

Developing Competences: A Reflection

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ABSTRACT

This paper is about helping students of English engage in a discussion in a way that meets natural interactional standards and expectations. Some language learners are not as skilled at taking, holding, and ceding the floor as others, and aberrant turn-taking can often lead to communicative difficulties. Such students rely on a limited understanding of what it means to be communicative and this affects their ability to contribute to group discussions. In order to gain a better understanding of this issue, a teaching journal was created and observations and reflections were recorded over a five-week period. In particular, observations were made of two male Japanese students in an English discussion course at Rikkyo University. During this period, a number of potential solutions were identified and presented to these students in order to help them improve their turn-taking ability and develop their overall communicative competence.

INTRODUCTION

All first-year students at Rikkyo University in Tokyo are required to complete two semesters of a discussion class operated by the Center for English Discussion Class (EDC). In these classes students are introduced to a variety of contemporary topics and a suite of functional discussion and communication skills that facilitate their discussion. As the classes are small, comprised of no more than nine students, there is ample opportunity for each student to learn, practice, and use the skills while discussing each topic in their weekly ninety-minute lesson. The students are assessed on their use of these skills in group discussion tests three times in both the spring and fall semesters. In the context of an EDC classroom, “discussions” are defined as the extended exchange of ideas on a single topic for 16 minutes between three or four participants (Hurling, 2012). They therefore practice such discussion skills as giving and asking for opinions, and giving and asking for reasons and examples to help them in this exchange of ideas. These are introduced as sentence stems like *In my opinion...* and *It's mainly because...* or as whole formulaic chunks like *Can you give me an example?* It is further stated in the course aims that these discussions should be balanced, interactive, and constructed by all participants, so students also focus on the rules and strategies needed for smooth discussions (Hurling, 2012). This requires students to learn such skills as choosing a topic, joining a discussion, connecting their ideas to each other, and closing topics. Teachers introduce a new skill most weeks and offer feedback on their use, but their job is mostly to facilitate student interaction and give the students as much time as possible to communicate in English. In a typical EDC lesson this means about 60 minutes of total student interaction time. The most important aspect of language development at EDC is the development of fluency – the knowledge of how to do something with the language, and to communicate meaningfully in real time (Hurling, 2012). It is a practical and pragmatic approach to the teaching and learning of English as a second language.

In order to gain a better understanding of how well students at EDC meet the aims of the course, a period of reflective practice was undertaken. As teachers, developing the ability to critically reflect on the courses we teach, the students we are teaching, and on our own methods and delivery is an important part of our professional development. Murphy (2014) suggests that reflective practice enables teachers to expand their repertoire of strategic options in the face of challenges. This could mean the challenges we face in real time during lessons or those that are faced as part of the planning and implementation of future lessons. Such challenges require reflection in regards to their causes and the identification of potential solutions. In so doing,

teachers are able to enhance the quality of the learning opportunities they provide to their students (Murphy, 2014). In this learning context this means helping EDC students to participate successfully in group discussions. I decided to focus on the idea that, as mentioned, discussions at EDC should be *balanced, interactive, and constructed by all participants*. In my second semester as an EDC instructor, I began to keep a teaching journal and made notes about how the students in my classes were able to discuss topics in this manner. Teaching journals allow us to accumulate information that, on later review and interpretation, can assist in the deeper understanding of our work (Farrell, 2007). In the course of my initial investigation, one problem became clear: students sometimes hold the floor for too long by taking excessively long speaking turns. I felt that this revealed an inability to interact competently according to the course aims. Given that most students will at times take a turn that is too long, consideration was given as to whether this behavior was occasional or dispositional. Two students soon stood out for their habit of taking long speaking turns. Both of them held the floor for up to three minutes even when a much shorter amount of time was required to express their ideas, and it impacted their groups by making it more difficult for the other students to contribute. I began to make notes about their performance, the performance of the groups they were engaged in, and thought about how to intervene so they could improve in future lessons. What follows is a description of their classroom behavior, a consideration of why such traits are problematic, and a description of the kinds of interventions made. While the principal aim of this study was to improve the discussion performance of these particular students, as well as the behavior of their interlocutors, it is also hoped that this can be of benefit to other instructors who encounter similar behaviors in their classes. All student names used are pseudonyms.

DISCUSSION

A Tale of Two Students

Over the course of two terms, most students at Rikkyo University become adept at using the discussion and communication skills they are introduced to during their English discussion classes. However, some students find it difficult to use and understand some of these skills in a manner that meets natural conversational requirements. The two male first-year university students who came to my attention while preparing this paper were Level 3 students at Rikkyo which means they combined Listening and Reading TOEIC scores in the 280 – 479 band. Kazuki was the first student to stand out as a result of his inability to conform to standard turn-taking norms. He was an active and engaging interlocutor, willing to take the floor and good at offering the floor at the end of his turn, but he held the floor for very long periods and disrupted the ability of the group to discuss topics in a timely manner. He had the tendency to repeat words and whole phrases as he built towards a full sentence. For example, in this interaction with another student (A):

A: I think studying abroad for one year is a good idea. It's mainly because it gives us enough time to become good at speaking English. What do you think of my opinion?

Kazuki: I am sorry... I am sorry I disagree... but I disagree... I am sorry but I disagree... we can learn... we can... we can learn... *chigau* [that's wrong]... we can practice speaking for one year... but it... costs... but it costs... too high for one year... In my opinion... it is good... in my opinion it is good to stay for one month. Is there anything to add?

The total time it took to produce this response was one minute and thirty seconds, and it was typical of this student to produce responses like the one above. Clearly, Kazuki took more time than was appropriate when he took the floor. It is also important to note that in the example above the question posed by student A was offered to all three students in Kazuki's group and he selected

himself as the next speaker despite not being ready to contribute.

Tatsuya was another student who also took a very long time to produce responses to seemingly straightforward questions. Unlike Kazuki however, Tatsuya was not an outgoing interlocutor and his long responses were filled with silences and pauses rather than repeated words. He maintained the floor with a combination of hesitation devices like *Well...* and *Hmmm...* as well as gestures that indicated he was thinking and about to speak. When he did speak, he produced language very slowly and much of the fluency he achieved was through the production of memorized stock phrases, like in this dialogue with a classmate (A):

A: What are the biggest risks of using social media?

Tatsuya: Hmmm... the biggest risks...(breathes out) ...I think...the biggest risks...risks are...hmmm...(stares at table)...well...students...risk...their...when...In my opinion students are risk...It's mainly because students...students...use social media...(looks through textbook)...hmmm...well...YouTube watching YouTube too much...Finished. Do you understand?

This response took almost three minutes. Obviously, something was wrong here and the rest of the 16-minute discussion progressed in similar fashion. Tatsuya was not always quite so poor at contributing to the discussion but this was not totally unusual for him either. He held the floor for an abnormally long time and as a result of this he and his classmates often sat in silence. While pauses can be useful for buying time to think about a response, doing so excessively will be interpreted as aberrant by native speakers and other language learners alike (Dörnyei & Thurell, 1994). Tatsuya's classmates responded to his prolonged periods of silence with quiet incredulity, and it seemed as though they did not know how to respond, and struggled to follow his train of thought. Few of the normal rules of conversational interaction were in evidence and it was not an interactive, balanced and co-constructed discussion, as required by the course.

Understanding the Problem

Kazuki and Tatsuya clearly had difficulty in recognizing and conforming to standards of conversational interaction. They seemed to believe that their utterances ought to be grammatically accurate – as evidenced by Kazuki's sentence building and Tatsuya's prolonged periods of thinking – even if this came at the expense of other important communicative considerations. They appeared to rely solely on their *linguistic competence* – their store of English words and understanding of its syntax – to enable them to contribute to each discussion. This was a problem when they did not possess the vocabulary required to express their opinions or the grammar necessary to put it all together. It also betrayed a misunderstanding of what is required to communicate effectively and that linguistic competence is only one form of knowledge about a language. Learners who are familiar with the grammar of a language and have a good vocabulary can still let themselves down in real conversations (Dörnyei & Thurell, 1994). Students like Kazuki and Tatsuya need to develop their *interactional competence*: the ability to open and close conversations; get, hold, and relinquish the floor; as well as other paralinguistic competences like body language and the use of hesitation devices (Celce-Murcia, 2007). Moreover, they – as well as their groups – need to develop their *strategic competence* which is the ability to negotiate meaning, resolve ambiguities, and compensate for problems or deficits in communication (Celce-Murcia, 2007). This would then help them become more complete users of English with a better understanding of its standards of behavior and expectations regarding its use. Conversations and discussions may appear random and spontaneous but they do follow certain patterns and there are rules determining who speaks and when, and for how long (Dörnyei & Thurell, 1994). Of course

second-language students should not always be held to the same standards of performance and ability as native or expert speakers, but verbal exchanges run more smoothly when such social conventions are observed (Cutting, 2002). Therefore, the rules, competences, and principles that characterize typical verbal exchanges in English were considered when assessing the performance of these students in the classroom. Furthermore, these same principles were considered when attempting to identify ways to improve their performance in class so that they could participate in balanced, interactive discussions.

After identifying the needs of these students, I began in the sixth week of the fall semester to present both Kazuki and Tatsuya with a number of strategies, suggestions, and ideas aimed at helping them to participate more effectively in class discussions. The following is a summary of these interventions.

Developing Awareness

In order to have these students move beyond their faith in grammatically accurate utterances I reminded them about the course aims. I suggested that they should focus on fluent output rather than accuracy and that it was fine to sometimes make mistakes. Although both of them seemed relatively comfortable speaking – as noted they often spoke first – they did not want to risk speaking imperfectly. They also seemed to have an ambivalent attitude towards taking long turns. Kazuki had previously shown an awareness of the fact that he took a long time to speak but he continued doing it. After his first discussion test, when asked what he wanted to improve next time he replied “I want to speak smoothly. Sometimes I am stopping and going but I want to going [sic] smoothly”. I reminded him of this statement in his next class and asked him to always “go”. Tatsuya also indicated that he knew he spoke too slowly but had not done anything to rectify or address the problem. In fact, I had spoken to his teacher from the previous semester who told me she had talked to him about this issue as well. I asked both of them to be aware of how long it took them to produce and share their ideas – a timer is in view of all the students during discussions. Kazuki did well that lesson and I observed fewer occasions in which he needlessly repeated words. Tatsuya, on the other hand, seemed to find it harder to accept the idea that it was fine to make mistakes and I noted that his behavior did not change during this lesson. Once again he held the floor in silence while he thought of his response, and he did not seem to pay attention to how much time it took for him to produce a response as he was surprised when the timer sounded to indicate the discussion was over.

Skill Reinforcement

The next strategy I tried related to the appropriate use of turn-taking skills. The students had in fact already practiced joining a discussion and the attendant turn-taking discussion skills: If they were ready to talk they were encouraged to take the floor by saying “Can I start?” or “Can I say something?”; if they needed more time to think about their own response they were to offer the floor by asking their group “Who would like to start?” or “What do you think?”. Both Kazuki and Tatsuya had previously demonstrated a misreading of this discussion skill by volunteering to speak first even when they were not ready to speak. In the next class I reminded everyone about these skills and what was implied by their usage and asked them to use them as needed throughout the lesson. Tatsuya appeared to embrace this and used the question “What do you think?” frequently throughout the lesson thereby giving himself more thinking time. Although he still hesitated when it was his turn to speak, there was some improvement in his fluency because he agreed with a previous speaker and was able to use her ideas. As for Kazuki, he still chose to speak first most of the time but he was able to speak more smoothly because, as he had mentioned in previous weeks, he was more familiar with that week’s topic – discussing celebrities – and had some good ideas.

He was ready to speak and began his turn by using “Can I start?” appropriately.

Generating Content

Noting that Kazuki had spoken quite smoothly about a topic he was familiar with, I decided to give the students more individual planning time to prepare for each discussion topic in the following lesson. Giving students more time to think about speaking topics helps them to generate ideas and activate their schemata (Harmer, 2007). Prior to this, I had not given students much individual time to prepare for each discussion, typically giving students about a minute to complete a textbook activity before discussing their answers with a partner informally. These textbook activities provide students with a range of ideas which they are then required to rank, choose the best ideas from, or make simple distinctions about: for example, whether something is good or bad, important or not important. In order to help them generate more content, I gave students three minutes to complete the textbook activity on their own. They considered the question “What types of pressures do men and women feel?” and selected possible pressures from a list of six in the book. In addition to this I asked them to think of and write down their own reasons to support these selections. Once finished, they discussed their ideas with a partner before the discussion began. Kazuki responded quite well. He jotted down some original reasons and examples to support his ideas, and when he spoke he did so quickly and without much repetition. On the other hand, Tatsuya used this time to script his ideas and during the following discussion he simply read aloud what he had written in this preparation time. He had developed some good ideas but his contribution still did not conform to expected standards of interaction. While I think that individual preparation time can be beneficial, I still believe that student-student interaction time should be maximized in discussion classes. Furthermore, I do not want students to become accustomed to such a method as I do not think it prepares them for real-life instances in which they will need to respond in a fluent, spontaneous manner.

Group Dynamics

As discussions are co-constructed endeavors, it is incumbent upon the group to request the floor when an interlocutor has taken too long to speak, and for speakers to offer the floor to the group if they have been speaking for a long time. During this reflection period I realized that I would not only need to focus on how to help these two individual students but also on how to get the group as a whole to cooperate more successfully. As mentioned earlier, Tatsuya’s classmates tended to remain quiet while he struggled to produce content, meaning that the whole group sat in silence. I reminded the whole class that they were responsible for having an interactive and balanced discussion. I therefore encouraged them to use previously learned skills related to paraphrasing and clarification whenever there was a communication problem. They were to use the sentence stem “So, are you saying...?” if they wanted to help their interlocutors finish a sentence, or to ask “Can you explain?” if a point had not been clear. For speakers, I said they needed to ask questions like “Do you follow me?” if they had spoken for a long time and felt that they had not been clear. One member of Tatsuya’s group was particularly good at responding to this need and helped him complete his turn more smoothly by paraphrasing a point Tatsuya was trying to make. However, the other members persisted in remaining quiet. As for Kazuki, he used the aforementioned question “Do you follow me?” to check that others had followed his idea before handing over the floor in a smooth transition between speakers. I definitely regarded this as a successful intervention with him because it suggested that he was paying more attention to turn-taking norms.

Keep it Simple

One suggestion that I repeatedly made to these students was to “keep it simple”. I felt that both

students were sometimes over-complicating things by trying to produce the perfect response. I feel that students should sometimes be encouraged to say what they can rather than what they want to as it can be a useful strategy for dealing with communicative difficulties (Dörnyei & Thurell, 1994). Especially if trying to say exactly what they want interferes with the flow of a discussion. Of course it would be ideal if our students could always find the most suitable word to express themselves but when it is not possible, finding a substitute can be the difference between speaking smoothly and reaching a conversational dead end. During this reflective period, I told both Kazuki and Tatsuya to rely on more high frequency descriptors like *good*, *bad*, *important*, and *interesting* in the hope that they could give their opinions in a more timely manner. This seemed to work quite well for both students and some temporary improvement was noted, however, they needed reminding of this suggestion numerous times as they often fell back into old habits.

CONCLUSION

Changing student behavior can be a challenge. Personality traits and speaking habits develop over a lifetime and it is difficult to change these in a single semester. In terms of language learning, many students come to class with expectations that have been shaped by previous learning contexts and will continue to conform to those expectations in a new setting. In truth, I had expected to find more “Kazukis” and “Tatsuyas” – Japanese students who were accustomed to learning a language through its grammar rather than its practical use – when I started teaching this course. In my experience however, the majority of students at EDC have learned that although they may sometimes lack linguistic resources, they can have a rich discussion by taking risks and using interlocutors for support (Hurling, 2012). This aspect of the course seems to have been difficult for Kazuki and Tatsuya to accept. Taking risks is a key factor in the successful learning of a language (Brown, 2002) so it is important to encourage risk-averse students to embrace this while attending an English discussion course. Creating an environment in which students are willing to take risks will also maximize the likelihood of interventions being successful.

There are further important cultural considerations to bear in mind when trying to orient students to different modes of interaction. It might seem simple and straightforward to ask students to intervene when a fellow student is having difficulty in completing an idea for example, but that may represent a challenge to students that we as teachers may not understand well. I have certainly found this to be the case. Japanese learners are likely to continue using a familiar style of floor management in English language classrooms even after they have received instruction in turn-taking (Young, 2018) and there are a number of linguistic and pragmatic reasons to account for this orientation (Young, 2018; Williamson, 2019). Different cultures have different standards regarding appropriate behavior. This can be reflected in terms of a culture’s timing in regards to turn-taking, pauses, and silences, and its tolerance of interruptions (Cutting, 2002). Nevertheless, it is possible to encourage students to use those strategic skills that facilitate the exchange of ideas in a way that satisfies unfamiliar communicative requirements. Moreover, it is important to introduce our students to these differences so that they are aware that a different set of expectations exist when communicating in an international context.

Overall, I found the practice of keeping a reflective teaching journal a valuable experience. Taking the time to think critically about each lesson enabled me to gain a better understanding of a significant problem that developed in my classes and will likely develop again. Moreover, I was able to identify a series of interventions that helped my students meet the aims of the course. In the busy life of a teacher, it can be easy to notice a problem in class only to forget about it until the same problem arises at a later date. By keeping a reflective journal I was more attentive to the needs of my students and paid more attention to the requirements of the course. In the future, I would also like to get a better understanding of my students’ attitudes and perspectives regarding

this issue as a reflective journal only allows me to understand the situation from my own perspective. Working more closely with my students would allow me to broaden my understanding of this issue and possibly identify more ways in which I could help them become more competent language users.

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