

Observations on Purpose and Value in EFL Discussion Classes

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ABSTRACT

The language learner's choice to engage in classroom activities or not to engage in them is in large part influenced by a sense of purpose and value in the tasks that teachers set forth. In this paper, the author explores the connection between a sense of purpose and meaningful communication in compulsory first-year Japanese university English discussion classes. Student behaviour indicative of engagement or disengagement in the group task was observed by the author and logged in a teaching journal. After reflection on meaningful communicative behavior demonstrated by students, the author then made slight changes to a discussion preparation activity in an attempt to enhance this behaviour and preliminary implementation was conducted. These changes were designed and intended to help all students better understand the purpose of the task, gain confidence in their English ability, and better understand the value of meaningful interaction in discussions.

INTRODUCTION

A discussion can be defined as “the communication of information between two or more people undertaken for some shared purpose, such as solving a problem, making a decision, or increasing participants' mutual understanding of the situation” (Forsyth, 2014, p. 361). It is therefore difficult to participate in a discussion if the participants do not understand the shared purpose of the task. Discussions in small groups are inherently social activities and are often used in communicative language teaching (CLT) classrooms because “students interact a great deal with one another” (Larsen-Freeman, 2000, p. 130). Interaction is believed to be important to second language acquisition (SLA) as it includes aspects of student mediated input, output, and negotiation of meaning. It is through this input-interaction-feedback-output process that learners are believed to learn (Gass & Mackey, 2007) and thus acquire communicative competence (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). This is precisely why discussion has been chosen as the main classroom activity for a compulsory English Discussion Class (EDC) taken by all first year undergraduate students at Rikkyo University.

Classes are usually capped at eight students, thereby maximising student-student interaction time and making it easier for the teacher to monitor those interactions and give relevant and actionable feedback. The main goal of the EDC course is for students to acquire the ability to discuss topics fluently in English. As with many language courses based on CLT, lexical forms are introduced to students in terms of the particular communicative functions they perform. In order to help our students, a set of phrases (forms) specific to a formal discussion discourse are explicitly taught, each of which is expected to manifest discussion behaviour (functions) through its use (Schaefer, 2018). It is hoped that at the very least, these behaviours are incorporated into the student's “interlanguage grammar” (Fromkin et al., 2009, p. 334) and proceduralised so that conditions for attainment of the ability are met. It is then for the students to decide if they consider the behaviour appropriate to perform at any given moment during their discussion. Writing about the broad course aims, Hurling (2012) states:

[W]e see fluency development as being the most important aspect of language to develop in classes [...] fluency is based around the development of procedural knowledge, i.e. how to **do** something with the language one is learning. That is, EDC seeks to develop students'

abilities to use English to communicate meaningfully in real time. (pp. 1-2)

In more specific course syllabus terms, every phrase has been chosen with the intention to help students: 1) communicate meaningfully and/or 2) structure the discussion. Each set of phrases are further grouped into a set of *Discussion Skills* (DS) such as connecting ideas, comparing and closing topics or *Communication Skills* (CS) such as comprehension and paraphrasing. These DS and CS groupings are designed to help the students make a cognitive connection between the phrase (form) and the specific discussion behaviour (function). If students understand the connection between phrase and behaviour, meaningful interaction should ensue.

In the EDC course, students discuss issues related to such topics as culture, media, society and ethics. Although significant, knowledge about the specific discussion topic itself is not enough to conduct a meaningful discussion. Effective interaction requires participants to also understand that only through performing certain individual and group behaviours is it possible to fulfil the communicative purpose of their interaction. In a discussion, giving and taking turns, expressing ideas without offending other participants, encouraging exploration of a topic in more depth and clarifying ideas so that they are easily understood by all participants are but a few of the numerous behaviours required for engagement in meaningful interaction.

Crucially though, these behaviours must be motivated by a sense of purpose. As Larsen-Freeman (2000) points out, “[t]rue communication is purposeful.” (p. 129) Inside and outside the classroom situation, *purpose* and *value* play a vital role. More often than not, if an activity has purpose and value to the listener, speaker, and group, it can be considered meaningful (Harmer, 2001, Littlewood, (1981). The purpose of the EDC discussion is for group members to facilitate and encourage group examination/exploration of a topic. The value lies in learning something new. The participants may learn something new about their group members, the topic they discuss, the English language or about all of these things simultaneously. Shared concepts of purpose and value can therefore be considered the foundation of meaningful communication. In an English as a second language (ESL) context, the purpose and value of communication in English does not necessarily have to be made explicit by the teacher. ESL learners usually exhibit communicative behaviours in the classroom that align with their need to interact with people outside, in the ‘real-world’. However, in Japanese EFL classrooms such as in EDC, students come with different experiences of using English to communicate and have different expectations of what meaningful English communication entails. Therefore, a group task purpose must be created and associated to the discussion so that students form a “shared mental model” (Forsyth, 2014, p. 361) of the real-world outcomes and consequences of their language practice. The importance of this point became even more salient as I taught my classes during the second semester of the academic year.

In the first few weeks of teaching the second semester syllabus, I noticed that some students had minimal difficulty in using phrases to structure and communicate meaningfully in the discussions. These students seemed to understand the intended purpose and value of discussion. The function phrases enabled them to behave in communicative ways and learn something new. In other words, they were supportive of the group’s purpose and attempted to engage meaningfully with the other students. Some other students, however, despite demonstrating knowledge of how to scaffold discussions through phrase use, seemed to not realise the communicative potential of the phrases. These students did not attempt to use the phrases for their intended communicative purpose so their discussions, or contributions to the discussions, were not meaningful. These students were disengaged from the task and thus also from the other group members. With the intention to better understand and enhance meaningful communication in EFL classes, I chose to observe the discussion behaviours that appeared whilst students were in discussions. I observed all of my 13 classes and made notes regarding instances of clear engagement or disengagement

behaviour. As mentioned above, clear patterns of engagement and disengagement behaviour began to appear in most classes after the second or third week of observation. Normally, disengaged students would occasionally demonstrate more engagement behaviours and students who were usually engaged would sometimes behave in a more disengaged manner. However, classes were comprised of students who were more or less consistent in their behaviours over the period of the observation.

DISCUSSION

Presentation of Purpose

Discussion phrases and their purpose are introduced to students during the presentation. In keeping with the student-centred nature of the curriculum, instructors are trained to present new target language in order to “[c]reate a need for the new Discussion Skill by showing students how useful it is, not just by telling them it’s important” (Center for English Discussion Class, 2018a, p. 110). I attempted four presentation techniques through the semester: test-teach-test, dialogue comparison, guided discovery, and deep end tests, and found them all to be effective ways of focusing the students’ attention on how the phrases are used. A model dialogue included in each textbook lesson is printed for students to read and exemplifies how the phrases fit into a piece of discussion discourse. As well as contributing to aspects of recall fluency through repetition, the subsequent controlled practice stage also seemed to help the students practice and internalize the basic listener/speaker patterns involved. A “Remember!” textbox which describes the interactional purpose of the DS or CS is printed below each model dialogue in the textbook and I would often direct student’s attention to this written description in case students had not understood the presentation technique I had used. When I observed some students using the phrases without any meaningful intent during the discussion, I realised perhaps additional guidance regarding purpose was needed either in the presentation or discussion preparation stage of the lesson.

Reflection-on-action: Production Stage of the Lesson

During the fourteen week second semester, six DS’s are taught along with three reviews of CS’s that were introduced in the first semester. There are three tests during the semester, the first of which is in week five. I observed all classes after week five except lessons that included a test (Lesson 9 and Lesson 13). Harmer (2001) notes that one effect of group testing is that students may change their usual pattern of class behaviour and perform below their ability for that particular lesson only to revert back to usual behaviours after the test. I therefore began my observations in week six (Lesson 6) and made notes on how students used the taught phrases to interact with each other. In Lesson 6, the topic of Social Media was discussed using the DS of Different Viewpoints. Through the use of this skill students should be able to “discuss a variety of perspectives on a given topic, beyond their own personal opinions” (Center for English Discussion Class, 2018b, p. 15). As I observed the discussion, I could see that students were having difficulty thinking of different viewpoints and often using the same viewpoints: a child, an elderly person, and a university student. Additionally, most groups seemed to treat the production stage of the lesson as a continuation of the preceding controlled practice stage. This meant that rather than using the DS freely throughout the discussion, students tended to perform a basic discussion round-robin and then produce the DS once in question/answer form at the end. In order to fulfill the communicative potential of the Different Viewpoints DS, it should ideally be used throughout the discussion multiple times. However, as long as the group was incorporating the phrase into the discussion I did not make too fine a point of this in feedback.

In Lesson 7, the topic of The Influence of the Media was discussed using the DS of Information. When students use this phrase, the intention is that students support their opinions

with further evidence and “learn from each other while making the discussion deeper and more interesting” (Center for English Discussion Class, 2018b, p. 17). Two problems seemed to arise here. The function question, “How do you know about that?” was often asked at times when the opinion was based on common knowledge, therefore making the question difficult to answer. The addressee would be put in an awkward position and the group would shy away from asking the question again. The best way around this would have been for the student to give a personalized answer such as “when I was in high school, my baseball coach told me” or something similarly personal. Using personal experiences has the added benefit of being a more meaningful way to interact in this situation but some students, and this was the second problem, would simply say “I saw it on the news”.

In Lesson 10, students discussed the topic of Society using the DS of Balancing Opinions. Balancing Opinions involves discussing the advantages and disadvantages of certain opinions raised in the discussion. Student behavior for the skill was similar to that of Different Viewpoints. A basic opinion-support round-robin was observed after which one or two students would ask a question such as, “What are the advantages of limit overtime?”. After this question and answer, they would quickly end the discussion and move to the next discussion question. In Lesson 11, students discussed the topic of Money using the DS of Comparisons. The intention of learning this skill is for students to “talk about the topic in greater detail and consider the merits and demerits of any given idea when set against another” (Center for English Discussion Class, 2018b, p. 24). Here, too, students tacked on the function questions after the initial sharing of opinions and reasons. After the initial round-robin students would pause, think for a moment, and then ask a question such as “how is donating money and goods better than volunteering?”. As a question, this is a very good one which should encourage evaluation of ideas. However, it was often the case that the question was answered, “donating is easier than volunteering” and then the discussion was closed.

Reflection-for-action: Aligning Interactional Purpose

While I observed these discussions, two general types of student behaviour appeared. One type of student seemed to be oriented towards having meaningful interactions and would use the phrases to enhance this behaviour. A student comment I received from the first semester mentions two significant points in regard to this orientation. The student describes helping each other as a behavior that is beneficial to communication and that using a phrase such as “you mean...” elicits meaningful and rewarding interaction. The student also acknowledged that the phrases can help to structure the discussion and make it ‘smooth’ – expressing a positive effect on group dynamics and successful completion of the discussion. To what extent this knowledge was gleaned from certain lesson stages or whether it was something that was learned from other past experiences is impossible to say here. But it is clear that for this student, the discussion class has a purpose and value, thereby making it meaningful. This student seems to share behaviours with many other students who attempted to engage meaningfully with the group.

List of engagement behaviours as perceived by the teacher.

- adding information based on personal experience and attempting to express more abstract ideas
- helping group members to finish sentences or use a DS when someone forgets
- helping a speaker express their ideas by suggesting vocabulary or grammar
- asking pertinent questions after the initial “round-robin”
- expressing misunderstanding and initiating repairs (often with gesture and/or facial expression)
- asking and answering the question “Is there anything to add?” in order to keep the

- discussion going
- initiating negotiation of meaning through paraphrase or clarification

For some other students however, there seemed to be no intent to have a meaningful exchange and no investment in the discussion. Behaviour was limited to adding simple ideas and facilitating turn-taking.

List of disengagement behaviours as perceived by the teacher.

- adding information but very rarely for personal information and often simply to repeat ideas of others
- perform a “round-robin” in a highly ordered perfunctory manner
- very rarely helping other speakers when they were having trouble expressing their ideas
- never asking questions after the initial “round-robin”
- never giving extra information in order to keep the discussion going
- never expressing misunderstanding or initiating repairs
- never attempting to paraphrase or clarify the speaker’s utterance

When reflecting on the two general types of student behaviour, I knew that I wanted all of the students to be engaged and share the same communicative orientation that students displayed in the first list above. All students were subject to the same student-centered and inductive presentation technique yet during the discussions, why did all students use the phrases to structure the discussion but not all of them use the phrases to communicate meaningfully? The EDC presentation stage is less teacher-centred than a traditional presentation stage in which the teacher controls and the students understand (Wajnryb, 1992) but some level of teacher control is necessary to ensure that what the students learn inductively through these techniques is indeed what the teacher wants them to learn. Structural elements of discussion such as “Who would like to start?” or “What shall we discuss next?” function overtly as group cohesion devices. Students induce the same mental concept about how they are used and, more importantly, why they are used. On the other hand, even though all students may understand the intended interactional purpose of DS’s such as Different Viewpoints or Comparison, because these ideas are more abstract, individuals who have confidence in their English ability are likely to use these DS’s in meaningful ways that fulfill task goals. Additionally, they would be more likely to engage in negotiation of meaning and other helpful group behaviour. Students who are less confident thus appear to the teacher as if they are disengage. However, their apparent disengagement behaviours may simply be caused by the task goals being too vague or task completion appearing too difficult, two factors that immediately negate any incentive to engage meaningfully. In order to guide all students towards the same purpose, the teacher must present the discussion objectives in a clear, simple and manageable format so that all students perceive the goal of meaningful interaction as attainable through DS use. Connecting DS’s to the discussion topic or questions must also be part of the plan. Breaking the task down into its constituent DS’s and allowing the students to think about how these more abstract ideas can fit structurally into each part could clarify the task purpose and imbue confidence by making the task appear more achievable.

I designed and implemented a group planning activity that aims to help students construct a shared mental model of the discussion. Lesson 14, the last of the semester, is a chance to practice and review all of the discussion skills that have been introduced throughout the year. One page of the textbook includes a list of all the topics covered in the second semester and questions related to them. For practice, I instructed the group to choose one topic that they would like to discuss.

Out of all of my classes, 5 classes chose the topic of English in the World and the question “Is it important to learn English?” so for brevity I will use this topic as an example here. However, the template was applied to many other questions in the same manner. In the discussion preparation stage after students had thought about the questions individually, I instructed them to ask the person sitting next to them “What are we going to compare in this question?” As students had never considered the discussion in this way before, there was usually a brief period of confusion followed by some mumbling of the question I had just asked them to ask. Usually, there was no answer forthcoming so I had to tell them that we were comparing the importance of learning English for different people. This comparison is intended as the starting point of the discussion and should be used as the point from which the other DS’s and CS’s follow which is why I introduced this skill first. I wrote on the board, “Is learning English important or not important?” I then instructed them to draw a table (see Figure 1) and to make notes in it about ideas for the different skills we want to use in order to explore the topic.

Table 1. Planning template to encourage a shared mental model of discussion

Topic: English in the World

Question: Is it important to learn English? Discuss:

Comp?	POV?	Adv/Disadv?	Info?
Is learning English important or not important?	A student A Japanese company A farmer A trading company A tour guide	Connected to what you are comparing (Add examples)	Ask when you hear something interesting or surprising

Following the comparison skill, I pointed to the “POV?” column and then asked them, “What are some different viewpoints we can discuss?”. Ideas for points of view came a little easier: a student, a Japanese company, a farmer, for example. I had to intervene at one point to point out that each situation should be considered in terms of who is likely to be there and who might be affected by the behavior. I asked, “Who might want or need to learn English? What types of people?” and from these questions, other interesting perspectives came up: a trading company and a tour guide, for instance. I then asked students, “What advantages and disadvantages can we discuss?” Again, there was little response so I had to tell them that we can talk about the advantages and disadvantages of learning English and the advantages and disadvantages of not learning English. I said that the advantages and disadvantages are always connected to the thing you are comparing and I drew an arrow from the “Comp?” column to the “Adv/Disadv?” column in the figure to indicate the connection.

I also mentioned that the advantages and disadvantages should be talked about through different perspectives and gave an example: “From a student’s perspective, I think learning English is more important. One advantage is...” I then asked them what skill the last column, “Info?”, referred to. They said “information”. I then asked “When can you ask about information?”. I told them that they could ask for information after someone has talked about an advantage or disadvantage but that it is more natural only after a surprising or particularly interesting comment. I finally said to them that they should start the discussion with a comparison question and continue to compare ideas throughout the whole discussion. As this was a preliminary implementation of this planning strategy it is difficult to say what effect this planning had on the students. I would like to research any possible effects in the future.

CONCLUSION

During the semester, I observed student interactions and made notes of my observations in a teaching log. I then reflected on my notes and created a discussion planning template. My notes helped me to ‘reflect-on-action’ and subsequently ‘reflect-for-action’ (Murphy, 2014). Through this reflective teaching process, I learned that when teaching discussion skills, it is probably better to be less inductive in some areas of my teaching and to “separate out learning from knowing or doing” (Grenfell & Harris, 1999, p. 28). Explicit strategic planning before discussions, such as use of the template described above, may help students share a purpose and therefore practice discussions in a more meaningful way. As I had noticed the problem of purpose arose during the discussion stage of the lesson, I decided to adapt the discussion preparation activity however the basic concept could also be incorporated into the presentation stage of the lesson. With continued and repeated use, the template could hopefully have many benefits.

Firstly, by showing the different skills in a template form, students may be able to more easily specify interim goals (Willis & Willis, 2007), thereby making the task at hand less daunting and less vague. Secondly, students may be able to better distinguish lesson stages and see how the final discussion practice should be freer than the controlled practice stage and does not necessarily need to follow a rigid dialogue pattern. Additionally, students may be able to better visualize and contextualize how the skills are used holistically to examine and evaluate any topic. Contextualization in this way should help the student understand that these discussion skills aid not only communication ability but also their critical thinking ability which can be applied outside of class in any language. Finally, students may have more confidence to participate collaboratively and be more likely to exhibit a communicative orientation to the task if they do not exhibit it already. When students are aware that the achievement of meaningful interaction can only be realized through group interdependence, issues relating to motivation, lack of confidence, and group rapport may also be less likely to cause problems for some individuals in the group.

The extent to which students interpret the function phrases we teach as behaviours which aid and enhance interaction probably depends a lot on many external factors (outside the classroom) such as their prior experiences and confidence with English, oral proficiency when they enter the course, and their general aptitude for learning languages. For those students who already implicitly know that phrase use enables interactional skills, explicitly teaching the phrase along with its intended behavior serves only to reinforce and make explicit their knowledge. For students who do not recognise the phrase/behavior connection, explicit instruction of a planning strategy could be the catalyst for them to make the connection and engage meaningfully in a second language, perhaps for the first time. In the future, I would like to look more deeply into this area and attempt to ascertain if planning strategies of this kind do or do not enhance meaningful communication in EFL classes. If all students in an EDC class clearly understand the purpose and value of communicative behaviours, I believe that they will then be in a better position to have more meaningful classroom discussions.

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