

The Use of Complaint Letters as an Authentic Source of Input for an Interactive Task in Second Language Learning

Handoyo Puji Widodo

handoyopw@yahoo.com

University of Adelaide, Australia

Abstract

This article reports empirical findings from a micro-interactional analysis of the use of complaint letters as an authentic source of input for an interactive task that intermediate level university students performed in the ESL context. The present research study aims to examine whether the tasks of comprehending, responding to, and discussing complaint letters engage students in socially, cognitively and linguistically laden undertakings. Three international students from Brazil, Saudi Arabia and Taiwan participated voluntarily in this research study. These participants were asked to comprehend, respond to and discuss complaint letters, which served as an authentic source of input for these tasks. The recorded audio data were transcribed, coded and analyzed through a micro-interactional analysis. The key findings are that the use of complaint letters enabled: passive and active engagement in peer interaction; meaning making of the input content; meaning negotiation; cognitive and emotional responses to the input; prior knowledge or experience activation; and the deployment of discourse markers in dialogic interaction. The findings suggest that the use of appropriate authentic texts as interactional input affords students the opportunity to engage in tasks personally and meaningfully.

1 Introduction

Tasks in second and foreign language learning and teaching have been much discussed and researched. Task based language learning and teaching (TBLLT) is seen as an offshoot of communicative language teaching (CLT), which promotes learners' engagement in real communication, in which learners make use of language meaningfully (Klapper, 2003). Theoretically and empirically speaking, tasks play two central roles in language learning; that is, they provide situational and interactional contexts for activating learners' language acquisition process, and the tasks can promote second or foreign language learning (Shehadeh, 2005). The focus of TBLLT is primarily on meaning (Ellis, 2003; Skehan, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2007), and learners are afforded the opportunity to use a target language freely and meaningfully. Ellis (2003) points out that tasks serve as a trigger for the selection and use of linguistic resources (e.g. grammar and vocabulary) in context in order to accomplish a particular task. To achieve particular task outcomes, learners have to negotiate meaning and converse with each other; this interaction entails asking for explanation, checking comprehension, confirming responses, or elaborating on ideas. Enmeshed in the TBLLT framework, learners are supposed to play a role of language users who experience the same kinds of communicative processes as those taking place in real-world interaction.

Work in the area of TBLLT in second language acquisition (SLA) and learning has attracted much attention among English language educators and researchers over the last decades (Butler, 2011; Ellis, 2003; Ilin, Nozū, & Yumru, 2007). Task based language pedagogy is rooted in both cognitive and interactionist (socio-cognitive) SLA theory and research findings (Doughty & Long,

2003). There have been a large number of research studies on the usefulness, effectiveness and roles of tasks in order to promote second or foreign language acquisition and learning in language classrooms. A fuller discussion of previous studies will be presented in the literature review section. Despite numerous studies on the usefulness, effectiveness and roles of task based language learning, investigating how complaint letters as authentic informational input can serve as a trigger for second or foreign language acquisition through personally meaningful interaction remains sparse. To fill this empirical void, the current research study focuses on examining how authentic artifacts such as complaint letters could facilitate an interactive task that intermediate level students can perform in the language classroom. This study aims to provide comprehensive insights into the use of authentic texts as a source of input for task based language learning. The present research study examines this question:

- How do students engage in an interactive task cognitively, socially, and linguistically?

This question is conceptually and empirically grounded. In doing so, this article presents a brief overview of such conceptual foundations as (1) definitions and characteristics of tasks, (2) underlying theories of TBLLT, (3) authenticity in tasks, and (4) authentic texts and tasks. The present research study is informed by previous empirical findings that show the usefulness, effectiveness and roles of TBLLT.

2 Literature review

2.1 *Definitions and characteristics of tasks*

Scholars in the area of TBLLT provide different definitions of tasks. In this article, I would like to list four central definitions of tasks alongside the characteristics of tasks. To begin with, Willis (1996) defines tasks as a set of goal-oriented activities. These activities are geared to afford learners the opportunity to: build on their confidence in exploring whatever language resources (e.g. grammar and vocabulary) they know; gain a lived experience of spontaneous interaction; observe how others express meanings; negotiate a particular task given; and engage in using a language purposefully, communicatively and cooperatively. Second, Ellis (2000) adds that a task is seen as a ‘work plan’ that typically involves (1) some input – information that learners are required to process and use – and (2) some instructions in relation to the outcomes the learners are supposed to achieve. Third, Skehan (as cited in Hanauer, 2001) elaborates that the characteristics of a task include: “(1) meaning is primary; (2) there is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities; (3) there is some communication problem to solve; (4) task completion has some priority; and (5) the assessment of tasks is in terms of outcome.” (p. 296)

Lastly, Klapper (2003) elaborates that tasks are meaning-based activities closely associated with learners’ actual communicative needs and with some real-world relationship. In this sense, learners have to achieve a genuine outcome in which effective completion of the task is accorded priority. Thus, Klapper (2003) outlines that the idea of the use of a task is “to create an actual need for language to be used and for learners to identify what language they need to perform the task” (p. 37).

In implementing tasks in the language classroom, a task should have particular features of complexity as defined by Skehan (2003a), including code complexity, communicative stress and cognitive complexity. Robinson (2003) adds that tasks should render such triad of components as (1) task complexity – intrinsic cognitive demands of the task; (2) task conditions – the interactive demands of task performance; and (3) task difficulty – learners’ perceptions of the demands of the task depending on individual or learner differences in the cognitive factors (e.g. aptitude or working memory) and psychological factors (e.g. anxiety or confidence). Edwards and Willis (2005, p. 3) point out some distinguishing characteristics of tasks as listed below:

- In carrying out a task, the learners’ principal focus is on exchanging and understanding meanings, rather than on practice of form or pre-specified forms or patterns.
- There is some kind of purpose or goal set for the task, so that learners know what they are expected to achieve by the end of the task, for example, to write a list of differences, to

complete a route map or a picture, to report a solution to a problem, to vote on the best decorated student room or the most interesting/memorable personal anecdote.

- The outcome of the completed task can be shared in some way with others.
- Tasks can involve any or all four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing.
- The use of tasks does not preclude language-focused study at some points in a TBL lesson, though a focus on specific grammar rules or patterns will not generally come before the task itself, as this could well detract from the real communicative purpose of the subsequent interaction.

Although the definitions of tasks above are varied, “at the core of each definition is an emphasis on the communication of meaning” (McDonough & Mackey, 2000, p. 82). More importantly, tasks should involve informational input, real-world situatedness, socio-cognitively and communicatively laden interaction, goal-oriented activity, meaning exchange and negotiation, and linguistic complexities. These factors determine how much individual learners contribute to a given task, how the task mediates dialogic interaction between learners and their peers, and how a particular situation facilitates such interaction.

2.2 *Underlying theories of TBLT*

Scholars have different theoretical foundations of task based language learning and teaching (TBLT). Shehadeh (2005) lists the four main theoretical foundations which inform the present study. To begin with, from the Interactionist Hypothesis perspective, tasks should allow learners opportunities to negotiate meaning. This meaning negotiation is facilitated by the exchange of information which entails conversational modifications through negotiation devices (e.g. confirmation checks, comprehension checks, clarification requests, repetition requests, and repetition) so that meaning is mutually understood (Lee, 2005). In the context of learning an additional or foreign language such as English, the negotiation of meaning enables learners to produce a particular target language (TL). Scholars who favor the Interactionist Hypothesis are interested in examining “how the different task types, variables and dimensions may affect the negotiation of meaning, interlanguage modification and feedback to learner output” (Shehadeh, 2005, p. 21). Secondly, within the Output Hypothesis framework, tasks enable learners to produce a language comprehensibly in order to accomplish the tasks. Comprehensible output (e.g. language expressions) is a prerequisite for the negotiation of meaning and for understanding an exchanged message through modified conversational or dialogic interaction. Anchored in Skehan’s Cognition Hypothesis (Skehan, 2003b, 2007), tasks involve three aspects of performance: fluency, accuracy and complexities. Fluency deals with how well learners are able to communicate in real-world interaction. Accuracy touches on how aptly learners make use of a target language according to its conventions. Complexity corresponds to the learners’ capability of using more complicated TL resources. These aspects of performance are affected by types of production and communication assigned to learners. Lastly, resting on the socio-cultural framework, tasks are defined as joint activities of constructing knowledge or ideas. This collaborative knowledge construction is situated in learners’ sociocultural background in that in this activity learners locally determine goals of this joint knowledge construction activity. This knowledge co-construction involves cognitive processes. From this perspective, tasks are jointly accomplished by learners, and the task accomplishment process facilitates second language learning. This task accomplishment is mediated by dialogic interaction. In this dialogic interaction, students engage in social and cognitive activities which aim to get tasks done collaboratively.

By understanding the underlying theories of TBLT above, language teachers and language program designers will be well-informed about the creation of learning tasks which match language learners’ proficiency, prior knowledge or experience, and sociocultural background. Certainly, such underlying theories should be refined by empirical evidence. In such a way, both theoretical and empirical grounds inform how language teachers implement tasks in language classrooms.

2.3 *Authenticity in tasks*

The notion of authenticity has been much discussed in the area of English language teaching (ELT). “This notion emerged in the late 1970s at the time when communicative methodology was gaining momentum and there was a growing interest in teaching and testing ‘real-life’ language.” (Lewkowicz, 2000, p. 43) Authenticity in TBLLT is a key dimension of task design or creation. Borrowing Bachman’s authenticity term (1990), Waer (2009) categorizes task authenticity into: situational authenticity and interactional authenticity. Situational authenticity pertains to if a task reflects real-world activities. In short, when a teacher assigns learning tasks to students, such tasks should suit what they experience in daily social interaction. Long (1985, cited in Ellis, 2003, p. 4) lists some examples of real-life tasks such as painting a fence, dressing a child, or filling out a form. Drawing on this, tasks can be defined as real-world activities that people do in their daily life. Interactional authenticity corresponds to how much learners make use of a particular language in exchanging ideas or negotiating meaning to achieve mutual comprehension when performing a task. In interactional authenticity, active engagement is needed to get a certain task done. Interactional authenticity is a reaction or a response of learners in which a language serves as a mediational tool for communicating ideas or meaning (e.g. giving and exchanging information). Thus, both a situation and interaction mediated by a language allow students to perform certain tasks meaningfully. The challenge for English teachers in task design is to create tasks that afford learners chances to engage in meaningful interaction and to direct their attention to make use of language resources appropriately. In doing so, a language teacher needs to provide learners with appropriate authentic texts, either written or spoken, which get students to engage in personally meaningful interaction in which they make use of language resources. This entire interaction certainly involves social, cognitive and linguistic processes that the students experience.

2.4 *Authentic texts and tasks*

Authentic materials or texts are a vital component of task based language learning and teaching (TBLLT) in that learners are required to produce real-world language expressions in order to successfully complete a certain task. Gilmore (2007) argues that the notion of authenticity “can be situated in either the text itself, in the participants, in the social or cultural situation and purposes of the communicative act, or some combination of these” (p. 98). Authentic texts provide students with “a much richer source of input in the classroom and have the potential to raise learners’ awareness of a wider range of discourse features” (Gilmore, 2011, p. 791). Therefore, authentic materials facilitate learners’ second or foreign language development. Morrow (1977, as cited in Mishan, 2005, p. 11) defined authentic text as “a stretch of real language by a real speaker or writer for a real audience and designed to convey real message of some sort.” In this article, I define authentic text as informational input for interested participants, for building an interpersonal relationship between the interested participants, and for communicating meaning.

It is also useful to define what texts mean here. Texts are traditionally defined as spoken and written discourse which comprises words, clauses and sentences or utterances in spoken form. They are also visually presented through visuals such as pictures (images), photographs, drawings, symbols, signs, sketches and icons. Thus, texts are both verbally and visually presented as well as both written and spoken. The primary goal of text presentation is to communicate ideas or making meaning for communicative purposes (Widodo, 2012). There are a variety of text forms, the medium or the physical format in which texts are found or presented. Texts are presented in mass media (e.g. newspapers, magazines, radio and television), advertisements, letters, forms (e.g. a job application form, a hotel room reservation form), faxes, memos, notices or announcements, manuals, reports, journals, textbooks, brochures or flyers, encyclopedias, books, story books, literary works (e.g. poems, plays), movies, music, recipes, posters, excerpts, diaries, statistics, transcripts, manuscripts and product labels. These text forms can be presented online, digitally or in-print.

In the present research study, complaint letters serve as an authentic source of input for completing an authentic task assigned to the participants. The marriage of the authentic text and the

authentic task is intended to reflect humans' real-world sociocultural encounters on a daily basis. In addition, authenticity in texts and tasks aims to "encompass personal and divergent tasks as well as more personal ones" (Mirshan, 2005, p. 10). By deploying complaint letters as authentic informational input, students are expected to engage actively in dialogic interaction in which a wide range of language resources are used to make and negotiate meaning. Thus, the emphasis of integrating authentic texts into tasks is placed on affording students opportunities to communicate meaning through real-life artifacts containing informational and linguistic input.

2.5 Empirical studies

A spate of empirical research has looked at the usefulness, effectiveness and role of tasks in second and foreign language classrooms and other settings. In this article, I would like to review some key empirical studies though these do not relate directly to the use of authentic materials or texts in TBLLT. First, Hanauer (2001) qualitatively examined the process by which pairs of advanced second language learners whose native language is Hebrew comprehended poems and whether the task of poetry reading played a crucial role in second language acquisition. Hanauer's findings show that the task of poetry reading primarily entails close reading and meaning construction. In addition, he found that the task of poetry reading could enhance learners' linguistic and cultural knowledge of a target language. Gass, Mackey and Ross-Feldman (2005) investigated how three tasks: picture differences task, consensus task and map task, performed by 74 Spanish students at university level, facilitated interaction in two comparable settings: classrooms and laboratories. The findings show that there were a few differences in interactional features investigated in the two contexts. Not only did negotiation for meaning take place in the classroom and laboratory, but also recasts and self-correction occurred in both contexts. Third, Waer (2009) examined how a role-play task (doctor-patient interaction) engaged upper-intermediate level high school students in situational authenticity and interactional authenticity using a conversational analysis. The findings reveal that though role-plays are real-world activities, these should relate to students' own situations and interests so that the students are motivated to act role-plays. These tasks serve as a trigger for practicing language meaningfully if the tasks allow students opportunities to communicate meaning instead of asking display questions which are already prepared. Fourth, Danan (2010) looked at how translating and dubbing tasks as communicative acts facilitated language acquisition. She found that the dubbing task allowed for the internalization of vocabulary in that rehearsals were repeated, and the visual medium reinforced the meaning. The dubbing task also improved students' speaking speed and pronunciation, helped them become familiar with colloquial language, and facilitated the internalization of meaning through multiple repetitions. Drawing from Danan's findings, the dubbing task not only allowed the students to make meaning, but also enabled them to notice certain language features of the text. Empirical findings that report the use of specific learning tasks within the framework of TBLLT do not seem to be widely published in scholarly journals. To fill this gap, the current research study reports how complaint letters, as informational input, could promote dialogic interaction among intermediate level university students in the ESL context.

3 Purpose of the present study

The empirical findings on the usefulness, effectiveness and roles of tasks in second and foreign language classrooms have been reported above, but little is known about how the use of complaint letters as an authentic source of input could engage students in an interactive task cognitively, socially and linguistically. This engagement includes how students respond to the given text in the ESL context and if such a task entails such interactional features as meaning making, meaning negotiation and the use of discourse markers. Therefore, the present research study looks at how intermediate level university students make use of cognitive and linguistic resources when they are exposed to complaint letters as an authentic source of input and how such authentic artifacts trigger dialogic interaction between the students. Informed by this research goal, the overall contribu-

tion of the study lies in the presentation of empirical evidence for the usefulness and roles of authentic written text in engaging students in communicative language learning activities in language classrooms.

4 Research methods

4.1 Research site and participants

This research study was conducted at an American university and involved three international students. These were a Portuguese speaking female from Brazil, an Arabic speaking male from Saudi Arabia and a Taiwanese-Chinese speaking female from Taiwan. The Brazilian participant was a freshman majoring in international studies at the university, and she had been in USA for one year. The Arab participant was an American Language Institute (ALI) student, and he had been in USA for one year and two months, and was enrolled in engineering science at another American university. The Taiwanese participant was also an ALI student, and she was enrolled in computer science at a Taiwanese university, and had been in USA for seven months. They were between 17 and 19 years of age.

All of the participants were well-informed about this research study, as they had been requested to review the Subject's Consent Form and to sign it before the task was carried out. More importantly, their participation was voluntary, meaning that they could withdraw from this project at any time. Pseudonyms were used to conceal the identity of the participants. This ethical measure is based on the principle of autonomy and respect for the persons involved (Oliver, 2010). Moreover, confidentiality seems to be a salient ethical issue, such that any 'harm,' such as embarrassment (Israel & Hay, 2006), can be minimized. The Taiwanese participant is thus identified here only as F; the Arab participant is named I; and the Brazilian participant is identified as T. These participants were chosen because they were college ESL freshmen with intermediate English ability, and they were of different cultural backgrounds and genders. In relation to the participants' language proficiency, their English proficiency was determined based on their international TOEFL scores. Before they took an English course for international students at ALI along with other international students, they took a paper-based International TOEFL administered by ALI. The institute grouped all the international students taking the course into 3 levels: (1) elementary; (2) intermediate; and (3) advanced. Based on ALI's policy, the students were categorized according to their TOEFL scores: elementary (below 500); intermediate (500–550); and advanced (above 550). The three participants, T, I and T, had TOEFL scores of 525, 525 and 530, respectively.

4.2 Material

The materials chosen were complaint letters written by tour and travel agent customers, but only one letter was intensively examined in the current study to allow for a detailed and focused analysis. This letter talked about asking compensation for a serious mistake that a travel agency made. Such a mistake caused two newlyweds to miss their honeymoon, which was an important moment in their lives. This letter was chosen because it was expected to serve as a 'trigger' or source of input for the participants to engage actively in an in-class peer discussion on the content of the letter once they had read and grasped it. This material is viewed as an authentic or real-life artifact that the participants might find in daily social interaction.

4.3 Tasks and procedure

The participants in this study were presented with the tasks of comprehending and discussing the complaint letter. The goal of the tasks was to ask the participants to read and discuss the content of the letter. In this respect, the participants were expected to produce an outcome (e.g. a list of opinions expressed during the conversational interaction) through idea co-construction which came out of the input given (Foster & Ohta, 2005).

Before the empirical tasks were carried out, the participants were seated next to one another in a quiet lounge. Two participants were seated face-to-face, while another was seated in the center between the two. Thus, the seating arrangement was in a triangle formation. After that, the researcher read the instructions for the entire task. The entire empirical task was conducted as follows:

- To begin, the participants were each asked to read the letter with the length of 737 words silently for seven minutes.
- They were then told to pay attention to the message of the letter for ten minutes and to try to comprehend it. They were asked to identify features of the letter such as language expressions, layout, participants, the issue, the main ideas and the main supporting details.
- Afterwards, they were asked to discuss the content of the letter on the basis of their own opinions for 20 minutes. In this discussion section, the participants shared what they learned from reading and comprehending the letter with each other. The content of the discussion specifically includes the: (a) issue or problem; (b) actors involved, (c) setting or context; (d) reasons for bringing up the issue; (e) response to the issue; and (f) follow-up action in relation to the issue.
- Lastly, the participants were told to list the opinions discussed in eight minutes.

The total time spent was 45 minutes for the entire session. Once the participants understood the instructions, they were told that the session was audio taped. None of them objected to the recording of the session. Once the participants were ready to do the task, the digital audio recorder was turned on and placed in the middle on a table. While the participants were going through the entire session, the researcher kept silent and observed the discussion unobtrusively (Hanauer, 2001). The session ceased as soon as the participants were ready to close the discussion.

4.4 *The nature of the tasks*

Anchored in Skehan's TBLLT framework, this empirical task meets the following criteria:

1. Meaning is primary because the participants negotiated meaning through turn-by-turn dialogic negotiation;
2. There is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities. In this sense, the participants related their prior knowledge or personal real-life experience to the content of the letter in making rational judgment on it;
3. There is some communication problem to solve. This can be seen in the interaction among the participants in which they made frequent use of discourse markers and made requests for meaning clarification so that the meaning was successfully rendered;
4. Task completion has some priority. In this regard, the participants negotiated some alternative solutions to the problem when complaining something to someone else; and
5. The assessment of tasks is in terms of an outcome. The outcome was a list of the opinions or ideas expressed during the discussion (See Appendix A).

4.5 *Data collection method and analysis*

The empirical data were gathered while participants were interacting with each other, and they were completely recorded using a digital audiotape recorder (Type: Olympus WS-100) in high quality voice mode. The recording time was about 45 minutes. The recordings were transferred onto a computer and transcribed using the free transcribing software, "Express Scribe." The entire data were analyzed using a micro-interactional analysis. From the micro-interactional perspective, meaning making or construction occurs through dialogic or social interaction between actors. The reason for using a micro-interactional analysis in the present study is that the analysis was used to examine interactional events in which a line-line analysis of transcription was done, and the analysis looked at specific conversational events. The micro-interactional analysis involves the following steps:

- Review the recordings to examine the entire sequence of conversational interaction by playing them back;
- Transcribe the recordings. During the transcription, each line-by-line conversation was numbered to organize the transcripts tidily. Once the recordings were transcribed, the participants were asked to check the transcripts carefully in order to achieve data credibility and trustworthiness (Lee, Liebenau, & DeGross, 1997). This process is called member checking in qualitative research;
- Take notes while listening to the data. This activity was used to write descriptive and analytical accounts;
- Identify main themes of the findings by playing and replaying the recorded audio data forward and backward to identify all the spoken data;
- Examine the whole audio recorded data to determine if there were exceptions which made conclusions less than comprehensive;
- Select focused details for data analysis. The focused details include interactional features which involve cognitive, social and linguistic processes that the participants experienced. In this present study, the focused details include: meaning making, meaning negotiation, responding to the text, the use of schemata and the deployment of discourse markers during the interaction;
- Code the selected data so that these were written in an organized manner. Data coding aims to condense extensive sets of data into smaller and analyzable units based on particular categories. Practically speaking, all the data were entered into a computer program called a spreadsheet. This spreadsheet has columns for coding, themes of findings, details of findings, and types of interactional processes (cognitive, social or linguistic). This data template is called a codebook or a data worksheet;
- Analyze and interpret the selected data in a non-judgmental and qualitative way. This non-judgmental and qualitative analysis and interpretation entail that the analysis and interpretation of all the data on the basis of the research question and independent of personal opinions. Instead, these findings were connected to relevant theories and empirical findings to determine if the findings elaborate on, refine or challenge the theories and previous empirical findings;
- Review the data analyzed; and
- Draw conclusions from the entire data analyzed.

5 Findings and discussions

After the empirical data were organized into a manageable, easily understandable, and analyzable base of information, these naturally occurring data were qualitatively coded and analyzed based on the major themes of the findings. As pointed out previously, the present study investigated this question: How do students engage in an interactive task cognitively, socially and linguistically? The empirical data reveal such central findings as: (1) passive and active engagement in peer interaction; (2) meaning-oriented interaction: responding to the content of the input given and meaning negotiation among the participants involved; (3) role of prior knowledge or experience (schemata) in dialogic interaction; and (4) the deployment of discourse markers in dialogic interaction. These findings show that the authentic artifact or material allowed students to experience a social process through such dialogic interaction as meaning making, meaning negotiation and cognitive and linguistic processes through schemata activation and deployment of discourse markers. These cognitive, social and linguistic processes are documented in the following findings.

5.1 *Passive and active engagement in peer interaction*

Firstly, in the interaction between the three participants, there was unequal participation, as seen in the empirical data (see Table 1).

Participants	Pseudonyms	Frequencies of Talk Turns	
		Short Responses (≤35 Words)	Long Responses (≥36 Words)
Taiwanese Female	F	2	2
Arab Male	I	11	4
Brazilian Female	T	6	12
Total		19	18

Table 1: The frequency distribution of interaction between the participants

Based on Table 1, it is clearly evident that **T** dominated the discussion. She had long response turns more frequently than the two other participants – **I** and **F**. This unequal verbal participation in the discussion might be due to such possible factors as prior knowledge or schemata, personal experience, topic avoidance, personality, willingness to communicate, anxiety, cultural beliefs, and social and personal identities (Brown, 2007; Morita, 2004), though students have the same language ability. **T** seemed to know more about the content of the complaint letter; so she could express her ideas fluently, and another factor might be her desire to communicate because her participation in this research study was voluntary. Drawing on this observation, the letter played a role as comprehensible input or trigger for initiating an interactional activity between the participants, even though there was unequal participation in social interaction (i.e. the discussion).

Secondly, although three participants were involved in the discussion, only two participants – **T** and **I** – interacted socially with one another. The other participant **F** just took long and short response turns only twice respectively throughout the discussion. Being the most passive participant does not necessarily mean that **F** did not comprehend the content of the input (i.e. the complaint letter). This is because, as the researcher observed, **F** paid attention to the input while reading it, and she listened attentively to the two participants while they were talking. Based on **F**'s case, participation could be associated with the interaction of mind. In this regard, participation should not be seen only as overtly verbal behaviors, but also as internal action in the participant's mind. Thus, "...turn-internally occurring embodied actions, participation places a particular emphasis on a hearer's role as an active co-participant" (Park, 2007, p. 341). This implies that participation takes place not only in verbal communication, but also in internal communication in the participant's mind. Traditionally, participation is viewed as an overt behavior which is observable. Drawing on this finding, the mind plays a central role in mediating intrapersonal interaction (processing ideas) and interpersonal interaction (interacting with others). In other words, participation through the interaction of mind should be taken into account when weighing student participation.

5.2 *Meaning or message-oriented interaction*

The findings show that the students engaged in message or meaning-oriented interaction. In this interaction, in responding to the text, they made meaning of the content of the text and negotiated meaning of the message. These findings are presented in detail below.

5.2.1 *Responding to the text*

The empirical data also show that once the discussion began, as the researcher observed, the two participants, **T** and **I**, provided a brief explanation of the global content of the letter. They seemed to propose a new option for understanding the specific sentences and clauses of the letter content – the interpretive hypothesis – and the participants confirmed what they stated previously – the re-statement of the interpretive hypothesis (Hanauver, 2001). This evidence suggests that the two participants paid close attention to the input (the complaint letter), provided new interpretation, and came up with the new global understanding of the message in the input. On the other hand, **F**'s utterances as seen in Excerpt 1 suggest that she did not try to interpret or give hypotheses about the letter content, but she seemingly agreed with the ideas uttered by **T** and **I**. Although **F** did not

make many interpretations about the letter message, she tried to posit herself in the interactional situation¹.

Excerpt 1

135 **F**: I think I also did the same thing as they did ... I would ask the company to return
136 all my money (.) or even pay me [more money] ... I think ... my mood is bad/

Based on this finding, the participants engaged in a meaning making activity. Meaning making is one of the features of authentic social interaction in which the participants attempt to make meaning of the message. This meets what is called situational and interactional authenticity (Waer, 2009). This allows the participants to engage in personally meaningful interaction which involves social, cognitive and linguistic processes.

Another finding is that, throughout the discussion, all of the participants focused on the message of the letter. They did not notice either the letter's linguistic (e.g. grammar) or the non-linguistic structures (e.g. layout). The main reason for not paying close attention to these features might be that the participants were familiar with the content of the complaint letter and that they were focusing on the global meaning of the message. Another reason is that the letter comprises commonly used expressions which are quite familiar to the participants. This evidence indicates that structural noticing is not an absolute prerequisite for comprehending the messages when the emphasis is on meaning (Truscott, 1998). As a result, the task could encourage the participants to initiate and elaborate dialogic interaction in such a way that facilitated meaning-based interaction. This evidence can be seen in **T**'s utterances in Excerpt 2.

Excerpt 2

20 ...another thing they lost not only the ticket ... they lost money for the hotel
21 and so on ... er in the end...it's not just money they lost but they lost the idealized
22 trip ... er er er (.) a long time before they were married\ and then it's a kind of dream
23 of going to Hawaii too\

This finding suggests that cognitive responses to any input given are badly needed in that such responses allow for processing information, and such responses serve as a tool for interpersonal engagement in a particular interactional event.

As seen in Excerpt 2, the participant made her rational judgment by providing emotional response to the content (verbalizing feelings and empathy with the characters and event). Such an emotional response is essential to logical reasoning (Watson-Gegeo, 2004) because emotional responses can facilitate how logical reasoning is processed and communicated. Other evidence could be found in **I**'s utterances in Excerpt 3.

Excerpt 3

80 **I**: I think it's fair that the agency makes any mistake ... they have to pay for their
81 mistake ... but for natural phenomena, so (.) they should not pay compensation to
82 the customers/

The participant tried to make fair judgments of whether complaints should be appropriately addressed, or he provided an objective approach to reasoning when sorting out the problem. This reasoning indicates the cultural appropriateness of complaint utterances.

Drawing on the two findings above, interactional events entail cognitive and emotional responses which are used not only to process and recall information, but also to evaluate such information. Both cognition and emotion play a crucial role in how information is generated and judged.

5.2.2 *Meaning negotiation between the participants involved*

The turn-by-turn dialogic interaction between the two participants, **T** and **I**, shows that these participants negotiated meaning. In this case, a variety of conversational expressions took place

hidden factors and thematic considerations (Ketchum, 2006). In short, content, formal and abstract schemata could affect how one interprets a certain message (Landry, 2002).

5.4 *The deployment of discourse markers in dialogic interaction*

Lastly, the data reveal that the participants deployed discourse markers. Svartvik (as cited in Fung & Carter, 2007) argues that such markers are believed to be frequently employed by speakers as a delaying tactic. It denotes a thinking process when an answer or a response is not immediately available. Discourse markers as a tactic or strategy are used to search for or locate words, recall ideas, and organize and think such ideas aloud. In the present study, almost all of the participants employed discourse markers. The types of the discourse markers used can be seen in Table 2.

Participants	Frequency of the Use of Discourse Markers						Total
	Pauses	err	eh	umm	RW	oh	
F	42	4	0	0	4	0	50
I	39	21	1	5	0	0	66
T	20	7	4	4	5	1	41

Note: RW – Repeated words consecutively like to ... to ... or big big big ...

Table 2: The frequency of the use of discourse markers by the participants

Based on Table 2, **I** employed discourse markers far more frequently than the other two participants. In addition, all the participants used other discourse markers like *a kind of, I think, yeah* and *okay*. Such discourse markers allowed the participants to create sufficient time to reformulate, rephrase, self correct, or repair their utterances. These markers could also be used to elaborate and modify the existing prepositional meaning to make clear the intention of the speaker (Fung & Carter, 2007). In short, these discourse markers should not be seen as linguistic limitations, but such markers should be viewed as part of the cognitive process that the participants engaged in, or thinking time that the participants spent on processing the ideas or thoughts to produce comprehensible output.

6 Conclusion

This article has presented how complaint letters as an authentic source of input could facilitate dialogic interaction (from comprehending to discussing complaint letters) among intermediate level university students. The major findings suggest that mutual engagement, meaning making and negotiation, cognitive and emotional responses, prior knowledge or experience activation and the use of discourse makers typify dialogic interaction in which cognitive, social and linguistic processes take place. Drawing on these findings, both the use of complaint letters as an authentic artifact (material), and the responding and discussing tasks facilitate turn-by-turn conversational interaction. This conversational interaction entails how the participants make use of cognitive and linguistic resources in order to communicate meaning through interpersonal interaction. Compatible with McDonough & Mackey's findings (2000), this interpersonal interaction facilitates second language acquisition. In order for students to engage in meaning-oriented interaction, they need to make use of cognition (prior knowledge and experience activation), language (how such prior knowledge and experience can be communicated through linguistic resources) and social space (a condition where students can interact with each other). These three crucial factors are a prerequisite for getting students to engage in interactive tasks.

Though the present study produces useful findings, it has major limitations in terms of the time constraints, the single task examined, the limited number or frequency of the trial, the lack of data triangulation (data richness or rigor), and the limited number of participants involved; as a result, the findings are not generalizable. Another reason for not generalizing the findings is that the tasks carried out may render different results or outcomes if they are tested in a different study context

due to individual differences and learning contexts. Because of these limitations, future studies should explore the use of triangulated data collection methods (e.g. observation and interviewing), the study of diverse groups of learners (e.g. of different sociocultural backgrounds, ages and levels of language proficiency), and alternative research designs (e.g. ethnographic case study, interactional ethnography, micro-ethnographic classroom discourse).

Notes

¹Symbol Descriptions: (.) short pause; ... normal pause; [] overlapped talks; \ falling accent; (()) non-linguistics occurrence; (?) unintelligible talks; ? question remarks; “ ” direct speech; -- truncated talks; () Particular word/phrase; **bold** particular expressions

References

- Bachman, L. (1990). *Fundamental considerations in language testing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brown, H. D. (2007). *Principles of language learning and teaching* (5th ed.). White Plains, NY: Pearson Education.
- Butler, Y. G. (2011). The implementation of communicative and task-based language teaching in the Asia-Pacific region. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 31, 36–57.
- Danan, M. (2010). Dubbing projects for the language learner: A framework for integrating audiovisual translation into task-based instruction. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 23, 441–456.
- Doughty, C. J., & Long, M. H. (2003). Optimal psycholinguistic environments for distance foreign language learning. *Language Learning & Technology*, 7(3), 50–80.
- Edwards, C., & Willis, J. (Eds.). (2005). *Teachers exploring tasks in English language teaching*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ellis, R. (2000). Task-based research and language pedagogy. *Language Teaching Research*, 4(3), 193–220.
- Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-based language learning and teaching*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Firth, A., & Wagner, J. (2007). On discourse, communication, and (some) fundamental concepts in SLA research. *The Modern Language Journal*, 91, 757–772.
- Foster, P., & Ohta, A. S. (2005). Negotiation for meaning and peer assistance in second language classrooms. *Applied Linguistics*, 26, 402–430.
- Fung, L., & Carter, R. (2007). Discourse markers and spoken English: Native and learner use in pedagogic settings. *Applied Linguistics*, 28, 410–439.
- Gass, S., Mackey, A., & Ross-Feldman, L. (2005). Task-based interactions in classroom and laboratory settings. *Language Learning*, 55, 575–611.
- Gilmore, A. (2007). Authentic materials and authenticity in foreign language learning. *Language Teaching*, 40, 97–118.
- Gilmore, A. (2011). “I prefer not text”: Developing Japanese learners’ communicative competence with authentic materials. *Language Learning*, 61, 786–819.
- Hanauer, D. I. (2001). The task of poetry reading and second language learning. *Applied Linguistics*, 22, 295–323.
- Ilin, G., Nozū, J., & Yumru, H. (2007). Teachers’ and learners’ perceptions of tasks: Objectives and outcomes. *Journal of Theory and Practice in Education*, 3(1), 60–68.
- Israel, M., & Hay, I. (2006). *Research ethics for social scientists: Between ethical conduct and regulatory compliance*. London: Sage.
- Ketchum, E. M. (2006). The cultural baggage of second language reading: An approach to understanding the practices and perspectives of a nonnative product. *Foreign Language Annals*, 39(1), 22–42.
- Klapper, J. (2003). Taking communication to task? A critical review of recent trends in language teaching. *Language Learning Journal*, 27, 33–42.
- Kramsch, C., & Whiteside, A. (2007). Three fundamental concepts in second language acquisition and their relevance in multilingual context. *The Modern Language Journal*, 91, 907–922.
- Landry, K. L. (2002). Schemata in second language reading. *The Reading Matrix*, 2(3). Retrieved from <http://www.readingmatrix.com/articles/landry/article.pdf>
- Lee, S.-M. (2005). Task-based language learning and teaching: Theories and applications. In C. Edwards & J. Willis (Eds.), *Teachers exploring tasks in English language teaching* (pp. 103–112). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lee, A. S., Liebenau, J., & DeGross, J. I. (Eds.). (1997). *Information systems and qualitative research*. London: Chapman & Hall.

- Lewkowicz, J. A. (2000). Authenticity in language testing: Some outstanding questions. *Language Testing*, 17, 43–63.
- McDonough, K., & Mackey, A. (2000). Communicative tasks, conversational interaction and linguistic form: An empirical study of Thai. *Foreign Language Annals*, 33, 82–92.
- Mishan, F. (2005). *Designing authenticity into language learning materials*. Bristol, UK: Intellect Books.
- Morita, N. (2004). Negotiating participation and identity in second language academic communities. *TESOL Quarterly*, 38, 573–603.
- Oliver, P. (2010). *The student's guide to research ethics*. Berkshire: Open University Press.
- Park, J. (2007). Co-construction of nonnative speaker identity in cross-cultural communication. *Applied Linguistics*, 28, 339–360.
- Robinson, P. (2003). The cognition hypothesis, task design, and adult task-based language learning. *Second Language Studies*, 21, 2, 45–105.
- Saville-Troike, M. (2006). *Introducing second language acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shehadeh, A. (2005). Task-based language learning and teaching: Theories and applications. In C. Edwards & J. Willis (Eds.), *Teachers exploring tasks in English language teaching* (pp. 13–30). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Skehan, P. (2003a). Focus on form, tasks, and technology. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 16, 391–441.
- Skehan, P. (2003b). *Task-based instruction*. *Language teaching*, 36(1), 1–14.
- Skehan, P. (2003c). The Cognition Hypothesis, task design, and adult task-based language learning. *Second Language Studies*, 21, 45–105.
- Skehan, P. (2007). Language instruction through tasks. In J. Cummins & C. Davison (Eds.), *International handbook of English language teaching. Part I* (pp. 289–301). New York: Springer.
- Truscott, J. (1998). Noticing in second language acquisition: A critical review. *Second Language Research*, 14(2) 103–135.
- Waer, H. (2009). Authenticity in task-based interaction: A conversation analysis. *ARECLS*, 6, 103–121.
- Watson-Gegeo, K. A. (2004). Mind, language, and epistemology: Toward a language socialization paradigm for SLA. *The Modern Language Journal*, 88, 331–350.
- Widodo, H. P. (2012, October). *Visual and linguistic designs in reading materials development: Making meaning of text*. Paper presented at the 2nd Conference on Applying (Putonghua/English) Language Arts (APELA), The Polytechnic University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR.
- Willis, J. (1996). *A framework for task-based learning*. Harlow: Longman.

Appendix A

A list of the main opinions which the participants talked about during the discussion session

1. The travel agent representative should have apologized to the newly married couple for a serious mistake.
2. It is reasonable that the couple received compensation or refund for the mistake that the travel agent made.
3. It is unfair that when it was the travel agent's fault, they did not give any compensation or refund to their customers.
4. The couple lost their important moment—honeymoon because this happened once in their life.
5. When complaining something to a person or an organization, we should behave or respond to the complaint politely so that the problem can be sorted out calmly.
6. The travel agent should not provide compensation or refund to their customers because of unexpected natural causes (e.g., bad weather) because it is not their fault.
7. It is common that complaints about cancelled flights occur in our daily life.
8. It is reasonable that the couple wrote the complaint letter to the travel agent to get refund for a serious mistake that the agent made, so the agent should have been accommodative or have taken immediate follow-up action.