

Encouraging Balanced Participation in Group Discussions

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ABSTRACT

For courses which involve group work, a key goal is ensuring equal student participation in group activities. In this paper I describe a classroom activity to help students consider what constitutes a balanced discussion and why having a balanced discussion is important. I begin by describing how I became interested in the importance of balanced group work. I then discuss literature on the importance of group work, on the benefits of group work for language learning and motivation, and on some issues with defining effective group work. Following this I detail the activity as I used it in class. This activity is centred around a multifaceted concept of *discussion balance*. The activity aims to raise students' awareness of what constitutes balanced group work, as well as the rationale for achieving this balance. I then briefly suggest some variations on the activity which may be useful for other teaching contexts, before discussing my overall impressions of the activity. I suggest that the concept of discussion balance helps ensure equal participation in terms of talking time, but more importantly in terms of specific language use. I also argue that having students consider the rationale for classroom behaviours is an effective technique to increase the uptake of these behaviours.

INTRODUCTION

My interest in the concept of balanced group discussions emerged as a result of earlier feedback activities I had done in class. In many classes I noticed an imbalance in the number of questions that each student asked. More confident and dominant students tended to ask a lot of questions, and less confident students asked fewer questions, if any. As well as the obvious effect of increasing participation by asking more questions, this disparity is an important factor because in order to get a maximum grade on the course students have to use linguistic forms which are questions as well as answers. Therefore, my feedback raised awareness of this imbalance and set groups the future goal of balancing the number of questions that each group member asked. When students implemented this feedback I noticed that it improved not only the balance of questions, as expected, but also the level of participation. In other words, when questions are shared equally there is a knock-on effect of changing the group discussion dynamic, because turn-taking is spread more equally. If four people need to give an opinion, the order in which these opinions are given is an important factor. This is especially the case for questions which involve a "yes" or "no" answer, or "agree" or "disagree" responses. Students who speak first have an easier time because they can say the simpler and more obvious answers when they express their opinion. Furthermore, the order of turn-taking in a discussion limits the range of speaking phrases that the speaker will use. For instance, the first person will not be able to agree or disagree with classmates. This can be a problem if more confident students who tend to speak first use the easy opinion, making it harder for less confident students to say what they think. Those with higher fluency are able to say more complex and unusual ideas, and so are not as disadvantaged by taking a later speaking turn as those who are less fluent. This is particularly a problem if students consistently follow the same discussion pattern and thus do not practice a range of linguistic skills. In short, making a more balanced discussion struck me as an efficient way to improve both class dynamics and grades. In the rest of this paper I follow the definition of a balanced discussion provided by Kellas (2012): "A balanced discussion was seen as a discussion where each student was both an active speaker and an active listener. In addition, a balanced discussion was one where each of the members in the discussion had an equal opportunity to express their own ideas." (p.

27). This captures the idea of balance involving both speaking time and speaking content.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Effective group dynamics are widely viewed as crucial to success in a language classroom. One reason is that the existing body of research in the second language classroom appears to indicate that cooperative learning methods maximise second language learning by providing opportunities for both language input and output (Liang, Mohanf, & Early, 1998). Stevick (1980) is unequivocal about this: “[In a language course] success depends less on materials, techniques and linguistic analyses, and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom” (p. 4, in Dörnyei & Malderez, 1999). What is more, numerous theories of second language acquisition hold that small group work in the language classroom is key for developing language skills. For example, Long’s (1996) interaction hypothesis and Swain’s (1985) output hypothesis both view interaction as playing a key role in language learning. Dörnyei and Malderez (1999) explain that there is a consensus in the research literature indicating that group events are greatly responsible for both the quantity and quality of interaction between group members, and responsible for the link between such group co-operation and the degree of individual student involvement. Put simply, successful group work seems essential for effective second language learning. As well as pedagogical reasons, though, there may well be motivational aspects to effective group work. Dörnyei (1997), for instance, argues strongly for the motivational benefits of cooperative learning. This could be particularly important for lessons in a compulsory university course, as any compulsory course taken by large numbers of students will have varying levels of motivation among students.

Another factor to consider is that group size is important. For example, a study by Cao and Philp (2006) found that learners reported group size as the most important factor influencing their willingness to communicate. A group of three or four was the optimum number of students that increased their willingness to communicate. A key implication in relation to L2 learning and acquisition is that immediacy within a communicative context has also been linked to increased production of language (Richmond et al., 2012, in Poupore, 2015). This means that close cooperation among a small number of learners facilitates both a number of, and a range of, language production opportunities. Small groups optimise such benefits. According to Lasito and Storch (2013), compared to working in pairs, in small groups learners are less likely to resort to using L1 if they encounter a language problem, and are more likely to resolve their problems with correct L2 language. The group size on the course that I teach is three or four people, so these findings are particularly relevant to my teaching context.

Group dynamics are established quickly, meaning the first few lessons spent together are of vital importance to the future functioning of the group. Development proceeds rapidly, and much structuring and organisation occurs in this period. Fairly quickly, the group establishes a social structure that will continue for the foreseeable future. This is relevant to note because healthy and varied dynamics will not emerge naturally. Ehrman and Dörnyei (1998) argue that a status hierarchy or pecking order quickly emerges when groups form. In the course of this process some students may take the authority to perform more numerous and more varied activities, and to control the activities of the group. This is important because “the perception of the group’s internal hierarchy allows participants to make assumptions about what to expect from another person and how they are expected to behave in interactions” (p. 116). If this idea that certain group members take on certain roles holds true, then it has important implications for the tasks that students will perform in a discussion, and thus the language and discussion skills that each member will practice. These factors affecting status could include competence (English level) or other social non-L2 related factors such as personality.

Despite the consensus over the importance of group work, the study of group dynamics in second language (L2) education has unfortunately for the most part been non-existent (Poupore, 2015). Theories of group dynamics as applied to language classrooms have usually been done on a whole-class scale. The problem with applying theories to a whole class is that, as Dörnyei (1997) explains, measuring groups is difficult in an L2 classroom because they are constantly changing and rearranging (p. 90). Empirical investigation of dynamics is intrinsically difficult. Classroom activities rarely involve the whole class together. Groups are usually divided into smaller units that are constantly changing. This is the case in the classes I teach. In my classes I use a system to randomly assign students to each group activity, in order to make sure students are always working with different people. Nevertheless, over the duration of a 15-week course with 90-minute lessons there is enough time for group dynamics to develop in the small eight-person classes that I teach. I personally feel that such dynamics have emerged by even the third week, as students have practiced discussion and have got a feel for who will speak more and who will speak less, for the different discussion roles that people will tend to perform, and for other students' personalities.

Another issue with investigating the idea of group dynamics is defining what exact aspect of dynamics is studied. What constitutes good interaction is hard to pin down. For instance, an investigation of opinions on what makes good class dynamics by Chang (2014) found that both students and teachers agreed that good interaction creates motivation, but they disagreed about some specifics of what good dynamics were. In particular, students seemed to emphasise group cohesiveness, the idea that group members should care about all members (not only about themselves), and that the class atmosphere should be relaxing. A second issue is that as well as the rather abstract idea of group dynamics itself, group work should not be assumed as automatically beneficial. There may be problems with the nature of group work. For instance, Poupore (2015) argues that "The motivational and educational benefits of cooperative learning and group work are in many ways contingent upon an efficient and positive group dynamic" (p. 721). While small groups are generally useful, there are potential problems. Most obviously, small groups allow the chance for some students to take a back seat, and conversely allow more outgoing students to take on a larger share of talking time. This is a problem because it is important for acquisition that students perform a range of functions and roles in a group. Learners need to produce language in order to increase proficiency, but the range of what is produced is critical. Simply hearing others produce language in a group situation will not lead to real acquisition.

Having discussed some of the issues relevant to group work, I also want to mention one study which is particularly relevant for my purposes. This is Kellas' 2012 paper, which addressed effective group work in the same teaching situation as myself, and is a specific discussion of activities to balance participation. He explains three techniques he tried in order to balance participation. The first is presenting a participation map showing the number of turns that each student takes and the direction of the discussion. The second is raising awareness of the 25% speaking to 75% listening ratios expected in a four person discussion. The third is timed activities in which students run through a prescribed set of functions in a discussion. Kellas makes two interesting observations. Firstly, that awareness raising is particularly successful for students who speak too much, and secondly that setting prescribed or controlled speaking activities is better for lower level students. He also notes that it is easy for some students who may be active in pair work to sit back and let other group members take up the slack when they engage in larger group work, and that the group may not notice this and still feel that they are successful. The danger with this is that groups may feel they have done well because the discussion itself was successful, even if the balance of participation is unequal. Kellas' comments here point to a possible problem with asking students to assess their own group performance, as they might not be in a position to judge well.

TASKS AND MATERIALS

The task I gave students involved a handout (see Appendix). This handout was designed to stress two key ideas. Firstly, it shows three things that students should consider when they try to balance the discussion: balancing the amount of speaking time equally between each member, balancing a variety of Function phrases and Communication Skills, and balancing asking questions to the group with giving one's own opinions. Sharing speaking time is perhaps the most obvious element of balance and arguably the one that students are most keenly aware of. The idea of balancing a variety of Function phrases and Communication Skills is more complex, as it encourages students to use a range of Reactions, Agreeing and Disagreeing phrases and Checking Understanding, as well as using a range of Function phrases in the discussion. The idea here is for students to make sure to use variety, instead of simply saying the first phrases that come into their head or saying the Communication Skills that they use "naturally". I feel that the third aspect of balancing asking questions to the group with giving one's own opinion is potentially the most difficult because in my experience, as explained above, this is a pattern that is hard to break. Indeed, it has been my experience that students in many cases do not seem to be aware of the imbalances that occur. This first section of the task, then, is purely instructive; it is about explaining the desired student behaviours. The second part of the task is about the rationale for the desired behaviours. The second part of the handout contains three reasons why students should balance the discussion. The first reason is broadly an extrinsic motivation to achieve grades, the second a social motivation to include others, and the third an intrinsic motivation for improved skills. This is arguably less obvious to students, so I included this to raise awareness of the benefits of balance.

The interactive element of the task is the two questions at the bottom. The first question asks students to explain which of the three rationales for a balanced discussion is most important. Each of the three reasons to balance the discussion are valid, and having students choose one and justify their choice was primarily in order to have them think hard and thus reinforce the rationale for the balance. Hopefully, this kind of question will stimulate higher-level processing of the ideas, as well as exposing students to different ideas when they hear classmates' opinions. What is more, my hope was that when students have explained why they feel it is important to carry out these behaviours they will be more likely to actually do so. In other words, it helps to get the students on board with the idea of balance by personalising it somewhat. Hopefully this thinking also increases motivation and understanding of the importance of balance. The second question is about the kind of balance that students need to improve and to help them to identify their personal goals. This is simply to turn the activity into an actionable goal for the coming group discussions. In short, the first question asks students to evaluate the reasons for achieving a discussion balance, and the second one focuses them on what they need to do to achieve a better balance.

PROCEDURE

I implemented the actual activity in lesson 10. However, the theme of this activity was not new to my students. In many of the lessons previously I had explained the three aspects of the discussion that I wanted students to balance and I had mentioned this in feedback activities. I had particularly emphasised this before the two previous discussion tests, as this element of balance is extremely important to ensure each group member gets a good test grade. I chose to carry out the task in lesson 10 because this lesson was just after the second discussion test, so my stressing of the three elements of balance was, ideally, fresh in students' minds. In addition, the activity worked as a transition from the previous lesson. I asked the class what advice I had given in the previous lessons, to elicit the idea of balance. I then explained that we would do an activity to refresh their memories about this. I could comment if the class had done a good job with achieving balance (or not) in the test, so the class could continue to focus on a good balance or attempt to improve it.

Another reason for implementing the activity in lesson 10 is that the Function for lesson 10 is relatively straight-forward compared to the other functions later in the course, so I felt I needed less practice for this Function and could therefore spare class time for the activity.

The activity took between 8 and 10 minutes on average. I gave out the handout and gave students a minute in silence to read the information. Students then discussed the questions in pairs or threes. I judged the time for the activity based on the level of detail students could give and how enthusiastic they were about discussing. At the end I took a count of how many students chose each reason to balance the discussion, and I asked each individual student what their “balance goal” was for the next discussion. In my post-activity comments I linked the idea of a need for balance to a formal discussion situation such as a seminar or a workplace discussion. I compared it to a chat on the train or in a coffee shop, in which the focus is on enjoyment rather than equal balance. After my activity was finished students commenced the preparation activities for the first group discussion. I left the handout paper on the tables during the discussion as a reminder. Finally, after the first and second class discussions each discussion group answered the question “How was the balance in our discussion?”, to maintain focus on what I wanted them to do. The final thing I did was to follow up on the actual classroom task by including a reminder about the need for balance in the class comments after lessons. In these class comments I asked students to focus on the element of balance they found most difficult in the subsequent lessons.

VARIATIONS

In terms of this specific activity, there are two changes I considered. Firstly, the activity could be done earlier in the semester. As mentioned in the literature review, one key aspect of group dynamics is that they develop early on, and so any attempt to mould group behaviour may be more effective at these initial stages of the course. Although I mentioned balance frequently in the early stages of the course, the explicit focus of this activity was done later on in the course, and by this time it may have been harder for the groups to modify their interaction patterns. The second possible change is that I feel using Japanese for the activity may have been useful. This is because the activity is a kind of “meta” consideration that need not be done in English. The goal is deep understanding rather than English learning, and this kind of deeper cognitive processing may be more effective in L1. It would also speed up the discussions of the activity questions and ensure 100% comprehensibility of the ideas I presented. For instance, my point about balancing functions and communication skills is a little abstract and perhaps not explained well enough.

Another kind of variation I should mention is not to the activity itself but in terms of applying the underlying principle. The principle behind this activity is providing a desired behaviour and providing an accompanying rationale, then having students attach a personal importance to the rationale. In this respect it is very flexible. Any behaviour could be included if it has multiple rationales. It is therefore especially appropriate for a more abstract classroom behaviour (such as “balancing a discussion”), because it seems more likely that this will have multiple aspects to it and multiple reasons for doing the behaviour.

DISCUSSION

What is perhaps a more noteworthy aspect of this activity is how students can choose from a range of rationales for a behaviour that the teacher wants them to do. One strength of this is that it individualises motivation. I felt that this was successful, because in general students approached the activity seriously and could articulate a reason for their choice. I feel that this kind of discussion of personal importance is more effective than simply lecturing this information at the students. The principle here is that discovering for oneself is more meaningful and autonomous. It also gives students a chance to see reasons that they might not have previously been cognizant

of. This variety of choice seemed to be borne out in how student answered the questions. As mentioned above, I took a poll of which reasons were chosen. 42 students chose being polite as the most important reason, 29 students chose improving weak points, and 16 students chose getting a good grade. Although this is informal and the sample size is small, this is perhaps an important finding in terms of motivation for students. The need to consider others seemed to be a priority for many students, more so than the “personal” motivations. This could perhaps be used as a principle when encouraging other kinds of classroom behaviours.

Another observation is about the success or otherwise of this kind of approach. I noticed that the quality and length of the discussions about reasons for balance was unrelated to students’ English level. It would seem that some people tend to understand the meta-level questions about the learning process and can think about them better than others. I was pleased that students engaged in the task with almost universal vigour. Inevitably, however, it resonated more with some classes than others: some students attempted to explain in more detail than others. Overall, however, the range of justifications students gave for their choice of reason suggest that they took the activity seriously. For instance, students said that achieving a good grade is an important reason to balance the discussion for these reasons: the teacher cannot give a grade to students who do not give their opinion; students need to pass the course; and getting a good grade is the best use of class time. Students said that balancing the discussion to be polite is most important for these reasons: it is important they should acknowledge others in the group; if students cannot speak they will feel sleepy and bored; students want to hear everyone’s ideas; it is more interesting; everyone has an opinion so everyone needs a chance to say it; and this gives everyone an opportunity to improve their skills. Students said that improving weak points is important for these reasons: overcoming weak points is the most important point of college life; improving skills helps when speaking with foreign people and it is not easy to improve one’s own weak points.

In terms of the benefits of the activity, these are related to the three rationales I gave students, as these rationales explicitly show how balance can be beneficial to students. Firstly, they can achieve a better grade if they display an increased range of language skills. Secondly, the class or group dynamics will improve if everyone converses equally and feels they have a stake in the class. Thirdly, students will spend more time on aspects of the course they find difficult, rather than sticking to what is instinctual and therefore easier for them. I feel the discussion generated by the activity was successful, but it is harder to gauge the actual effects of this. As mentioned in the literature review, measuring group dynamics is notoriously complex. Students were tasked with improving one aspect of balance. It is, however, difficult for a teacher to track the performance of up to eight students who are each trying to improve one specific aspect of their discussions. This is even harder considering that there is no previous benchmark for the students’ performance of this aspect of balance against which their later performance can be measured. These things cannot be reliably assessed by the teacher. Some of the benefit of this activity, then, has to be taken as an article of faith. Nevertheless, I feel that the activity helped. The most visible results were with the quieter and with the more overbearing students. It was frequently the case that the quieter students noticeably began to ask more questions, and conversely that the more domineering students held off and allowed others to participate more. These aspects were more noticeable to me as the teacher, but there is also a more theoretical idea that if each member is doing a little to improve the balance, the cumulative effect of all these small changes will have a large effect on the overall group dynamics. In principle, then, this kind of activity should have a positive effect in the following discussions, if students are keeping it in mind.

Looking back, I feel that one weakness of the activity is the idea of “balancing Functions and Communication Skills”. This is tricky because it includes many different things to balance, so it may be hard for students to keep a track of what they have been saying in a discussion and the

range of skills they have used. This advice seems to serve as a reminder more than a concrete goal. In future I would like to elaborate on this more and to provide clear guidance as to how students could do this.

CONCLUSION

I believe there are two noteworthy aspects to this activity. The first relates to the definition of discussion balance. It is common to hear instructors and students talking about equal speaking time, thereby equating a balanced discussion purely with the time spent talking. This is easily observable to students themselves. However, I would argue it is more productive to view balance in a more nuanced way, including not just the amount of speaking time but the content of that speaking time. A multifaceted view of balance helps students to balance the *nature* of their contributions to the discussion, as well as the *extent* of their contributions. As I argued previously, the effect of each person slightly modifying their behaviour can be significant. Each individual person making little changes can smooth out a group discussion to a noticeable degree. It is more than the sum of its parts. The second point of note is the self-reflection aspect of the activity. As I have discussed, I believe this is a suitable approach to encouraging those behaviours for which the teacher can easily see the benefit but students might not so intuitively grasp the gains. The principle is that motivation is higher if students have come up with the reason to do these things for themselves. This is an important motivational principle, implemented in a controlled form of self-discovery.

Overall, I hope the discussion here has shown how this activity can be a useful tool for teachers to deploy in certain classroom situations. My experience with the idea of a multifaceted discussion balance inspired me to keep using this activity in the future and to keep adjusting it. I will continue reworking this activity because in my experience it has been beneficial, and it is certainly something that I will keep doing in the future.

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APPENDIX

Discussion Balance

How to Balance the discussion:

In the discussions, always think about 'Balance'. There are three kinds of balance:

- A) Balance the speaking time in your group (Everyone should speak for the same amount of time)
- B) Balance Function Phrases and Communication Skills (Use a variety of Functions and a variety of Communication Skills)
- C) Balance Questions and Opinions (You should explain your own opinion and also ask questions to your group)

Why to balance the discussion:

There are three reasons why a balanced discussion is important:

- 1. Using a balance means you get a good grade in class because you use a variety of Functions and Communication Skills.
- 2. A balance is polite because each person has the same chance to participate.
- 3. Using a balance means you can improve your weak points, because you try to do the things you are not good at.

QUESTIONS:

- 1. In your opinion, which reason to balance the discussion (1, 2, 3) is most important, and why?
- 2. What kind of balance (A, B, C) do you need to improve, and why?