The Effects on Low-Level Students of Using Interaction Patterns in Discussion Preparation Activities

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews a reflective journal which was kept for one semester of a discussion skills course at a Japanese university. The focus of the journal was to monitor the effects of using practice interaction patterns in discussion preparation activities in low-level classes. The reflections discuss the positive and negative effects of the patterns on students' discussions, and leads to a discussion of how to give students mass practice of discussion skills whilst at the same time retaining authenticity of discussion content.

INTRODUCTION

Last semester I had three classes that stood out as being somewhat weak. On the course I teach; an English Discussion Course (EDC) at a Japanese University (Hurling, 2012), the classes are divided into four levels and these classes were two Level 4 classes (TOEIC circa 270) and one Level 3 class (TOEIC circa 400). It regularly took them up to a minute to start their discussions, and once started they would regularly stagnate. They seemed overwhelmed; there was confusion, hesitation and long silences. In EDC, we teach a set of target skills over two semesters, but these students were hesitant to use much of what they had learnt previously. There was a lack of fluency in their discussions. Fluency has been described as having two components: selection of utterance and production of utterance (Gatbonton & Segalowitz, 1988). I had seen my students producing the skills adequately in practice situations, so it seemed as if the main problem was with utterance selection. They did not know "what to say, to whom and when" (Gatbonton & Segalowitz, 1988, p. 473).

Some direct, personal coaching from myself and peer-coaching by stronger students enabled the classes to do well on the tests in Lesson 5, but I was concerned about the upcoming lessons and the noticeable increase in difficulty that they would bring. I knew that to provide such direct coaching would not be appropriate nor practical for every lesson.

One method some teachers use in order to problem-solve classroom issues is to keep a reflective journal. This is said to be useful in approaching difficulties you are having in class, as it helps you to "remedy problems" (Farrell, 2007, p. 109). This is also a compulsory professional development task for teachers in their second semester working at EDC, so I decided that in order to help my low-level students, I should focus my reflective journal on them. However, a reflective journal is said to work best when the focus is narrow, so I needed to pinpoint my focus (Farrell, 2007).

One way of helping to gain fluency in the discussion is to use interaction patterns (see Appendices A-F) in the discussion preparation activities. In EDC, these preparation activities usually consist of speaking practice done in pairs, in which students discuss written prompts in order to generate ideas for their discussions. This helps them to generate content for the discussions, and often teachers will prompt them to use the target skill (or several) during these practices. Strategic planning such as this has been found to improve student fluency (Ellis, 2009), and pre-task planning and repetition are said to reduce cognitive load which allows students to focus on other things, such as content (Burns, 2019). The interaction patterns are scaffolding devices used to facilitate mass use of target skills, usually during designated practice activities.

While I already used such patterns in these targeted practice activities, I had not yet tried using them in discussion preparation activities. Therefore, in order to monitor the effect that these

patterns have on discussions, I decided to focus my journal on using these interaction patterns in discussion preparation activities. The diary took the form of brief notes made in-class, which I then wrote up into a narrative after the day's classes had finished. This method is described by Murphy (2014) as keeping retrospective field notes.

EDC methodology requires teachers to remove scaffolding for discussions, as they need to independently achieve success in their discussions, so usually patterns were withdrawn from students before discussions. While I used patterns for both discussions, most of my notes were focused on the second and final discussion in the lessons so these are the patterns discussed here.

DISCUSSION

In lesson 6, I introduced the first discussion preparation pattern (see Appendix A). With the first focus classes of the week, the students took time to figure out how to use the pattern and it caused confusion, but I realised that this was because I did not model the activity. Thereafter, I modelled for the other classes that week, which seemed to reduce confusion. This became my first conclusion about the patterns: it is always worth modelling the patterns for students. Aside from this, my journal states that students were struggling with the different viewpoints skill, and it was difficult to say what effect the pattern was having due to this.

For lesson 7, I drew a pattern on the board and left it up for reference for most of the class, adapting it for the final discussion preparation (see Appendix B). I noted that this elicited a lot of use of the information skill and was well-used by students. They carried the patterns over into the discussions which again made for plenty of target skill use and suggested that the pattern had been internalised. However, the students were constantly glancing at the board, unfortunately even after the pattern had been erased before the final discussion. This led to me preferring to print the patterns on paper over the semester, although not exclusively.

Another problem was that the skills not included were not used whatsoever, which made me think that the pattern had become like a rule to students. This was to be a recurring theme of my journal and a negative point of using the patterns: once they had been deployed, the students tended to stick to them. This was confirmed to me during a discussion in Lesson 8, when one student was chastised by another for asking for a different viewpoint instead of paraphrasing as was written on the pattern (see Appendix C), despite the pattern being removed before the discussion. I also noted that such structured discourse can sound inauthentic at times, with mass repetitions of the information and viewpoint skills sounding unnatural. This was also a recurring theme of my journal.

Despite these emerging shortcomings, it was clear that using the patterns was helping students to organise their discourse and that they were attaining some fluency with their target skill use in discussions.

Into the second half of the course, I predicted that the upcoming skills would now not be as difficult as the content. Again, the initial patterns I used with my first focus class sounded very forced, and I decided to make the patterns more minimal (see Appendices D and E) so that a) I could give more time to scaffold the content and b) to see if I could address the issue of students not sounding very natural. This gave mixed results. Some groups were becoming able to use a blend of target skills independently, whereas others seemed to suffer a reduction in fluency.

For lesson 12, I needed to get the students using all of the previous skills in preparation for the test, and so I used a more detailed pattern in the second group discussion (see Appendix F). However, I tested students in the first discussion to see how they would handle just being told to use a mix of skills and being allowed to look at the phrases. Given the amount of target language they were now required to use was quite dense, they seemed overwhelmed by this and the introduction of the pattern for the preparation activity prior to this discussion seemed to be a

significant relief. This was further confirmation that the patterns were helping, especially when there was a lot to remember.

CONCLUSION

Looking back over the semester, I believe that the patterns helped students to navigate a challenging set of lessons and tests. While we teach why and how to use the skills, knowing when to deploy them in a real-time discussion can be difficult for weaker students. Having a structure to follow seems to lighten the students' cognitive load, in that it is one less thing for them to think about during discussions. I think that the patterns help to give them cues as to when to use skills, so I would say that they contribute to helping with the selection of utterance required for fluency. Moreover, although it was not my principle focus, they also helped with the formation of utterance as they practiced the skills on-mass. Using the interaction patterns helped to improve both the selection and production of utterance which improved fluency.

However, there are some challenges to consider when using these patterns. If the patterns are used in discussion preparation, then students tend to continue using them throughout the discussion, so you need to carefully consider how you want the discussions to be structured. For example, if you leave a skill out of the pattern then it might not be used at all in the discussion.

Then there is the issue with authenticity. Students sticking fast to the patterns can end up sounding unnatural. For example, always asking for a different viewpoint after someone gives an opinion sounds strange. I believe students can and do notice this. This is a concern, as if the students are unable to produce the skills in a natural way, it seems unlikely that they would use them outside of the classroom. On the other hand, Bygate (as cited by Ellis 2001, p. 6) believes that mass repetition is in fact necessary for language acquisition, whilst others make the case that as long as they are communicative, formulaic and repetitive preparation activities are desirable when students are learning new skills (Gatbonton & Segalowitz, 1988). Several researchers have said that routine, formulaic speech is necessary when learning (Gatbonton & Segalowitz, 1988), as learning language formulaically and then analysing it later is natural and thus beneficial for communicative competence. Perhaps, as I only taught these classes for one semester, I was anxious to see them executing the skills perfectly when they were in fact in the earlier stages of acquisition. Furthermore, as some students did seem to be able to use the skills more naturally by the end of the semester, then perhaps we have to accept that it just takes time to do so.

In my opinion, there needs to be a balance – weaker classes need lots of repetition to attain fluency, but at the same time we should aim to have them using target skills in an authentic way. The easiest way to do this might be to directly communicate the issue to students. If a skill works well being used repeatedly, encourage students to do so. If it sounds inauthentic, encourage them to use it in moderation. My attempts to do this got mixed results, sometimes causing confusion. I had trouble communicating that they should go from using the skills as much as possible to using them more sparingly. However, I only started doing so rather late in the semester. Had I addressed the issue from earlier on, then more authentic discussions could perhaps have been attained and this is certainly something that I will attempt in the next school year. I could also try different ways of getting the message across, for example, I could explicitly tell them that they sound unnatural when overusing a target skill. This might go some way towards addressing the quality of utterance, whereas I have to admit to often becoming preoccupied with hearing a large quantity of target skills. In the future, I will look more at quality of utterance selection and give more feedback on that.

While I have been discussing pattern use, I did use the journal to record other issues that emerged during the course. I made several journal entries that discuss scaffolding more generally, and this shows that I had further concerns than just organising students' discourse. One such

concern was the difficulty of the content, and a similar project could be conducted on how to scaffold content in this course. I also used the journal to try and predict what difficulties students would face in upcoming lessons, and I note several times that I often cannot accurately judge what will be difficult. I would be interested to develop more accurate methods of doing this, as being able to accurately predict what students will find difficult would allow me to plan more dynamically.

Finally, I hope that this paper demonstrates how keeping a reflective journal can help teachers to investigate problems they have been having, set goals for the future, and to explore their own views on language learning (Farrell, 2007).

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APPENDIX A – Lesson 6 (Different Viewpoints)

A: Read the question + Ask for Different Viewpoint
B: Different Viewpoint + Check Understanding + Connecting Ideas (*Do you agree with me?*)
A: Connecting Ideas + Check Understanding
B: Yes, I see + Ask for Different Viewpoint
A: Different Viewpoint
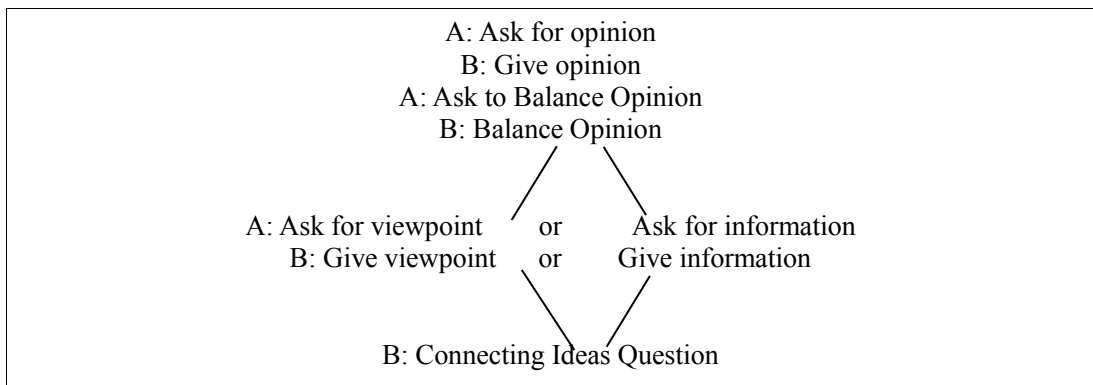Both: Close Topic + Change Topic

APPENDIX B – Lesson 7 (Information)

A: Read question + Ask for Opinion
B: Give Opinion
A: Ask for Information
B: Give Information + Check Understanding
A: Ask for Different Viewpoint
B: Give Different Viewpoint + Connecting Ideas Question

APPENDIX C – Lesson 8 (Test Preparation Lesson)

A: Ask the question	B: Give an opinion
A: Ask for reason	B: Give a reason
A: Ask for information	B: Give information
A: Ask for a viewpoint	B: Give a viewpoint + Check understanding
A: Paraphrase	B: Connecting ideas question

APPENDIX D – Lesson 10

A: Ask for opinion
B: Give opinion
A: Ask to Balance Opinion
B: Balance Opinion

A: Ask for viewpoint   or   Ask for information
B: Give viewpoint   or   Give information

B: Connecting Ideas Question

APPENDIX E – Lesson 11

(a) Ask comparison question   (b) Give comparison
(a) Ask balancing question   (b) Balance opinion

SOMETIMES (not always) ask
- Viewpoint questions
- Information questions

DON'T FORGET to
- Connect ideas
- Close Topic

APPENDIX F – Lesson 12

A: Ask comparison question   B: Give comparison
A: Ask balancing question   B: Give balance
A: Ask for information   B: Give information
A: Ask for viewpoint   B: Give viewpoint + Connecting ideas question -

(*Do you agree with me? Which is better -.....?*)