

Noticing Interaction Performance in Discussion: A Poker Chip Activity

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces an activity that was designed to help students in English Discussion Class (EDC) lessons reflect on their group performance and usage of target Discussion Skills. Based on principles found in Dörnyei's Principled Communicative Approach (2009), and influenced by Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis (1990; 2010), this activity has students exchange colored poker chips to track target language use and balanced participation. This paper introduces the key influencing theories of Dörnyei and Schmidt, and describes how the activity is to be best utilized. The author concludes by offering variations of the activity along with possible areas of development and improvement.

INTRODUCTION

In Rikkyo University's English Discussion Class (EDC), discussions are defined as "the extended exchange of ideas on a single topic for 16 minutes, between three or four participants" (Hurling, 2012, p. 1-2). As described in the course objectives, students are expected not only to offer their own ideas in a discussion, but to elicit ideas from group members by asking questions using a variety of functional target language. Working together as a group to actively exchange ideas using target language skills in English assists students in increasing their English language input and output, which in turn helps to maximize their overall language gains (Liang, Mohanf, & Early, 1998).

However, quantifying instances of being a speaker or listener is not necessarily enough to identify a balanced discussion. I adhere to Kellas' (2012) definition of a balanced discussion as one "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. 2-27). Although many discussion groups successfully carry out discussions in a balanced way, many others find themselves with areas to improve. What often happens in these latter groups is that students appear to find themselves in one of several situations: they become the dominant speaker or active listener by taking up the most time to contribute ideas and/or questions, they become reclusive and fail to contribute any ideas or questions, or they are balanced in how much they offer ideas and questions, but their exchanges tend to focus on one or two individuals at the exclusion of one or two others in the group. What is lacking in these situations is equal opportunity for all students to express their own ideas. While it is important that students actively participate in each discussion, it is also beneficial when they are aware of whether their active participation is encouraging or preventing the active participation of others.

In this paper I will introduce an activity that I implemented in my EDC lessons to address such issues. This activity was designed around three principles found within Dörnyei's (2009) Principled Communicative Approach (PCA), and was influenced by Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis. PCA is an approach that came from an attempt to "maximise the cooperation of explicit and implicit learning" (p. 36), and is centered on "the creative integration of meaningful communication with relevant declarative input and the automatization of both linguistic rules and lexical items" (p. 42). It is important to me that my students continue to develop their communicative language skills within the frame of practicing discussion skills, but with an explicit focus on working together to have a balanced discussion. The Noticing Hypothesis, which simply states that language learners must consciously "notice", and subsequently register, any input

before it is incorporated into language acquisition (Schmidt, 1990; 2010), influenced the procedure of the activity, as well as the feedback that follows.

DISCUSSION

PCA is grounded in seven key guiding principles (Dörnyei, 2009), three of which form the theoretical basis for this activity. The first is *the personal significance principle*, which states that “PCA should be *meaning-focused* and *personally significant* as a whole” (p. 41). EDC discussions are necessarily centered around communicative language teaching, requiring students to exchange their personal ideas and engage in negotiation of meaning when the communication of these ideas requires assistance. As opposed to a conversation or debate during which simple speaking turns may suffice without necessarily asking follow-up questions directly, discussions require participants to listen carefully and ask questions to draw out relevant information and knowledge to help the group develop ideas around a single topic. In addition, EDC students are all first-year university students roughly separated by proficiency level into rosters of those from the same college or major, and thus each discussion is made up of groups of peers. Through our lessons and subsequent discussions, my hope is to help students understand that investing in such efforts that lead to balanced, and engaging, discussions with peers is in their interest, especially in forming connections that will carry outside of the classroom.

The second principle is *the controlled practice principle*, which focuses more on the benefits of controlled practice activities. Dörnyei (2009) explains that “similar to the training of musicians or athletes – [language learning] should also include *controlled practice activities* to promote the automatization of L2 skills” (p. 41). Practice activities that follow this principle should also have clear directions and have a format that is “as motivating as possible within the tasks’ inherent constraints” (p. 41). My activity draws students’ focus to two tasks in particular: use the target Discussion Skill to ask questions to group members, and do so in a balanced way by working together so that all group members have an equal opportunity to participate, meaning as both speakers and listeners. The practice activity itself utilizes colored tokens, in this case plastic poker chips, to help students visualize whether they accomplished the tasks as a group. Ideally, using physical tokens draws students’ attention to the activity and offers some added motivation to engage in the activity.

The third principle is *the focused interaction principle*, which has some overlap with the previous two principles. It states that “PCA should offer learners ample opportunities to participate in *genuine L2 interaction*. For best effect, such communicative practice should always have a specific formal or functional focus, and should always be associated with target phrases to practice” (p. 41). Although the personal significance principle also places importance on activities being genuinely communicative, and the controlled practice principle encourages controlled practice, the difference is in focusing on target language forms to do so. EDC students are encouraged to practice specific target language phrases in every lesson, and my activity’s functional focus is on using these phrases to ask questions equally to all group members. In addition, the target language phrases as presented in each lesson allow students to focus on engaged, genuine interaction with group members by helping them ask relevant questions that are catered to the ideas of each group member.

The Noticing Hypothesis and related ideas presented by Schmidt have also strongly influenced the layout of the present activity. Assisting students in noticing, and thereby improving, their own strengths and weaknesses would not be possible without drawing such points to their attention. To understand how one might do this, it would be useful to consider a related aspect to the Noticing Hypothesis that Schmidt (2010) refers to as “noticing the gap”, which says that “in order to overcome errors, learners must make conscious comparisons between their own output

and target language input” (p. 724). If students’ attention can be brought to the gap between their performance in discussions, either with regard to target language use or discussion management skills, and the ideal target outcomes of each discussion, then perhaps some discussion skill improvement and language acquisition will have occurred. The design of the present activity attempts to assist students in “noticing the gap” with the use of poker chips and post-discussion feedback. Ideally, students will notice whether they successfully used the target language actively to ask questions, and whether they did so in a balanced and cooperative way with their group members.

PROCEDURE

This activity is designed for group discussions of three to four students, with desks arranged such that each student can see the others in their group, and the surface of the desks are within reach of all discussants. For the typical EDC desk layout, no special changes should be necessary in preparing the desks, and this layout can easily be replicated in other classes. Prepare one stack or collection of tokens for each student so that each set of tokens is visually unique from the others. In my case I prepared a small stack of colored plastic poker chips for each student so that each student had a color separate from those of their groupmates. (Henceforth these tokens will be referred to as “poker chips”.) Next, place each stack of poker chips in the center of the discussion groups’ table or desk arrangement. In addition, it is helpful for students if you prepare some visual reminder of the target language to be used in the discussion, whether that is a poster on the whiteboard at the head of the room, or handouts of some sort to be placed on the students’ desks, although this is not necessary.

For the purposes of this activity, a 10-minute discussion is long enough to evaluate student and group strengths and weaknesses. Students are instructed to take one stack of uniquely colored poker chips and place them on their desks prior to beginning. Students will have a discussion as usual, but every time they ask a question during the discussion using the target language, they are to give the target group member one poker chip, which the recipient is to then keep on their own desk in front of them. If the target language includes open question phrases such as “*What does everyone think of my idea?*”, then the next speaker who takes up the offer and begins their speaking turn will receive the poker chip. One way to preempt this scenario is to instruct students to place a poker chip in the center of the group when asking an open question, and the next student to respond will grab it.

As students continue the discussion, each student will be able to visually keep track of whether they are using the target language or not to ask questions, as well as who was asking and answering whose questions. This should reduce the cognitive burden of remembering to use the target language, and also allows the group to see whether all three or four group members are asking and receiving the same number of questions, and by extension, speaking time and attention, in their roles as listeners and speakers. The visual reminder of seeing other students’ poker chips, as well as hearing the sound of poker chips clinking on desks, should help some students notice whether they are using the target language themselves.

During the discussion, instructors will need to monitor each group closely. When students neglect or forget to exchange poker chips with group members, it is important to remind them to do so, whether it be a visual cue (such as making some sort of gesture that cues them in to needing to exchange poker chips), or more direct intervention (such as moving chips for those students, especially in the beginning of the discussion). This activity has the potential to be cognitively demanding on instructors, as instructors such as those of EDC will need to take general notes for feedback in addition to making sure students are using the poker chips as instructed.

Once the discussion has ended, students should be instructed to not touch any of the poker

chips currently in front of them, as some may attempt to return the poker chips they received to the original owners. The follow-up activity should ask students to reflect on the following points:

1. How many times did you use the target language to ask a question?
(i.e. how many poker chips did you give to group members?)
2. Which students in the group did you ask questions to?
(i.e. which group members have your colored poker chip in front of them?)
3. Did everyone receive an equal number of target language questions?
(i.e. do all members have roughly the same number of poker chips in front of them?)

These questions are designed to bring certain aspects of the students' performance to their attention, helping them notice if there is a gap between their actual performance and the desired outcomes.

The first question addresses whether each student is actively trying to use the lesson's target discussion skill phrases. EDC Discussion Skills have target language phrases that help students function as both a listener and a speaker. This activity limits the focus to asking questions only (to listen to the ideas of others), which subsequently requires the following speaker to use the target language to clearly communicate their ideas, thereby encouraging usage of both sides of the Discussion Skill. The second question helps students reflect on whether they attempted to ask questions to each group member, which in turn encourages group members to exchange ideas. The third question asks students to reflect on whether the discussion was balanced or not. It was designed to help students notice if there was any domination of speaking time by any member(s) within the discussion, which would help them balance out the speaking time more, and possibly help them to encourage shyer students to participate more actively in future discussions by targeting students who haven't received a poker chip yet with questions.

VARIATIONS

Due to the design of the activity and minimal preparation that is required, there are several ways to adapt the activity to the needs of the lesson. In the context of EDC, this activity is useful for practicing both Discussion Skills and Communication Skills (such as negotiation of meaning), but it could also be used to help students notice aspects of their performance in asking general follow-up questions, or participating in a variety of seated interactions. This activity can also be utilized in classes of any proficiency level. In highly proficient groups of students, this activity may be more useful in improving overall discussion management skills and in balancing out speaking time among students. In my Level I classes, for example, several students had a high proficiency level due to their experiences living abroad. They had very few problems communicating their ideas clearly and were able to utilize the target Discussion Skill phrases to effectively express their own ideas, but they tended to dominate discussions by not asking for the ideas of their peers in the group. However, by using the poker chips in the present activity, some of these dominating students realized the degree to which they were denying other group members the chance to participate in the discussion, and they began to actively balance out group participation more equally in future discussions. On the other hand, some other Level 1 students were effective discussion managers and helped other members balance speaking time well, but their English tended to sound a bit too casual or wasn't as clear and concise as might be expected in an academic discussion. In such cases, the present activity was effective in helping them notice whether they were using the target Discussion Skills to communicate their ideas clearly in a register that might be considered more appropriate for academic discussion.

The follow-up activity that helps students reflect on their performance can be done either individually, in pairs, or as a group, depending on the needs of that particular grouping of students. It may also be helpful if students from different discussion groups pair up and discuss how the activity went for them, as this may highlight similarities or differences in overall performance and

points of interest.

In its current form, this activity has students place poker chips down on desks so that the poker chip positioning has no meaning aside from whose desk it is on. However, it is possible to attribute meaning to the actual physical placement of the poker chips. The poker chips that I used with my students are actually designed to be stackable with each other. Originally, I had considered using this feature of the poker chips in the activity itself where students, upon distributing a poker chip to the next speaker, would add the chip to an ever-growing tower of poker chips. In this variation, speakers would mark the speaker side of the Discussion Skill by then adding their own colored poker chip to their tower, visually marking when they have successfully used the target language in their own ideas. As questions are asked and elicitation are answered, everyone's poker chip tower will climb higher and higher, which would show two things.

Firstly, this would help the group visualize the order in which one member was asked questions by other members, if that is something that the teacher would like them to track. The towers would function as a chronological record of questions and speaking turns for each student. In addition, if group members place down a poker chip on their own tower whenever they use the speaker side of the target Discussion Skills, you can see if it was in response to a targeted Discussion Skill question, or if it was unprompted. A group member with a tower full of their own color, and few others, would indicate that target language questions are either not being directed toward them, or that they are volunteering their ideas before any elicitation.

Secondly, it would visually indicate by height how many times one person is asking questions or is being asked questions with the target language. Needless to say, towering piles of poker chips would certainly bring the degree to which one is actively participating to the attention of the group quite quickly, but I decided that there were more potential problems than benefits. For one, the instructions for this to work properly, as well as the instructor's attention in managing the activity during the act, may be too complicated to be useful to students. Another possible problem rests in the fact that students sometimes forget to use poker chips even when they are not being stacked up, so adding one retroactively at the moment they remember would be impossible if using towers. Another obvious problem is that the towers of poker chips are easily knocked over by a stray physical gesture in a heated discussion, the semi-malicious intent of a bored participant, or any other random happening. As such, I decided to leave this idea for a different time and context.

CONCLUSION

Overall, this activity went very well from my perspective as the teacher. I started using this activity halfway into the fall semester during lessons in which I introduced a new target Discussion Skill, and students tended to react favorably to it. Many students used the target language more actively in their ideas and questions, and were more proactive about asking questions to quieter group members in discussions that utilized the poker chips. In some higher proficiency Level I classes, students who tended to dominate discussions began to notice in the follow-up activity that some group members had zero poker chips in front of them. One chatty student in particular, a very proficient student who had spent several years abroad, was shocked at how few poker chips they had used during the discussion, and made a point to relinquish the floor by asking questions to the other group members in the following discussion.

Because this activity does an effective job of visually presenting the need to have balanced discussions to students, I would recommend using this activity in one of the beginning lessons during the first semester. The first EDC Discussion Skill, which encourages students to ask for and state clear opinions, would be a great chance to also introduce the need to do so in a balanced way. This would begin establishing beneficial habits for students in the discussion course to follow,

and reinforces the pattern of learning and practicing a new Discussion Skill in each lesson. In addition, routinizing this activity early on would make it easier to implement in future lessons as there would be no need for lengthy instructions.

Care should be given during classes with easily distractible students, as some students tend to play with the poker chips. It is subsequently important to be alert and help remind students to use the poker chips appropriately. Some classes of well-intended students will distribute their poker chip whenever anybody in the group uses the Discussion Skill, as if the poker chip is to be given to the person asking the question. In addition, as mentioned earlier, many students will be so focused on the discussion at hand that they simply forget to use the poker chips at all. Giving clear instructions, ensuring students know the purpose of the activity, and monitoring effectively are all vital to the activity. Despite these potential issues, however, I feel that this activity has many more benefits than drawbacks.

Possible points of improvement can be found in evaluating its usefulness for certain groups of students. It may be useful to ask students to comment on how they view the activity, and whether it helped them improve their language skills or notice any interesting points in their performance to reflect on. It may also be challenging to observe all students in any given class, so it may benefit the instructor to record students engaging in the activity and then analyze this recorded data to both assess the activity's usefulness and address any newly discovered potential drawbacks.

I plan to continue utilizing and improving this activity, as well as to continue exploring new methods for facilitating students' language acquisition. Engaging, principled activities, especially those that incorporate elements of both implicit and explicit learning, can have incredible benefits for language learners in the classroom. I hope that this activity proves to be of some use for other teachers of English discussion, and I look forward to continue its development.

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