

# Using Manipulatives to Promote Proper Floor Management in English Discussion

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## ABSTRACT

Negotiating transition relevance places (TRPs) is a necessary skill for successful floor management in any language (Sacks et al., 1974). The differences in turn-taking rules between languages can make mastery of this skill difficult for learners of English. Activities that parse and scaffold these rules with prefabricated chunks of language can improve automaticity and interactional competence across the language and culture gap. This paper describes one such activity that uses a manipulative to attempt to bolster use of turn-taking phrases in English discussion. Instances of these phrases in a testing environment were counted and measured against total speaking turns to derive percentages of turns taken or relinquished with a target phrase among two experimental and one control group over a seven week period. The results indicate that using a manipulative to introduce turn-taking phrases at TRPs may lead to their sustained deployment and more successful floor management generally in free production.

## INTRODUCTION

The difficulties that language learners have managing the floor and taking turns in an L2 are well documented (Cook, 1989; Dörnyei and Thurrell, 1994). Young (2013) further found that failing to open the floor at the completion of a speaking turn negatively impacts the entire group. More specifically, when a Japanese speaker of L2 English fails to mark the end of their turn, next speakers (NSs) must first determine that the floor holder has finished his/her turn and then self-select to speak next. Therefore failure to pass the floor places a significant communicative burden on the rest of the group: firstly, identifying that the current speaker (CS) has completed his/her turn and, secondly, managing the selection of the NS.

This burden often leads to a stilted, unnatural procession of speaking turns. When the CS fails to select the NS, the NS often self-selects from the CS's right in the seating position (Munby, 2005). Tracking the turn order of four Japanese learners of English, Munby found that eight of 16 turns passed directly to the right in a 13 minute discussion, positing that "[g]enuine instances of self-selection are rare in this conversation perhaps because of the predictability of the circular turn-taking practice." Fujimoto (2010) argues that such patterned turn-taking among Japanese speakers arises from the need to establish a hierarchy within the group. Itakura and Tsui (2004) contend that this hierarchy is closely tied to gender, and that the gender dominance of Japanese male speakers is attributed to a "self-oriented conversation style," supported and perpetuated by Japanese female speaker's "other-oriented conversation style." Thus, this dynamic is mutually constructed. Harumi (2001) also notes that silence may arise from a problem with turn-taking, as silent students may not be properly allocated a turn or have difficulty claiming a turn. Whatever the cause, by relying on patterned speaker changes dictated by the L1 or cultural background, students perpetuate an unnatural style of discourse in English discussion. To address this complex problem, one must design and employ an activity that encourages students to engage in a more natural pattern of discourse that does not rely on the defaults related to sitting position, social hierarchy, or gender while simultaneously allowing ample opportunities for each group member to be allocated and/or claim a speaking turn.

The current study was conducted within English Discussion Class (EDC), a compulsory course for first year students at Rikkyo University "with the intended result that EDC students will be able to exchange opinions with others in order to share their culture and beliefs with both

native and non-native speakers in English” (Hurling, 2012). The course is communicative in nature and teaches students function phrases for oral performance, which are “largely derived from Dornyei and Thurrell’s direct approach to conversation instruction (1992; 1994) as well as Kehe and Kehe’s speaking text *Conversation Strategies* (1994)” (Hurling, 2012). These phrases are what Celce-Murcia (2007) refers to as “those fixed and prefabricated chunks of language that speakers use heavily in everyday interactions,” specifically the subsets of routine and lexical frames within formulaic competence. Celce-Murcia further lists “how to get, hold, and relinquish the floor” as a dialogic genre of conversational competence, a subset of interactional competence. Naturally, these aspects of broader communicative competence manifest differently across languages, which can cause significant L1 interference when learning an additional language. It is useful, then, to consider how these elements of communicative competence are manifested at the dialogic level between Japanese and English.

Tanaka (2000) notes that the beginning of a speaking turn in English is important for projecting the shape of the turn, whereas in Japanese turn-endings “are critical for turn projection.” In an extensive comparison between turn-taking in English and Japanese, Furo (2001) found that English employs a more collaborative floor with more frequent floor changes occurring before complex transitional relevance places (CTRPs)<sup>1</sup> while the Japanese floor has more changes occurring at CTRPs. In addition, Furo notes that Japanese speakers tend to “invite interlocutors’ backchannels by using questions and sentence final particles that function to establish a collaborative relationship with interlocutors,” which sheds some light on how turn-endings are so important for turn projection in Japanese. In a conversation analysis of native speakers using their L1, Kitamura (2001) observed that participants often allowed a period of silence between turns rather than overlapping speaking turns, creating simultaneous speech. If Hutchby and Wooffitt (2008) are correct in their assertion that transitional relevance places (TRPs)<sup>2</sup> are projected, then the Japanese floor indeed cannot have floor changes before TRPs, as this placement would paradoxically precede its own projection.

## METHOD

Expecting EDC students to perform speaker changes before TRPs without being familiar with the “routine and lexical frame” of the English floor could be unrealistic; rather, activities should first aim for speaker changes at TRPs in accordance with the Japanese floor. The activity described in this study is based on the findings of Sacks et al. (1974), who propose two straightforward rules for how turns are allocated at a TRP; the first rule is further subdivided into three operations:

- 1) At a TRP
  - a. If the CS selects a specific NS, that NS should take a turn.
  - b. If CS does not select a NS, any NS may self-select.
  - c. If neither rule (a) nor rule (b) is employed, CS may extend his/her turn.
- 2) Rules 1(a)—(c) operate again for the next TRP.

Munby outlines various, mutually inclusive floor-passing mechanisms that occur at TRPs within an L2 English discussion among L1 Japanese students. These include asking a question, nomination of NS, completion of the grammatical clause, termination of hand gestures, use of phrases, falling intonation, and code-switching. Celce-Murcia (2007) states “a communicative focus, which includes mastery of systems such as conversational turn-taking and speech-act sets, means that many set phrases and other formulaic elements of language use also need attention. Generally for each social move or function, there is a stock of potential utterances.” The challenge is to find a way for Japanese EFL students to slot prefabricated English lexical chunks

into the Japanese routine frame. In keeping with EDC curriculum, students receive several such sets for a variety of social moves and functions.

In week seven of semester one of English Discussion Class, students learn a set of function phrases for Joining a Discussion (Doe et al., 2013). All but the lowest level students<sup>3</sup> are taught six phrases in total: four for Joining a Discussion, and two for Asking Others to Join a Discussion.

Table 1

<i>Functions for Joining a Discussion and Asking Others to Join a Discussion</i>	
<u>Joining a Discussion</u>	<u>Asking Others to Join a Discussion</u>
Can I start?	
Can I make a comment?	Does anyone want to comment?
Can I add something?	Does anyone want to add something?
Can I ask a question?	

The functions for Joining are deployed when NSs want to close the floor and self-select (claim a speaking turn). The functions for Asking Others are deployed when CSs want to open the floor for the NS (terminate their speaking turn). Viewed from the perspective of a TRP in the Japanese floor, we can see that a CS first deploys a function for Asking Others to Join the Discussion (opening the floor/initiating the TRP), followed by a NS deploying a function to Join the Discussion (closing the floor/terminating the TRP).

The operational nature of Sacks et al.'s rules for speaker changes at TRPs allows for these functions to be easily input, forming the rules of speaker changes in EDC:

- 1) CS opens the floor by Asking Others to Join the Discussion.
- 2) Once the floor is open or if rule 1 is not employed, NS self-selects by using a function to Join the Discussion.
- 3) If neither rule one nor rule two is employed, CS extends his/her turn.

Obviously, the function phrases in question are not the only methods by which turn allocation can be actualized. Indeed, even after being taught several sets of proscribed function phrases, EDC students may use a variety of phrases and paralinguistic strategies to negotiate turn order and pass the floor (Munby, 2005; Young, 2013). In teaching the Joining phrases to EDC students, the challenge for EDC instructors is to temporarily constrain the use of these additional strategies to guarantee repeated use of the target phrases in order to increase the probability of successful retention and automaticity.

### **Activity: “Pass the Mic”**

In addition to the above considerations based on research in conversation and discourse analysis, any communicative classroom activity must necessarily follow relevant pedagogical principles.

Firstly, this activity described here follows Brown's (2007) principle of the Language-Culture Connection by bridging English speech-acts and the Japanese style of turn-taking with floor changes occurring at TRPs. It also draws attention to this social move through a final awareness-raising component. Hutchby and Wooffitt (2008) note that Sacks et al.'s rule-set “operates as an oriented-to set of normative practices which members use to accomplish orderly turn-taking.” While the English and Japanese styles of turn-taking are certainly different, they are not incompatible. Hutchby and Wooffitt further point out the “close relationship between the temporal, sequential and inferential orders” of turn-taking. “Pass the Mic” allows each student to parse out and reassemble these orders in a way that makes sense to them.

Secondly and with regard to Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences, supplementing a more traditional classroom paradigm composed of the teacher presenting the target phrases and feedback either orally or in writing, the kinesthetic and visual aspects are incorporated to create a more holistic mode of transmitting information to students (Gilakjani, 2012). A manipulative prop can achieve this balance in targeting learning styles while also confining floor management to the target phrases by tying the use of said phrases to the operation of manipulating the prop. The activity "Pass the Mic" does just this by providing a tactile, manipulative framework in which the function phrases are singularly employed according to Sacks et al.'s (1974) rules for speaker changes at TRPs while clearly designating the speaker role to all participants. Speakers receive tactile reinforcement of their speaking role, which other participants can easily confirm visually.

Finally, the activity follows Brown's (2007) principle of Automaticity by providing students with frequent opportunities to repeat "fixed and prefabricated chunks" from a manageable set of potential utterances that perform the turn-taking functions of taking and relinquishing the floor. The activity is designed to first draw attention to a stimulus (in this case, a toy microphone), which is linked to the use of the target phrases. This is in keeping with Logan's (1992) hypothesis that "the effects of automaticity occur after the effects of attention- [...] that automaticity is postattentive." By manipulating the stimulus ("passing the mic") students are able to tangibly feel when they take and pass the floor and by extension attach the physical movement to the social one. The awareness-raising component is in part intended to shift attention from the manipulative itself to the speech act it is meant to represent, in addition to the communicative context in which it is manipulated. The ultimate aim is to improve floor management by increasing automaticity and sustained use of the target phrases in free production.

At the outset of Discussion One (a ten-minute discussion following controlled practice of the target function phrase) in week seven, the instructor places a home base for the microphone at the center of each discussion group's table (Appendix A). A prop microphone is then placed on top of the home base. Students are then given the rules for "Pass the Mic."

The rules for "Pass the Mic"—designed in accordance with Sacks et al.'s (1974) modified rules for speaker changes in EDC—are as follows:

- 1) Whoever says "Can I start?" will take the microphone first.
- 2) When you finish speaking, use an Asking Others to Join function and place the microphone back on the home base.
- 3) To speak, take the microphone using a Joining the Discussion function. You only need to hold the microphone when you are a speaker. You do not need to take the microphone to ask, "Can I ask a question?" or any follow-up questions.

During the activity, it is the instructor's responsibility to ensure that each group follows the above rules. When students do not follow the rules, simply pointing at the microphone should be sufficient to correct the behavior.

At the end of Discussion One, the instructor passes out a slip of paper (Appendix B). Students are then instructed to think for a moment before filling in the blank and then to compare their answers with those of the other members of their group and to add the numbers together to see if they equal 100%. The main purpose of this final stage of the activity is to raise students' awareness of their ability to perform the discourse function of turn-taking. Secondly, it is meant to raise students' awareness of both their level of participation and that of the other members of their group. Through such awareness-raising, students are more likely to continue relevant positive behaviors (effective floor management and equalized participation through use of the target function phrases) in the future, as "awareness activities are also important in

making clear the boundaries of expected behavior” (Kellas, 2012). The goal of this awareness-raising is further emphasized through brief teacher-fronted feedback.

## RESULTS

To investigate the effects of this activity in EDC, twelve classes of seven to eight students were divided into three groups: two experimental groups and one control. The two experimental groups differed in the number of times they performed the activity. The first experimental group performed the activity three times in total: once each in weeks seven, eight, and nine. The second experimental group performed the activity only once in week seven. The control group did not perform the activity. To quantify the effects of the activity, the author counted the number of speaking turns<sup>4</sup> during two discussion tests<sup>5</sup>, as well as the instances of function phrases used to successfully join and ask others to join the discussions, to derive the percentages reflected in the tables below.

Table 2

*Percentage of Speaking Turns Initiated with a “Joining the Discussion” Function*

	Group	Test 2	Test 3
Experimental 1 (Activity in weeks 7, 8, and 9)		84.6%	68.5%
Experimental 2 (Activity in week 7 only)		81.6%	74.5%
Control (Did not receive activity)		69.7%	72.2%

Table 3

*Percentage of Speaking Turns Terminated with an “Asking Others to Join” Function*

	Group	Test 2	Test 3
Experimental 1 (Activity in weeks 7, 8, and 9)		57.1%	23.6%
Experimental 2 (Activity in week 7 only)		68.4%	39.8%
Control (Did not receive activity)		49.5%	15.6%

To control for the variable of controlled practices across the three groups during the weeks of the study, any students who were absent during this period were eliminated from the data set. This resulted in a relatively uniform 25 to 27 reliable samples for each group.

Logistical practicalities made it untenable to measure the percentage of each student’s speaking time in a testing environment, and so the effects of the activity on equalizing participation are not quantified in this study. However, as the results of the student survey of the “Pass the Mic” activity reflect, students from both experimental groups reported in week seven that the activity raised their awareness of participatory levels.

Table 4

*Mean Answers to Survey Questions (Appendix B)*

Question 1	Question 2	Question 3
3.362069	3.517241	3.689655

## DISCUSSION

As the percentages in Tables 2 and 3 reflect, the control group routinely performed equally well or worse than both experimental groups in both Joining and Asking Others to Join the Discussion. Comparing the results from Test 2 to Test 3 across all groups, it seems that the effects of “Pass the Mic” have only a short-term effect on increasing the instances of using a

Joining the Discussion function phrase. However, the activity clearly appears to have a longer-term effect on increasing instances of Asking Others to Join the Discussion at the completion of a speaking turn. The largest differential in the derived percentages of speaking turns either initiated or terminated with a target phrase is between the second experimental and control groups' termination of a speaking turn in Test 3: 39.8% and 15.6% respectively, a difference of 24.2%. Such a significant difference suggests that "Pass the Mic" indeed leads to an increase in sustained use of function phrases for Asking Others to Join the Discussion in free production. This in turn alleviates the previously noted (Young, 2013) communicative burden placed on the rest of the group when a CS fails to clearly open the floor (identifying the completion of a CS's speaking turn and managing the selection of an NS).

It is also worth noting that across all groups, the instances of Asking Others to Join at the end of a speaking turn are fewer than Joining the Discussion at the outset of speaking turn. This difference could have many, mutually inclusive reasons:

1. CSs have other stock phrases at their disposal that can be used instead, such as Asking for Opinions<sup>6</sup> or Asking Others to Connect<sup>7</sup>.
2. A CS uses another floor-passing mechanism such as nomination of a NS, a termination of hand gestures, or other such paralinguistic cues (Munby, 2005).
3. The NS is seizing the floor before it is opened by the CS (that is, before the termination of the TRP).

The possibility of the third reason above is an intriguing one. Remembering Hutchby and Wooffitt's (2008) assertion that Sacks et al.'s rules for turn-taking are oriented-to and normative, it follows that if the NS is seizing the floor before the completion of the CS's turn, then the participants may in fact be orienting to a more English floor with speaker changes occurring before TRPs. This would corroborate a supposition made by Kern (2009) in a conversation analysis of turn-taking within a 20 minute, task-based English discussion of seven students at a Japanese University.

In addition, the second experimental group—which performed the activity only during the week of the initial presentation of the target phrases—notably had the highest instance of both joining and asking others to join using a target phrase with regard to total number of speaking turns on the third discussion test. It may be that using "Pass the Mic" to ensure the target function's use over several weeks provides a crutch by which students relate the activity to the performance of the function and are thus less likely to deploy the target phrases without the aid of the microphone in free production. This hypothesis reinforces the notion that the manipulative microphone is best suited for *temporarily* restricting floor-passing mechanisms to the target phrases and raising awareness of how and why they are deployed. In other words, prolonged use of the manipulative prop may strengthen the association between the function phrases and the prop itself as opposed to the association between the function phrases and the speech act that the microphone is meant to represent. In this study, performing the activity only once—during the initial presentation of the function phrases—appears to have been the best method for drawing an appropriate association between the prop and the speech act, thereby improving students' ability to cooperate in discussion by successfully deploying mutually known function phrases to manage the floor in free production.

Students' overall reaction to "Pass the Mic" appeared positive. In addition, the activity had the unanticipated benefit of mutual accountability for following the rules, thereby ensuring proper deployment of the function phrases. Whenever a participant neglected to follow the rules of the activity (deploy a function phrase), another participant would invariably correct this behavior by reminding the student of the microphone. In this way, students held each other accountable for following the guidelines of the activity and so ensured deployment of the

function phrases at the appropriate time. Moreover, this mutual accountability seemed to prompt more reticent students to speak, as they became obligated to produce content after using a phrase for Joining the Discussion. This observation suggests that “Pass the Mic” succeeds in increasing the overall level of participation, at least within the context of English Discussion Class, and supports the earlier assumption that “equipping and encouraging students to pass the floor by using directed questions at TRPs will allow participatory students to involve non-participatory students, as well as encourage uncooperative<sup>8</sup> students to cooperate by passing the floor” (Young, 2013). Table 4 further supports this assertion.

## VARIATIONS

“Pass the Mic” can be modified to target Sacks et al.’s (1974) first type of speaker change (CS selects NS) while precluding the second type (NS self-selects). To do this, the Home Base should be removed from the table and the rules modified as follows:

- 1) Whoever says “Can I start?” will take the microphone first.
- 2) When you finish speaking, use a function phrase for Asking for Opinions or Asking Others to Connect, along with the name of the person to whom you pass the microphone.

This alternate version targets relinquishing the floor only (as opposed to taking and relinquishing the floor) by forcing students to end each speaking turn with a directed question. It may be better suited for shy or low level groups in which students rarely self-select to speak and can also be used during weeks two and eight of the first semester of EDC when Asking for Opinions and Asking Others to connect are respectively introduced. This version may better promote equalized participation among certain groups and encourage group cohesion by requiring students to use names. However, care must be taken to ensure that students do not revert to a more patterned and hierarchal turn order tied to seating position or gender, thereby preventing orientation to a more English floor.

Another variation is to use the original rules as a formative feedback activity rather than during a full-fledged discussion. In this case, “Pass the Mic” is reserved to correct the behavior of students who are not using the target phrases for Joining a Discussion. This variation can be used after the first or second discussion in week seven (when the target phrases are first introduced), week eight (a review lesson), or even in week nine (a discussion test lesson). This has the benefit of maintaining a more natural context for group discussion, which is otherwise altered by the structure of the activity itself. However, using the activity in this way may significantly cut into class time normally reserved for other activities.

## CONCLUSION

The data collected here suggests that turn-taking activities utilizing manipulatives can increase the frequency of target function phrases as measured through sustained use in free production of speech. This increase makes students more cooperative in negotiating turn order and managing the floor in group discussion. Furthermore, the student survey results indicate that “Pass the Mic” successfully raised awareness of participation and eased turn-taking in English discussion, in effect making students more cooperative in addition to more participatory. However, since the awareness-raising aspect of “Pass the Mic” may draw attention to non-participatory students, there could be negative washback from this and similar activities, creating anxiety for these students and in so doing perpetuate their behavior of non-participation. Furthermore, Harumi’s (1999) call for instructors to respect Japanese students’ use of silence could potentially preclude beneficial teacher intervention, further exacerbating this negative washback. This concern may be moot, however, as Kellas (2012) found by using a variety of activities to raise awareness of

turn-taking and participation in EDC that “in most cases, for both dominant and quiet students, participation scores improved” in regular lessons. This indicates more equalized participation stemming from awareness-raising activities, as both reluctant and dominant participatory behaviors are penalized in the scoring of regular lessons. Nevertheless, the effects of “Pass the Mic” on participation levels still need to be quantified and analyzed. Further research will also need to be conducted on whether this activity also increases accuracy. Finally, while the data in Tables 2 & 3 suggest that “Pass the Mic” may have the unanticipated effect of orienting students to a more English floor, conversation analysis should attempt to confirm this shift by taking pre- and post-test measurements of the amount and extent of instances of overlapping speech around TRPs.

It is also worth reiterating that “Pass the Mic” is designed to increase the frequency of a small selection of stock phrases *at* TRPs (rather than *before* TRPs, as is the case in English discourse) while minimizing alternative mechanisms for floor management. While this creates smoother and more effective discussion in the classroom while minimizing wasted talk-time, a side effect may be the formation of unnatural conversational habits that do not transfer out of the EDC classroom (Young, 2013). However, as Seedhouse (1996) argues, an “institutional variety of discourse produced by a speech community [...] convened for the institutional purpose of learning English” is far more realistic for English language learners and teachers alike. Some students have referred to the collection of EDC function phrases as *Rikkyo-ben* [Rikkyo dialect], and while EDC instructors may all agree that the prevalence of these curricular function phrases—Celce-Murcia’s (2007) “prefabricated chunks”—can lead to unnatural patterns of discourse, it enables students to communicate successfully at least within the institutional framework. In this way, EDC’s function phrases for Joining a Discussion help achieve the course goal of students being able to hold an extended discussion in English (Hurling, 2012). This research calls for further investigations as to how well so-called *Rikkyo-ben* transfers to other environments and contexts outside of the university. An institutional pattern of discourse is preferable so long as it is compatible with more natural patterns outside of a closed classroom.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Furo (2001) defines CTRPs as “conjunction points among grammatical, intonational, and semantic completion points.”

<sup>2</sup> CTRPs are alternatively referred to as TRPs in the literature, and will be referred to as such here.

<sup>3</sup> Level 4 students learn three phrases for Joining the Discussion and one phrase for Asking Others to Join the discussion.

<sup>4</sup> Furo (2001) notes the difficulty in defining what constitutes a speaking turn. In keeping with EDC curriculum as pertains to scoring a speaking turn on discussion tests, this paper considers a turn as an utterance containing two or more grammatical clauses and carrying semantic weight (content).

<sup>5</sup> Discussion Test 2 held in week 9 and Discussion Test 3 held in week 13.

<sup>6</sup> “What’s your opinion?” and “What do you think?” (Doe et al., 2013).

<sup>7</sup> “What do you think of {my/name’s} idea?” and “Does anyone (do you) agree with {my/name’s} idea?” (Doe et al., 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Young (2013) draws a distinction between participation and cooperation in English discussion: ‘participation’ means engaging actively as a speaker and a listener, ‘cooperation’ means using the curricular function phrases to mark and perform speech acts.



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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

# Home Base



### Appendix B

I held the microphone for \_\_\_\_% of the discussion.

私はディスカッション中\_\_\_\_%マイクを持ちました。

Please complete the survey below. (下記の質問に教えてください)

4 = Strongly agree (強く同意する) 3 = Agree (同意する)

2 = Disagree (同意しない) 1 = Strongly Disagree (強く同意しない)

1. Playing “Pass the Mic” made me more aware of how much I participate in group discussion.

(「マイクをわたそう」を通して、自分がどれだけディスカッションに参加しているかを実感することができた)

4 3 2 1

2. Playing “Pass the Mic” made me more aware of how much others participate in group discussion.

(「マイクをわたそう」を通して、他のメンバーがどれだけディスカッションに参加しているかを実感することができた)

4 3 2 1

3. Playing “Pass the Mic” made it easier for everyone to take turns speaking.

(「マイクをわたそう」によって、みんなが順番に会話に参加できるようになった)

4 3 2 1