# A Balanced Approach to English Discussions

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## ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on a change implemented in the final lesson of the spring and fall semesters at Rikkyo University's English Discussion Class (EDC) to provide a different context to classroom discussion activities. Drawing from a principle of utilizing multiple strands of ESL curriculum, changes were made to discussions and pre-discussion activities that included more emphasis on reading and writing. The goal of the activity was to increase student interest by including areas of English language learning that are generally precluded in regular lessons, such as in-class reading, explicit vocabulary instruction, and student-generated discussion questions. The procedures for these activities are discussed, as well as their efficacy, and notes on student preferences.

## INTRODUCTION

English Discussion Class (EDC) is a compulsory English class for first year students at Rikkyo University. The classes are 90 minutes long and are held once a week for 14 weeks. Students are given a homework reading assignment on a general topic, and at the start of each class they are given a quiz to test comprehension of the reading. EDC courses follow a unified curriculum, and while individual teacher style and choices allow for differences in instruction, in principle there is little variation in the stated goals of the class, which center on fluency and student-led discussions (Hurling, 2012). However, because the final lesson of the semester serves as a general review, this allows for a greater flexibility in terms of curriculum, and it is an excellent opportunity for instructors to try out new ideas.

In my years of teaching the course, I found that students generally read the homework reading, but not all did, and few consistently did a deep reading, in which they thoroughly checked the lexical items and grammatical forms. Furthermore, even if they did complete the reading, it did not necessarily equate to students utilizing the ideas and concepts later in the class discussions. To ensure that students completed the reading, a new approach was introduced in the final class, but reading was just one of several tasks implemented.

A set of goals that undergirds this activity is Nation's (2007) promotion of four strands of language learning: meaning focused input, meaning focused output, language focused learning, and fluency development. Meaning-focused input involves listening and reading, while output denotes speaking and writing. Typically, lessons involve learners engaging in substantial listening and speaking. With this new approach, reading and writing—while not completely absent from regular lessons—are given much more emphasis. Language-focused learning involves "deliberate attention to language features, including…vocabulary" (2007, p. 5).

EDC students are quite familiar with the focus-on-form practice of learning select discussion skills; along with fluency improvement, a primary focus of the course is to explicitly teach communicative forms, such as giving opinions ("In my opinion…), in order for students to be active participants in discussions. Teaching vocabulary, rather than those forms, would have been a familiar activity in terms of explicit instruction, even though the focus on vocabulary was new. The final strand is fluency development, which is usually completed as a warm-up activity at the beginning of class designed to increase fluency, one of the primary goals of the course (Hurling, 2012). Many, if not most, aspects of these strands were already present in the course; this activity attempted to introduce the remainder.

I chose a short news article for students to read, followed by a true/false comprehension check. Students then participated in an explicit vocabulary check to further clarification of terms

helpful for discussion. By making students more aware of lexical items already present in the article, I hoped it would increase the students' willingness to communicate and increase their enjoyment of the discussions.

Normally, discussions are initiated by students reading questions from the textbook. While this might not strictly be classified as teacher-centered, there is a lack of agency on the part of the students in terms of which questions to ask to begin and continue discussions. To counter this, another change I implemented was to have students write their own discussion questions. Another guiding principle for this activity was that of student autonomy, which can be broadly defined as the "ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec, 1981, p. 3). It was my hope that preparation for the discussion (in-class reading, comprehension check, explicit vocabulary activity) served to help activate the students' schemata, or prior knowledge, of the topic and assist in their writing of the questions for the discussion.

## DISCUSSION

Normally, homework in the EDC consists of an essay on a general subject, like "Social Media," or "Study Abroad," but the new lesson replaced this with a news article, also on a general topic. In essence, there were not big differences between these two types of reading, but there are solid reasons for introducing a news article in class. News texts are authentic and compelling (Aiex, N. K., 2000; Chandler, 1990), which are qualities that increase motivation (Antepara, 2003). Additionally, because the text was not a homework assignment, but rather one that students had to read during class, it increased the likelihood that the students would have fully completed the reading (Nation, 2011), which can often be difficult for instructors to discern with the regular homework reading.

In previous years, I used vocabulary activities to emphasize the lexical items in the homework reading in order for students to activate schemata and, ideally, carry those items with them to use in the discussions. This current activity represents another attempt at facilitating that transfer. One component of the week 14 activity centers on vocabulary, which is often categorized via two components: *incidental* and *explicit* vocabulary instruction. Incidental vocabulary instruction has been defined as learning one thing while intending to learn another (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). Through incidental vocabulary learning, students are able to guess the meaning of new words from contextual clues. Krashen's (2003) comprehension hypothesis posits that comprehensible input is a necessary condition for language learning and that extensive reading develops reading fluency, and reading skills in general, while simultaneously synthesizing understanding of previously read grammatical structures and vocabulary.

Students are exposed to vocabulary via incidental learning in both regular lessons and the week 14 activity, though the difference with the latter is an additional, explicit vocabulary check. Young-Davy (2014) points out that incidental and explicit learning should not be seen as opposites, but rather two components of a broader curriculum that uses the strengths of both aspects. Some students respond best to implicit learning and others tend towards explicit, but it is clear that effective, direct vocabulary teaching plays a crucial role in improving vocabulary skills for all learners (Hinkel, 2002a; Nation, 2005).

To initiate class discussions, students usually read written questions in the textbook, but another change implemented in week 14 was to have students write their own questions. After the reading and comprehension and vocabulary checks, the students should have had sufficient familiarity with the topic and enough vocabulary-activated schema to extend upon the relatively narrow news article in order to write their own questions to initiate discussions. I hoped that if students wrote their own questions, they would be more likely to take a personal interest in the discussion, and students also would utilize higher level skills on Bloom's (1956) taxonomy scale

like synthesis and evaluation.

## PROCEDURE AND PARTICIPANTS

The activity was conducted on the final lesson of both spring and fall semesters. In the spring semester, nine of my 13 classes participated. In the fall, out of 13 classes, eight were given the activity; due to the relative difficulty of the reading, the lowest Level 4 classes did not participate. Participants for this study were 71 students in the spring semester and 54 freshmen students in fall semester. All students had TOEIC scores ranging from 310-650 and were in enrolled in Level 2 or 3 (intermediate) classes. Seven classes were Level 2, which means each student had a combined listening and reading TOEIC score of between 480 to 679. Ten classes were Level Three, which means each student had a combined listening and reading TOEIC score of between 280 to 479.

In the final lesson of both spring and fall semesters, the students began class with a standard fluency activity and then a short review of the topics discussed during the semester. A handout was provided, and, in order to foster as much autonomy as possible, the instructor encouraged them to assist each other if they did not understand, rather than rely on the instructor. At a few stages, the instructor concluded one part and began another; this was not necessarily meant to scaffold the activity but rather a practical necessity to ensure students were all able to finish sections roughly simultaneously, and to finish all sections within the time constraints of class.

There were two articles, one concerning school uniforms and another the common cold. Most classes consisted of two discussion groups, and one of the two articles were given to members of each group. The articles were shorter (approximately 250 words) compared with the textbook reading, and the reading difficulty level was roughly equivalent to 700-950 on the TOEIC exam, in many cases much higher than the students' TOEIC scores. For some students it was a large gap, but according to Krashen's (2005) input hypothesis, learners move from their current level of competence (i) to their next stage (i + 1) by understanding input which contains (i + 1). These structures above the existing level of competence are understood by using context and knowledge of the world, together with existing ability. Though they were likely challenging, because there were ample scaffolding activities and partner checks, I thought this more difficult reading material to be appropriate for this activity.

The students began silently reading a short article, and they then completed a true/false quiz to check understanding. These two opening steps roughly mirror a regular class, with its homework reading and comprehension quiz at the start of class, so, at first, students would have been very familiar with these activities. However, after completing the quiz, instead of answers revealed by the instructor, students compared their own answers in pairs or trios, and finally checked the answer key on the final page. From that point, students moved to the explicit vocabulary check (See Appendix A). Fourteen of the most challenging lexical items were taken from the article and students began with a matching exercise, followed by a pair/triad check. Correct answers were again confirmed on the final page.

At this point in the activity, students were familiarized with the topic and had learned (or practiced) several vocabulary words pertinent to the topic, so their schemata would have ideally have been activated at this point. Students were then told they would conduct a discussion, an activity they were very familiar with, especially by the end of the fall semester. For this discussion, though, there were no questions for them to read, only blanks for them to fill out with their own. They were given some time to write their questions, and the instructor provided help to students (and in some instances whole classes) that struggled with this by suggesting the kinds of questions that elicit higher order thinking. Binary, yes/no questions such as "Do you like…?" were discouraged in favor of questions that a) synthesized their current knowledge and, through discussion, helped produce original ideas; and b) allowed for evaluation, to make value

judgements based on their opinions.

Once all students had written one or two questions, they initiated the discussion. The discussion times varied slightly with each class, but they were all in the familiar range of 10-16 minutes. Finally, in the last stage of the activity students had a brief closing "meta-discussion" about the two different styles of discussion lessons and which style they preferred between the two (See Appendix B). Through these short discussions, I learned their opinions of the "four strand" variations, namely in comparison with the standard lesson plan.

## VARIATIONS

There are any number of variations that can be implemented with this activity. As it was presented, the groups discussed just one topic (either school uniforms or common colds,) but given that the activity is news article-based, ample resources exist, either online or in newspapers or magazines. One area worth further exploration is student choice in selecting articles and topics, as I believe this would further ignite interest among students. The articles I used were high intermediate/advanced level of English, but careful selection (and/or editing) of texts to tailor to specific class levels is also a possibility; I excluded the lower-level classes from this activity but a text could be adapted for lower levels, and the vocabulary section could be simplified to a fraction of the items used.

The vocabulary activity was a matching word to definition task, but multiple methods for vocabulary checking exist, i.e., gap fill or synonyms/antonyms. For further emphasis on pair work, a jigsaw activity could increase student-student interaction. Students could make their own vocabulary list of difficult or unknown items, and then work with others to define the terms. Creating questions could also be done in other ways. Students could be limited to a particular kind of opinion question, such as "Which is better, A or B?" In discussions, each learner could begin by stating their question and the group votes on the best one(s) to use, or the instructor could dictate that a certain number of questions be asked, depending on what the outcome of the discussion is expected to be.

Although this was an introduction of the "four strands" philosophy of ESL teaching, there was not necessarily a perfect balance between the four skills in terms of time. Nation (2007) suggests the strands be given equal weight (or rather, time), but that was not a priority of this activity; indeed, each class was at least slightly different in the time they took to read, or write their own questions. Placing emphasis on a particular skill based on the needs of that particular class (or even individual student) seems to be a more important focus for instructors, rather than a possibly arbitrary and inappropriate time allocation forced upon each part.

## CONCLUSION

This activity was intended to expose students to a different way of conducting discussions, as well as different pre-discussion preparations, in order to increase their interest and overall enjoyment in class. Based on observations and notes taken during the final discussions, in which students compared the two types, for both spring and fall semesters, there was a significant overall preference for the week fourteen intervention.

The questions for the final discussion were 1) Which lesson did you like better, the normal lesson (using the textbook) OR today's lesson? Why? and 2) What's your opinion of a) the vocabulary check b) writing your own questions (instead of reading them from the book)? When asked for reasons why, the responses mainly centered on autonomy:

"I liked today's lesson because I asked my own questions."
"The questions were interesting and funny."

"The article was difficult but it was interesting."
"We only talked about [one student's] question the whole discussion."

I think further refinement and variations like the ones listed above should be used in any future implementation of this activity. More stringent assessment of discussion outcomes would be very beneficial to help determine the efficacy of this activity. Student surveys could provide more granular data concerning the positive outcomes the activity seemed to generate. In the end, a balanced class of reading, writing, listening, and speaking largely succeeded in improving students' interest in class discussions.

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## APPENDIX A – Vocabulary Matching ("Common Cold" worksheet)

### Vocabulary Match

**Step 1: Match the vocabulary word to the definition.**
**Step 2: Check with your partner/group.**
**Step 3: *Only* when finished with step 2, check your answers on the back sheet.**

**Paragraph 1**

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Cure | _____ | a. | A period (length of time) of ten years. |
| 2. Decades | _____ | b. | A group of atoms joined together. |
| 3. Types | _____ | c. | Experience something bad or unpleasant. |
| 4. Viruses | _____ | d. | Do something or give medical care to make an illness, disease or injury better. |
| 5. Treat | _____ | e. | Very, very, very small things that go into our body and make us ill (or kill us). |
| 6. Suffer | _____ | f. | Something that will make a disease, illness or problem go away. |
| 7. Molecule | _____ | g. | Kinds of things; sorts of things. |

**Paragraph 2**

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 8. Treatment | _____ | h. | A small number that is bigger than two. |
| 9. Remedies | _____ | i. | Starting and growing bigger. |
| 10. Symptoms | _____ | j. | When your body is too, too hot. |
| 11. Fever | _____ | k. | The medical care you receive from doctors, nurses, etc. |
| 12. Developing | _____ | l. | Things that make trouble or difficulty in your life. |
| 13. Several | _____ | m. | Medicines and drugs to make your body or mind better. |
| 14. Inconvenience | _____ | n. | The signs of an illness or disease. |

## APPENDIX B – Final Discussion Questions

**DISCUSS THE DISCUSSION!**

Today's discussion was a little different than normal. Talk about it!

*Ask your group members:*

1. Which lesson did you like better, the normal lesson (using the textbook) OR today's lesson? Why?
2. What's your opinion of a) **the vocabulary check**
   b) **writing your own questions (**instead of reading them from the book**)**?