Start!: Increasing Willingness to Communicate in Discussion Preparation Activities
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ABSTRACT
In the English Discussion Class (EDC) at Rikkyo University, students use English to communicate with one another in group discussion tasks. Because of the intense communication demands of the curriculum, not all students react positively, and some students are less willing to communicate with peers in their L2 than others. Because of this, this paper focuses on the teaching principle of “willingness to communicate” (WTC), a new construct in L2 motivational research which observes that reducing language anxiety is one way of increasing overall ease of communication. This paper reflects on this concept by discussing the nature of the discussion preparation activities meant to prime students for group discussions. An adaptation in order to more effectively increase WTC for these activities will be described, including a series of variations, followed by an informal observation of the effectiveness of the activity and suggestions for more formal data collection and analysis.

LITERATURE REVIEW
The English Discussion Class (EDC) at Rikkyo University is a mandatory freshman course that follows the trend of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in EFL/ESL pedagogy, encouraging meaningful output from learners as they participate in weekly group discussion tasks. The course is very learner-centered, and encourages speaking fluency by maximizing oral output from students. While the topics are designed to be engaging, and students often enjoy sharing their opinions with their peers, there are also moments of silence or tension that could be attributed to learner reticence. As research has previously shown, “speaking has been found to be the most anxiety-provoking modality of L2 communication” (MacIntyre, Baker, Clement & Donovan, 2003, p. 602). Indeed, EDC instructors can often encounter a lack of communication from students – the high amount of oral output expected causing higher levels of anxiety, and a reluctance to speak.

One of an EDC instructor’s goals is to support students in this communication process, by reducing language anxiety and increasing students’ desire to communicate with one another. Thus, much of the pedagogical practices in the EDC have been informed by a recent construct borne from L2 motivational research, known as ‘Willingness to Communicate’ (WTC), and defined as “the probability of engaging in communication when given a choice” (Yashima, 2012, p. 120). As MacIntyre (2007) has observed, through examining a student’s willingness or unwillingness to communicate in an L2, researchers have been able to unravel the “micro-level processes” that help or hinder their active participation (p. 564). Indeed, the two micro-level processes found to majorly affect a learner’s WTC are their perceived language competence, and their language anxiety (MacIntyre et al., 2003; MacIntyre, 2007; Yashima, 2012; Peng & Woodrow, 2010; Alemi, Daftarifard & Pashmforoosh, 2011; Brown, 2007).

Language anxiety in particular appears to be a strong factor that restrains learners from communication in certain situations. While research has shown that anxiety at the trait-level, such as being a naturally anxious person, is not heavily correlated with how much a student is willing to communicate, the anxiety produced by specific situational factors does cause L2 performance to suffer (MacIntyre, 2007). Some studies have also revealed that while language anxiety may not have a great affect on WTC in a classroom where communication demands are lower, the relation
between anxiety and WTC is stronger in a context where L2 use is much more intensive (MacIntyre, 2003; Yashima, 2012), such as in the EDC where learners are expected to conduct activities in 100% English. While EDC instructors may not have as much influence over learners who are naturally anxious, DeSaint Leger and Storch (2009) has asserted that anxiety produced by a specific situation, such as activities conducted all in English, are possibly “amenable to instructional intervention” (p. 270). Thus, by reducing anxiety borne from the individual activities done in a 100% English environment, EDC instructors may be able to increase their students’ overall levels of WTC. The intent of this paper is to provide one actionable way for EDC instructors to reduce situational language anxiety in one particular stage of the typical EDC lesson – preparation activities for group discussions.

TASKS AND MATERIALS
In every EDC lesson, there are two group discussion tasks. In order to prepare for these tasks, EDC instructors conduct shorter activities to help students develop ideas. These preparation activities require students to first make decisions on some content, such as checking boxes in a table or agreeing or disagreeing with a set of written opinions, before discussing their ideas in pairs. The intent of these preparation activities – to help students generate and practice expressing ideas before their larger group discussion task – is supported in research as a good way to encourage high levels of WTC over the course of the lesson. Brown (2007) has suggested sequencing activities in order of difficulty, and providing “reasonable challenges” (p. 74), which is accomplished by having a short preparation activity with a small number of partners before the larger group activity. In addition, the discussion preparation activities also give students sufficient time to prepare their answers, as well as reduces the demands to process content on the spot, which is in-line with recommendations from other studies (Aubrey, 2011; DeSaint Leger & Storch, 2009).

However, while the discussion preparation activities in the EDC textbook provide ideas for students to check or circle, the only instruction given when it is time to discuss, is to “discuss your ideas with a partner” (Lesley, Livingston, Moroi & Schaefer, 2014 p.10). Some students are able to quickly begin speaking after the instructor begins the activity. On the other hand, other students wait to speak, letting some time pass in silence before attempting communication. One possible cause of this reticence is that the activity is not actually a “reasonable challenge.” Though students are given functional language to practice, such as “What do you think?” or “Can I start?” some students may still struggle with understanding how to translate the information they checked in text, into an opinion that begins a discussion. Prior to the EDC, students may be more accustomed to classrooms where “correct” answers are emphasized and “incorrect” answers have negative consequences, contexts which Brown (2007) has described as common and not conducive to the kind of risk-taking required in a speaking class. This leads to students who are unwilling to communicate for fear of losing face.

Because of this, I began to adapt the preparation activities by adding an easy “start” to the discussion. This originally began by including a two or three turn dialogue at the bottom of a preparation handout for students to discuss in pairs, which simply showed one effective way to give the first opinion. Figure 1 demonstrates a general example of this adaptation:
In this activity, students were asked to check a box to indicate what they considered to be effective ways to learn different language skills. As the information that students interacted with was in a table format with multiple columns and rows, some students had difficulty understanding how to give the first opinion. Should they start by talking about each language skill? Or should they start by talking about each way? Providing the starting language in a limited series of turns gave students an easy way to begin talking about the ideas they had just interacted with on paper, so that they could focus their attention more on the expression of their ideas, rather than the processing of how to conduct the activity itself.

**PROCEDURE**

Thus, the material adaptation presented in this paper is relatively simple – taking an already useful preparation activity and inserting an additional element to increase students’ WTC, and to minimize the amount of silence between speakers. This adaptation can be used for any preparation activity that an instructor feels may be challenging for students to begin immediately discussing. Instructors could prepare their own handouts by transferring textbook content onto a new handout with an added dialogue box. Alternatively, instructors could create the short dialogue and print it out as a large poster to put on the whiteboard.

In either case, only the first few turns should be provided, with limited support for formulating the first opinion. As in Figure 1, only the very initial opinion language is provided, while trailing off for students to insert their own idea content such as reasons, examples, or other detail. Though it is possible to lengthen the dialogue, and add more language to encourage students to use function language, the purpose of this adaptation was not to provide a dialogue pattern for the first speaker’s entire turn. It was simply given to help students actively start communicating with one another. By only supplying the first two or three turns, instructors can...
avoid encouraging this idea of “correctness” or “perfection” that Brown (2007) warns against. Moreover, the following group discussion will have no patterns at all to help guide the task. Providing a starting dialogue helps students to begin communicating, but also pushes them to work through the minute details of how they want to express their ideas, and how they can communicate with one another interactively after that first opinion was given. This follows the principle of sequencing activities, also suggested by Brown (2007). Finally, an interesting observation from Alemi, Daftarifard and Pashmforoosh’s study (2011) was that language anxiety can affect not only how much output is produced, but also the quality of a speaker’s output. Accordingly, should WTC levels be lower for a discussion preparation activity, the complexity of students’ ideas decreases, making some ideas less transferrable to the group discussion. All of these reasons encompass the idea of reducing anxiety so that students feel more capable to start the activity.

VARIATONS
The material adaptation presented in this paper can be useful for EDC instructors in a variety of ways due to its flexibility. For instance, the amount of language support provided in these short starts can be as simple or complex to fit the needs and language levels in the classroom. For a lower level class, the first three turns can be written out in full, with only a space for students to fill in their original idea. For advanced learners, the turns can be simplified, where students are required to fill in more of the linguistic gaps. Figure 2 provides an illustration of a simplified start:

![Figure 2. Lesson 5 (discussion test 1), topic preparation (“Japanese and Foreign Fashion Brands”)](image-url)
In this particular activity, rather than providing the full functional language, only the beginning of each function phrase was given to help students figure out what topics to change. In addition, only the initial opinion language was provided, without explicitly encouraging further functional language use. This has the ability to encourage students to start the opinion, but leave it up to them to use functions and communication skills in their own way.

While higher levels of students can sometimes be seen as not needing an easy start or extra support in these preparation activities, research has suggested that actively reducing language anxiety can be even more vital with advanced students, than with lower level students. MacIntyre et al.’s study (2003) revealed that advanced learners often have higher levels of anxiety than lower levels due to the nature of teachers challenging students in classroom contexts (p. 602). Thus, it may still be important to provide an accessible start to the preparation activity for even higher-level classes. In my own classes, I have always provided a start, but I decide at any given situation whether or not to mention the start before beginning an activity. If a class appears to be confident without, I have them start on their own to allow them the autonomy to work through the ideas independently. Otherwise, I may simply point out the box on the handout with a quick “if you need help” comment before beginning the activity. Most of these immediate decisions depended upon what was determined to be a “reasonable challenge” for that specific group of students at that specific time.

Another way of varying this type of preparation activity, and the type of start needed, is when using the preparation activities as a fluency activity. The original concept for this adaption was borne from the need to encourage pairs of students to discuss ideas together. However, some discussion preparation activities can also be adapted into fluency activities, where a group of speaking students talk at a group of listening students for 3-2-1 minutes (Nation, 1989). A start can be provided for this type of activity, by simply providing the first opinion language. Figure 3 illuminates this variation:

![Figure 3. Lesson 4 (agreeing and disagreeing), discussion 2 preparation (“Clothes and Rules”)](image-url)
Here, the first opinion language, as well as language to encouraging advantages and disadvantages was given. The intent was to not only help students to process and explain the content that they had just checked on the table, but to also avoid students simply listing which people should have free choice or rules for clothing. Through adding the beginning of a function phrase, students are given an easy way to deepen their idea, and produce more content without having to struggle for more ideas. In this sense, while the start is not encouraging students to communicative interactively, it is supporting the quality of ideas, as noted by Alemi, Daftarifard and Pashmforoosh (2011) by providing an easy and effective way for students to talk about the text content they checked or circled.

**DISCUSSION**

Adding short starts to preparation activities has seen a lot of success in class thus far. In the beginning of the Fall 2014 semester I heavily highlighted the starts every lesson. However, while starts were still important in most lessons, as the topic was always new, as students became accustomed to jumping into activities quickly, I gradually began to simplify the start language further and further. Moreover, I stopped announcing the start in class, to observe whether students could conduct the activity without. Towards the end of the semester, even classes that had begun as more reticent were quickly jumping into pair or fluency-based preparation activities.

Yet, upon practicing these starts regularly, one unexpected point I became acutely aware of was the way in which I transitioned from the preparation activity into the group discussion task. By using the starts, I was setting students up in the right direction to discuss ideas and easily practice the functions and communication skills that they were learning. However, for group discussion tasks, only questions are provided, and not any initial opinion language. While the discussion preparation content and opinion language can easily be transferred and usable in the group discussion task, not all students were able to see this connection clearly. When groups were not aware of how the preparation activity led into the larger scope discussion questions, there were much lower levels of WTC at the beginning, which carried throughout the entire group discussion task. This meant high quality preparation discussions, but stilted and more reticent group discussions.

One way I countered this disconnect between the preparation and group discussion was by clearly articulating how the group discussion questions could be answered via ideas discussed in the preparation activity. For instance, in Figure 3 students were asked to check if different types of people should have rules or free choice about what to wear. After that, the first group discussion question following the preparation was: “Do you think students should have uniforms at… A) Elementary school? B) High school? C) University? D) Vocational school?” While the preparation ideas and group discussion question are essentially about the same topic, they use different vocabulary to talk about the topic – “rules or free choice” and “uniforms.” Hence, for lower level classes, I would point out how the group discussion question really basically meant whether they thought these students should have rules or free choice about what to wear.

When I did not explicitly express this connection with some class groups, the level of WTC was observably affected. Therefore, in the future I would highly suggest preparing easy ways of explaining how the preparation activity questions and group discussion questions related to one another. Again, this is a matter of sequencing activities and providing “reasonable challenges” to lead students into more productive talk time.
CONCLUSION
Holistically speaking, through informal observation it appeared as though adding a simple start to the discussion preparation activities was an effective improvement. To confirm these general observations, formal data collection and research is recommended. One way suggested, would be to implement this adaptation in a set group of classes, and choose another group of classes with similar characteristics as a control group. Record both groups of classes and analyze the amount of talking time in the preparation activities in comparison with each other, as well as the amount of silence in between speaking turns. In addition, the same elements could be analyzed in the group discussion tasks as well, to see whether students continue to display a strong WTC from the preparation into the group discussion. Through this information, EDC instructors could more effectively support students in reducing language anxiety, and increasing WTC.

REFERENCES