

Brainstorming Discussion Content

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ABSTRACT

It is now taken for granted in the world of English language teaching (ELT) that communicative activities in the often contrived English learning environment of a classroom need to be relatable to the experience of the learners in that classroom. This article presents a case for using brainstorming strategies in an English speaking class for the purpose of generating meaningful, creative, student-centered discussion content that will engage learners with the topic of the lesson and with each other on a deeply personal level.

INTRODUCTION

In the particular field of ELT, much like in education in general, course books serve as the number one tool and factor determining the content of the majority of the lessons, especially in formal education provided by schools and universities. This statement is even more pertinent in the context of a mandatory university course bound by its unified curriculum nature, such as the English Discussion Class (EDC) at Rikkyo University. Written by authors with expertise and understanding of the main concepts of language and skills acquisition, a course book can reasonably be seen as a guide for teaching. However, it should by no means be the unequivocal resource at a teacher's disposal. In fact, by excessively and blindly relying on course book content, it is easy to forget about the content that is in any classroom by default, ready to fill the space of any activity or task – the content lying in the experiences, existing knowledge, and viewpoints of the learners. A brainstorming technique, in this regard, is deemed appropriate as a way of meaningfully tapping into students' experiences in a natural way and an opportunity to open up the lines of genuine interest in classroom interactions between members of the group planned and orchestrated by a teacher.

A typical EDC lesson involves two group discussions, the content of which is largely determined by the ideas expressed in the reading on the topic of the lesson, and yet even more often directly borrowed by students from the discussion preparation activities (whose primary goal indeed is to give students a chance to prepare ideas for group discussion). However, the ideas that students are engaging with are already given in the activity itself on the pages of the book. Thus, students are reduced to merely making decisions that would express their opinions on the ideas provided in the book. In other words, students are not so much producing their own content as reacting to whatever information is available in what might appear to be a rather passive way. As a result, group discussions would sometimes lack unique ideas reflecting the personalities and past experiences of the particular learners present in the classroom. This paper will discuss the procedural details and implications of using a brainstorming activity in which discussion participants work on their own and/or together with their peers in order to create their own, unique and meaningful to them, discussion content.

A research case on the use of another productive skill, writing, (Rao, 2007) provided an interesting observation similar to what has been noticed in the speaking EDC program: students often complained that they lacked ideas and could not think of anything significant or interesting to write (to say during discussions, in the context of EDC). It has previously been noted by other instructors working in the program that students taking this course find it quite cognitively demanding to come up with ideas on the offered topics spontaneously in the dynamic and unpredictable flow of group discussions, so they would probably benefit from extra time spent generating ideas prior to group discussions (McLaughlin, 2015).

LITERATURE REVIEW

At this point in time, the necessity of communicative nature being brought to a foreign language learning process does not require any more reiterations and it should be regarded as a matter of course. An ordinary lesson conducted within the EDC program provides what some might regard as an exemplary case of communicative methodology in practice – students achieve lesson goals through a set of interactive activities focused on the speaking skill, equally involving all members of the group, with the role of the teacher transformed into that of a facilitator. The results of the formal course feedback carried out by the program at the end of each term consistently show positive responses from the students, who say they enjoyed the course and could improve their speaking skills. Certainly, this type of feedback is reassuring, yet there is an idea that should probably be given more consideration in this case, as well as in other classrooms employing CLT methodology: “While activities we use in the classroom for language teaching may be considered communicative or enjoyable, they do not necessarily involve depth and meaningfulness...” (Arnold & Murphey, 2013, p. 2).

The principle of meaningful learning, as well as the related concept of meaningful action, are some of the key notions that the activity described in this article is based on. Brown (2007) offers the following definition of the meaningful learning principle: it is “the process of making meaningful associations between existing knowledge/experience and new material...” (p. 60). He also points out some possible classroom implications of the principle, which are based on what appears to be the overarching idea of the principle in question, i.e. “anchoring new topics or new knowledge in students’ existing knowledge and background...” (p. 66).

Arnold and Murphey, quoted above, add the word “depth” in relation to meaningfulness, which could be a missing piece in the generalized definition of the principle formulated by Brown. The problem with identifying depth of learning occurring with the help of a communicative activity is closely linked with the fact, and teachers’ understanding, that all students are unique individuals “and ‘a world of meaningful action’ which is created differs from one student to another... The depth of meaning that a piece of information has for a student depends on its relevance to the student’s previous experiences...” (Candlin & Crichton, 2013, p. 79). Consequently, it seems worthwhile to attempt to activate the specific personal experiences of each and every one of our students in order for them to realize their classroom communications in the most engaging and relevant of ways. By having students reach for their existing knowledge through the process of brainstorming on a given topic, teachers are opening the door to the many worlds of personal meanings, each one valid and varied in its own way, each one contributing to the bigger picture of meanings that a group can construe together. Candlin and Crichton do not forget to take into account the interaction that helps to give shape to the communication and wisely mention that teachers should trust and imply “that students will and can learn from each other’s contributions...” (p. 80).

Another notion significant for the purpose and premise of this article is creativity. Creativity is defined in the popular education literature by Robinson (2001) as “imaginative processes with outcomes that are original and of value...” (p. 118). A crucial aspect, or some might see it as a side effect, of creativity in the classroom that both teachers and learners can experience has to do with unpredictable outcomes. In the case of the brainstorming activity, by giving reins to the students as to the content of the discussions and the paths those discussions could take, a teacher loses control and at the same time enhances his/her role as a facilitator. This experience can be regarded through both positive and negative lenses. On the one hand, a communicative activity designed with an element of uncertainty attempts to import into it “the key features of ‘real-life’ communication.” (Thornbury, 2017, p. 45) Indeed, as in real life, classroom communication with unplanned variables (especially such an important one as content, as in our case) leaves both

students and teacher with a free space for learning to happen, “where neither the process, nor the outcome, nor the language used in the exchange, is entirely predictable.” (Thornbury, p. 45) On the other hand, the same sense of uncertainty can be seen as overwhelming and challenging beyond our capacity to deal with. In the end, as Schultz (2010) observes, “too much uncertainty may stifle creativity...” (p. 160). In practical terms, it means that a teacher should offer creative tasks with clear enough directions so that students understand what is being asked of them and where they are heading towards with all the creative output they produce.

One final important term that should be mentioned is learners’ agency, which manifests itself through creative and meaningful action of a brainstorming activity. Agency is most generally defined as an individual’s will and capacity to act, and described as a fundamental yet complex characteristic of human behaviour (Gao, 2010). The aspect of agency we are engaging with in this review is control versus initiative, fixed versus flexible, which represent the dynamics of agency in the language classroom. From the EDC standpoint and applied to the content brainstorming activity, *control* equals using predetermined textbook content to supply ideas for group discussions, while using the ideas generated by students themselves stands for expressing *initiative*. More than anything, being open to the unpredictability of student-initiated lesson content involves putting trust in the learners but, as will be seen in further sections of this paper, brings its rewards.

PROCEDURE

For the purpose of this activity, in most cases described in this paper a whole page of the course book containing group discussion preparation was substituted with a worksheet designed, and later almost always redesigned, to guide students through the stages of brainstorming content for the subsequent group discussion (an example of such worksheet can be seen in Appendix A). It should be noted that in this article by the term “brainstorming” we imply “brainwriting” as in all cases the content was presented by students in the written form, which later was used to support group discussions.

The brainstorming activity for discussion preparation was implemented in various forms in six out of the fourteen lessons of the course. The different shapes that the activity took included the following:

- a. Pair brainstorming followed by pair discussions;
- b. Individual brainstorming, with content compared and completed in pairs or groups, followed by pair discussions;
- c. Pair brainstorming on a range of topics simultaneously with other pairs (gallery walk).

As previously mentioned, the worksheets were subject to change and improvement with the aim of bringing greater clarity to the tasks and instructions. A typical and most successful task format included several stages: (1) individual brainstorming of ideas to answer a certain question or fit given categories; (2) comparing ideas with a partner or a group in order to add more ideas or complete the list; (3) pair discussion based on the generated content; (4) finally, as in any EDC lesson, a group discussion with new partners. It is worth mentioning that a choice to prioritize individual brainstorming over pair/group brainstorming was supported by relevant research in the field. As Brown and Paulus (2002) state, “group brainstorming has found it to be less effective than individual brainstorming [...] as groups generate fewer ideas and group members exhibit reduced motivation and do not fully share unique information” (p. 208).

While the original intention was to use brainstorming for all six target function lessons and for the three review lessons, as the term progressed and the activity implementation garnered enough feedback to make more strategic choices, a decision was made to skip brainstorming for

discussion content generation for certain functions (see Variations for more detailed explanations of the rationale behind those choices). Instead, for those lessons the brainstorming technique was used at a different stage, namely Presentation stage. However, this case will not be addressed in this paper for the focus lies in the use of brainstorming for generating discussion content specifically.

Originally, the activity was planned to be implemented with various groups of students regardless of their language level. Later on, however, as the target language and discussion topics grew more challenging, a decision was made to spare one group of students of extra cognitive load that the activity posed as it did not seem to benefit their discussions or fulfillment of the lesson goals as much as it did for other groups.

VARIATIONS

Early on in the process of activity implementation, it became clear that in the interests of time and efficiency brainstorming should be framed with the help of a structure and instructions easily followed by students, who by the time of the second term in the EDC program were already settled in the routine of a typical class outline. In this respect, the very first day of testing out the activity defined the course for activity design for the weeks ahead.

On the first day of using the brainstorming activity to prepare students for the discussion on the topic of Modern Japanese Culture (Lesson 2 of the course), the flaws in using a more open brainstorming format were recognized. First of all, too many categories were suggested for students to add their ideas to, and consequently it took them an unreasonable amount of time to try and complete the activity. Some of the suggested categories, such as “subculture,” proved too difficult as students could not easily relate their experiences to this rather vague concept. Another crucial observation of the first day showed that it is absolutely necessary to spell out the tasks and instructions clearly for students on the worksheet to reduce any kind of ambiguity. At their most basic level, the instructions should provide a task (“Add your ideas to the list below”) and should then be followed by a clear question for discussion with a partner and lead to the use of the generated ideas and the target function(s) of that lesson.

It has been mentioned in the previous section of this article that certain target functional language of the course did not lend itself easily to the brainstorming type of discussion preparation. Such language included advantages and disadvantages, different points of view, and information sources. As the discussion functions that this language serves are content-driven themselves, it seemed perfunctory to provide students an opportunity to prepare that content in advance. As the objective of these functions is to learn to use them for developing the discussion flow in-action, it seemed like a redundant step to feed the function content prior to discussions themselves, thus removing the necessary cognitive pressure and natural interactions between group members.

One of the benefits of the brainstorming activity turned out to be its flexibility that allowed opportunities for experimentation in activity design from class to class. Below is a list of the most notable and significant activity modifications that were made throughout the term, as well as the various factors instigating those changes.

1. Ensuring greater clarity of instructions in order to reduce ambiguity (e.g. more clearly formulated questions; specific instructions to choose a particular number of items in each category; addition of steps needed for the task completion, etc.)
2. Reducing, adding to, or changing content categories presented in the course book to brainstorm for (e.g. “Other” instead of “Work” in Discussion 1 of Lesson 3 on Japanese Customs). Such changes are affected by the nature of the topics and the need to further break up the task.
3. Providing a prompt, or the first item on the list, as the starting point for any brainstorming session in order to set the direction for students.

4. Including an extra step of comparing individually generated ideas with a partner or a group in order to reduce the pressure of compiling a long list on one's own. Students also seemed to appreciate a chance to draw from each others' ideas before moving on to the discussion stage and would sometimes prefer to speak about the ideas borrowed from their partners rather than brainstormed on their own. In this way, pair/group work enhanced the power of individually performed brainstorming activity and substantially added both to the content of discussions and to the motivation levels exhibited by students.
5. Opting out of elicitation of ideas from a whole class in order to use time effectively. Pooling ideas from various students and writing them on the board as a mind map with the purpose of them later referring to these ideas in group discussions did not prove to be beneficial as it often took a long time to no obvious benefit of use in further discussions (i.e. students would most often refer to their own notes rather than look at the board).

DISCUSSION

In this section, the value of this activity for this particular stage of the lesson will be examined more closely, as well as general benefits of brainstorming as a strategy teachers in other contexts could use in planning their lessons.

First of all, we should not assume that brainstorming is an activity that requires less preparation on the part of the teacher simply because the responsibility of content creation is delegated to students. In fact, a few lessons' worth of activity implementation was enough to show that preparation should be thorough and thoughtful. Below are some questions teachers might find it useful to keep in mind during the planning stage:

- *Will this particular group of students have enough knowledge or experience on the topic to draw from? Is there any way to activate schema?*
- *Is the brainstorming carried out individually? In pairs? In groups? What are the benefits and, more importantly, possible traps and pitfalls of each format?*
- *How many steps, or stages, will the activity consist of? How will they be connected with one another?*
- *Are the instructions explicit and consistent throughout the steps?*
- *How is the brainstormed content used in later stages of activity/lesson?*

Having considered the aforementioned questions in the planning process, teachers may be able to produce an activity that will draw on students' creativity and let them access their knowledge within their scope and capacity. In that situation, as our experience proved, the benefits can be manifold. When well designed with all the improvements taken into consideration, the brainstorming activity allows students to bring more of their own personal experiences and a variety of ideas in general into group discussions, which might aid engagement with the topic as well as with discussion partners. A few instances of informal feedback collection in the form of end-of-the-lesson exit tickets showed positive responses of some students to the independent content generation that took place in those lessons, as well as appreciation of the fact that there were chances to discover new, often unpredictable sides to the character, thoughts, and experiences of their classmates. In addition, for me as a teacher the content that the students came up with allowed opportunities to learn the details of their lives that would otherwise remain unspoken, to find value in the strength and depth of their personal opinions rooted in past experiences, and eventually to build rapport based on the acquired knowledge of particular individualities of the students in each group.

Another value of using the brainstorming technique lies in a more psychological aspect of the classroom, one whose effect is harder to trace but that resonates profoundly with the students' ability to actively apply their agency in the learning process. The brainstorming activity, the results of which are immediately shared by group members in a meaningful social interaction, encourages students to be more proactive learners "owning" their group discussions. Through introducing their own, oftentimes unique content on the topic, students could express ideas far beyond what was suggested in the course book, thus using a chance to show their originality. In my experience teaching EDC classes using the course book, I could observe that more often than not students found themselves lacking original content (especially those group members who happened to be the last to speak). In such cases, it was not unusual for them to choose to skip their speaking turn completely because they did not want to repeat the same ideas again, so their speaking turn was reduced to a simple "I totally agree" and understanding nods of their classmates. In the first instances of implementing brainstorming activity, I was wary of the potential problem of a "block" – that some learners might react to this task with reluctance or an inability to produce any content of their own. To my surprise, I was soon persuaded of the power and importance of the trust we should put into our students: across thirteen groups of learners with varied language abilities, there was never a single student who could not write anything at all in response to the task and left the page blank. I could see that even for lower level groups, the cognitive challenge of this activity that I had previously foreseen as a teacher was met with enthusiasm and their best effort, both individually and collaboratively. This could be attributed to several factors. Crucially, there was always an adequate amount of time given for the task completion. First on their own, and later with their partners, students could feel safe coming up with ideas under limited time pressure. The additional step of pair/group comparison for list completion worked as another motivating factor. Lastly, students were reassured from the start that their ideas did not have to be written down with perfect spelling and the only thing that mattered was that their points made sense and were clear to their discussion partners. Some students appealed to either classmates or the teacher for help, but the majority of learners relied on their own language mastery.

Finally, the creativity aspect of this activity needs to be addressed. The use of a brainstorming activity for such an important stage of the lesson as group discussion preparation provides an outlet for creativity. In the beginning stages of activity implementation students seemed to take a rather careful approach to what they should write. They would choose safe word combinations and more often prefer to write fewer ideas than experiment with translations. Later though, a change in behaviour was observed and students' output grew bigger in quantity and more creative in expression. It was interesting to note that the creativity lay not only in the scope of ideas but also in the variety of language means used to note down the ideas. Interesting examples can be seen in Appendix B, which is a sample of the extent of students' output on the topic of Money. When answering the question "What can people do with their money?" the students took the liberty to interpret the question freely (*becoming beautiful, do reform*) and play with the language (*using small rich action sometimes, saving for thank actions for family*). Many students preferred to give more specific answers (*buy thousands of books and DVDs, buy gifts for parents, buying land*) to more generic ones (*going shopping*).

CONCLUSION

In this article I attempted to give an overview of how and to which benefits a brainstorming activity can be used to create student-generated content for group discussions on a given topic. A semester's worth of active experimentation with and reflection on activity design proved to me that relying on students' output while still directing them towards the goals of the lesson is a plausible and engaging way to tap into their existing knowledge creatively and invite their personal

experiences to be expressed more explicitly. Breaking up the activity into several steps ensured that students would be gradually preparing for group discussions through meaningful tasks that involved individual work, as well as interaction with their peers while looking for form and/or meaning of content together. The sufficient time allowed for the generation of content reduced stress and anxiety levels in group discussions and created space even for shier learners to contribute to those discussions more proactively. A possible direction of future action research into the use of the brainstorming technique for content generation could involve regularly collecting and analyzing student feedback on the effects and impressions of the brainstorming activity carried out in class.

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APPENDIX A

Discussion 1. What to Do With Money

Step 1. What can people do with their money? Add your own ideas.

- Saving for an emergency
- Starting a project or a business
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Step 2. Discuss with a partner. **Ask each other to compare different ways.** Talk about the differences.

What is a good way to spend money?

GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are some good things for people to do with their money?
2. What should people not do with their money?

APPENDIX B

Lesson Topic
Lesson 10, Discussion 1 “What to Do with Money”
Brainstorming Format
Individually
Course Book Content
Saving for an emergency, saving for something special (wedding, house, etc), donating to charity, buying things for yourself (clothes, video games, etc), buying gifts for your friends and family, travelling abroad, eating expensive food, starting a business.
Students’ Generated Content
Going shopping, having lunch or dinner with friends, have vacation in other countries, pay tuition, go on a trip, build or buy a house, buy stocks, spend on wife and children, buy thousands of books and DVDs, build a home theatre, be a sponsor of your favourite soccer team, buy gifts for parents, visit grandparents, donate money to charity, have a wedding party in Hawaii, use for our hobby, have a pet, get more education, have a family, give money to family, buy gifts on holidays for other people, start a new life abroad, buy things that you want, build a public facility, go to the gym, watch movies, going to a drinking party, spending on your health, saving for a wedding, saving for travelling, giving a present for someone, eating good food, paying the gas and electricity bills, save for education of your children, use for life, bets on horse races, becoming beautiful, travelling all over the world, making schools better, moving anywhere you want to, buy a car, go to car school, starting a new hobby, fashion, saving for future family, buying land, do reform, make an investment, self-improvement, gamble, sports, buy a house in Tokyo, buy a house all over the world, use for sightseeing, helping poor people in the world, raise a child, contributing as a volunteer, going to place where you can have fun, use for transport (taxi, train), eating out with friends, buying essential items for life, getting new skills, saving for special events, using small rich action sometimes, saving for thank actions for family, living with convenience, lending to someone, take your parents on a trip, studying abroad, buy a helicopter, hiring a house worker, staying at a hotel, taking tests, study more effectively by attending cram school, buying different brands, raising expensive dogs, becoming VIP for amusement parks, changing the job you like, getting better education, go to famous restaurants, travelling around Japan, donate to someone if earthquake happens, money can buy love, make someone happy, go to a live show, get a driving license, donate to people who have troubles, donate to some school, present a big house for my family, live in Tokyo.