

A Classroom Activity to Increase Fluency in Discussions

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Abstract

Successful discussions may necessitate fluent idea presentation and meaning negotiation skills. The results of my observation of students' performance indicated that students' "efforts" of trying to locate the exact words for a certain idea as well as their short of immediate ideas to talk about seemed to have given rise to the lack of fluency in discussions. In response to that, a class activity – Homework Cards—has been designed to increase fluency in idea conceptualization, formulation as well as negotiation skills. By looking at pros and cons of using Homework Cards, this paper is a tentative attempt to justify how using Homework Cards in discussion classes may increase fluency in discussions, thus helping to attain one of the goals of EDC program – exchange more ideas to deepen their understanding of various social issues.

INTRODUCTION

The overall goal of this activity is to foster students' fluency in communicating with others. And to achieve that goal, this activity aims at 1. providing ideas for quick start, 2. demonstrating the use of key words as lexical assistance, 3. incorporating communication skills (paraphrasing, asking for repetition, etc.) to ensure smooth meaning negotiation in discussion. There are three instructional principles behind this activity.

1. Most of oral production is made in the presence of other interlocutors, which brings up two conditions, namely reciprocity condition and time-pressure condition (Bygate, 2005 a). For discussions, which call for interaction among all interlocutors, the condition of time pressure is obvious. There is not often enough planning time for students to think well before they speak up, given the limited class time. If students could not think of things to start with, their turns could be easily taken away by those who can and therefore, lose chances to speak up. Given that, it may be a good idea to give those who don't have ready ideas some possible ideas to start with. This also coincides with the conceptualization stages of the speech processing model proposed by Levelt (1989). Homework Cards intend to review some of the ideas listed in the homework reading so that students may refer to them if they don't have ideas ready.
2. To ensure a smooth discussion, some key content words may be necessary to help students to express their ideas. And Homework Cards usually include those words based on two principles: a. those that can represent the main ideas of related topics; b. those supposed to be beyond students' productive knowledge, i.e. they may recognize the words, but they don't usually use the words (Nation, 2001). Many students tend to give up their turns merely because they could not locate the exact words they struggled to find out. Demonstrating the use of such expressions in the Homework Cards may enhance students' motivation towards learning, thus lowering their affective filter (Krashen, 1983).
3. Discussion involves an exchange of ideas with other interlocutors. In addition to the time pressure to speak up, students also face "reciprocity condition" (Bygate, 2011), which means students' utterances need also to accommodate their interlocutors' knowledge, thus facilitating listeners' comprehension. Given that, the skill of paraphrasing, or reformulation, could be critical in discussions. Meanwhile, paraphrasing is also one of the most important

factors in developing fluency, by means of using parataxis and formulaic hypotaxis (such as ‘I mean....’). In the light of this, Homework Cards usually include paraphrasing skills and other skills, (e.g. suggesting using repetitions, easy English words or examples to explain a difficult concept.) that are necessary for developing strategic competence, in the hope that students may use these skills in their own discussions.

CONTEXT

This activity is used with B-level students, those who rank as intermediate to lower-intermediate in EDC program. Students at this level may not be perfect in their grammar knowledge, but they are willing to speak up their ideas once they get rid of their nervousness for this class. Since EDC program aims at helping students become competent in communication, this activity fits well in assisting students in speaking up their own ideas and maintaining a 16-minute discussion with other members. Given the nature of this activity, the preferred timing to conduct this activity may be before either Discussion 1 or 2, depending on the ideas as well as the key words selected.

TASKS AND MATERIALS

In order to make Homework Cards, the teacher is to read homework carefully, taking out ideas that can be used in discussing either one of the last two discussion questions. Normally, Homework Cards are done in pairs. That is to say, the teacher prepares two ideas statements, one on card A and one on card B. For example, on Card A, student A is to read the idea statement to student B and this statement is one idea from the homework reading, which includes one or more content words that could be used in students’ own discussion. On the back of Card A, the initial words of the answer, such as “for example, ...” or “in other words,...”, are written for student B to put A’s idea in other words. And with Card B, student B will read to student A a different idea statement and A will attempt the answer. On both cards, a suggested answer is given for the questioner to check the answers. A sample activity could be found in as Appendix I.

To accommodate students of higher level, two sets of cards, each comprising more idea statements, shall be prepared. In this case, the teacher may need to think of extra relevant supporting ideas on his or her own, which shall contribute to a more complete view to the target topic. This complexity could both be conceptual and linguistic. (Sometimes, conceptually complicated ideas may involve more complicated words).

PROCEDURE

- Step 1: Prepare Homework Cards before class. Decide the level of complexity in line with students’ level and decide the number cards in each set according to the number of students participating.
- Step 2: Homework Cards are used as preparation for either discussion one or two. Accordingly, they are done as a prep activity before the target discussion takes place.
- Step 3: Supposing it works as pair work, hand out Card A to four students (student A) and assign those sitting opposite as student B. Each student is going to read out the statement on the card to student B.
- Step 4: Here, student B can use communication skills, such as asking for repetition or slowing down if necessary. Student B will have approximately 45 seconds to work on his or her

answer. When time is up, even those who could not come up with an answer will have to stop.

Step 5: Student A will read out the answer to student B. If student B is of lower level, s/he is allowed to read the answer him/herself. If higher level, student B has to use communication skills again to understand what A reads.

Step 6: The similar process is repeated with Card B, where student B reads the statement and student A tries to put that idea in other words.

Step 7: The teacher restates that similar answers are also fine. After summarizing two ideas and two content words (or expressions) introduced, the teacher again indicates the communication skills students have used in attempting the answers, pointing out that it is welcome that they use them again in their own discussions.

VARIATIONS

Adaption to higher levels:

1. In the spring semester, I used only pair work, i.e. two cards of two ideas and two content words. But in the later weeks in the fall semester, I sometimes used four cards within a group of four students. In this way, there are four ideas in total that can be reviewed and four content words or expressions that can be introduced. Starting with giving examples and sharing experiences and paraphrasing, more strategic skills could be included, especially when summarizing is introduced as another new function.
2. To use summarizing to increase or decrease level of complexity. With higher level students, who are supposed to be good at using paraphrasing (such as easy words, giving examples or experiences) in explaining a difficult concept, the question could be composed in a lengthy manner so that student could try to retrieve those content words from their memory by using summarizing to express the original idea in a shorter sentence.

For example, to practice paraphrasing:

A: The homework reading says that if we hang out with friends often, we may not become Hikikomori. Could you explain “hang out with friends”?

B: In other words, it means to spend time with friends. For example, I go shopping with my friends.”

To practice summarizing:

A: The homework says that we could go to see a movie with friends or chat with friends so that we will not become Hikikomori. Could you say “go to see a movie with friends or chat with friends” in four words?

B: In other words, if we “hang out with friends”, we may not become Hikikomori.

Lower level students may stick with pair work (i.e. two ideas and two content words) till they get used to what Homework Cards are about. To further decrease complexity, easier expressions and straightforward ideas may be selected to lessen students’ anxiety. Frequent modeling may be helpful too.

REFLECTIONS

Changes are often met with reluctance. So it can take some time to try to introduce a new activity. But if it is introduced in the first lesson, it may not seem particularly difficult, as it can be seen as one part of the lesson itself.

After doing Homework Cards for a whole semester, nearly all of my students know what to expect and how to deal with them. In the initial few times, students tried to answer the questions in their respective way. But after being read the answers for a few times, they know what they are expected to do ---to read homework reading well and to use strategic skills, such as giving examples, experiences and using other easy English words. Once I changed the shape and the color of the cards, some of the students even expressed surprise of not seeing the regular cards that they used to see!

Many students did actually recycle the ideas that Homework Cards present in their own discussions. However, only the very motivated students recycled the content words on the cards. There could be various reasons for that. For one thing, I could have tried to emphasize more about the importance of using those content words in the discussion, such as by writing them down on the board, in larger font. Also, it could be a lot to ask from some students, for whom thinking of what to say already takes up much of their processing capacity. And as my strategic skills are often in line with the functions, most of my students can use different strategic skills to answer the Homework Card questions.

There are mainly four reasons why Homework Cards could be worthwhile to be introduced in discussion class. First of all, it prepares ideas for students to use in their own discussions. When homework reading does not have enough good ideas, the teacher him/herself could use his or her own ideas to supplement. It works particularly well for lower level students, who may have a hard time formulating what they want to say. Secondly, the key content words or expressions serve not only as new words; they are new words or expressions that represent the key content of the topic. The likelihood of using those key words is much higher than if they are merely introduced as any good expressions. It may well give a sense of achievement if the student successfully applied the same word or expressions in their own talk. Another important reason why it is worth of class time is that doing homework card is preparing students for necessary discussion skills too. When students struggle to answer the Homework Card questions, they are thinking about using easy English, giving examples, giving experiences as well as summarizing. This actively contributes to later discussions. Lastly, the whole activity does not take up for more than five minutes, which actively contributes to enhanced students' interaction.

Despite promising advantages Homework Cards can bring about, there are also minus points that come along. For one thing, Homework Cards may deprive students of their original ideas. In the beginning, I told my students that they can also use their own ideas to talk about discussion questions. But I soon realized that if the language they learnt from doing Homework Cards did not get to be recycled, the chances for them to internalize that language could be limited. So I asked my students to start discussions using at least one idea from the homework card. And after that, they can state their own opinions. Due to limited class time, if students start with Homework Cards' ideas, they may end up having no time to express their own ideas eventually.

Another challenge of using Homework Cards lies with how to write those ideas on the cards. The same set of cards can prove to be difficult to some groups while appropriate to others. Take Human Rights I as an example, some lower Bs found it difficult to use Homework Cards.

Many of them said they did not even have chance to talk about death penalty in Japanese. Therefore, I tried to lower the level of difficult by decreasing the number of difficult expressions and replacing them with easier ones or, giving Japanese translation where appropriate.

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APPENDIX

One set of Homework Cards designed for Human Rights I

Card A

Student A: Why is death penalty (DP) a good idea? 1

I think there are many people who may commit serious crime. However, they stop from doing so because they are scared of (nervous about) death penalty.

Answer: In other words, DP prevents/stops people from committing serious crimes.

On the back of Card A

Student B: In other words,.....

Card B

Student B: Why is death penalty (DP) a bad idea? 1

In 2009, Sugaya was released after serving (staying) 17 years in prison. He was innocent (not guilty)!

Answer: You mean DP can make life of good people a disaster?

On the back of Card B

Student A: You mean...

To adjust to higher level students, an addition of two or three sets of cards could be prepared for both advantages and disadvantages of death penalty.

Why is death penalty (DP) a good idea? 2

Have you watched the movie “Fallen” (悪魔を憐れむ歌)? The vicious (very bad) murder never gets to be a good man until he was executed (killed).

Answer: You mean DP help to kill the real bad guy?

Why is death penalty (DP) a good idea? 3

As a tax payer, I want my money to be used for better purposes, not to keep vicious (very bad) criminals alive in prison.

Answer: So what you are saying is DP saves tax-payer's money?

Why is death penalty (DP) a bad idea? 2

Some murderers can get rehabilitated (have a fresh start in life) through counseling service in prison and become a good man.

Answer: So what you are saying is DP makes it impossible for some murderers to reflect / think carefully about... on their crime and get a fresh start in their life?

Why is death penalty (DP) a bad idea? 3

Personally speaking, to kill is against humanity (人道). Even though they have killed others, society has no right to take their lives.

Answer: In other words, no one has right to take the lives of others?