Preparation Opinions to Encourage
Critical Thinking in EDC Discussions
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ABSTRACT

In this article I discuss an activity I used that made changes to the preparation activities in the EDC textbook by substituting textbook ideas with more complex or unusual ideas. The goal of this activity is to increase the range of views that students consider and thus encourage critical thinking about the topics that students discuss. I briefly discuss literature on why to study critical thinking, how critical thinking has been conceived, and difficulties students may have doing critical thinking in an L2. I then detail the procedure of my activity, and explain a number of variations that can easily be made. I finish by discussing why I believe this style of preparation exercise is an improvement in terms of student motivation and target language use, but that this kind of activity may not be suitable for lower level classes.

INTRODUCTION

Some uniformity of opinions across students in Rikkyo University's English Discussion Class (EDC) is inevitable considering their similar life experiences before entering university, the difficulty of explaining complex ideas in English, and the lack of class time available for developing background knowledge of the discussion topics. However, students holding identical opinions for identical reasons may result in two difficulties. First, it may be hard for students to develop the discussion topics in detail and talk at length because students are unable to add more reasons or alternative opinions. Second, it may be difficult or even impossible to use a range of Discussion Skills or Communication Skills. This is because using certain Discussion Skill phrases require new topic content, and using Communication Skills is unnecessary with simple content that everyone understands.

Therefore, encouraging a critical approach to the discussion of topics may be more beneficial for both engagement with the lesson content and language production. Students will be pushed to express complex ideas and to use Discussion Skills effectively. In addition, if students have opportunities to discuss in detail, it may be more personally fulfilling, as students are exposed to unfamiliar ideas about a topic and so can learn more about the issues under consideration. With this in mind, I wanted to develop an activity aimed at encouraging students to think critically and to consider a wider variety of angles on an issue than are presented in the course-specific textbook (Brereton, Lesley, Schaefer, & Young, 2018).

I use the term *critical thinking* here in the sense of exploring ideas about a topic, rather than in the narrower sense of logical analysis (which is beyond the scope of this class). With this in mind, in this paper I shall explain some adaptations I have made to textbook material in order to encourage a fuller analysis of the discussion topics.

DISCUSSION

Within the literature on critical thinking, there are three questions of relevance to my activity. The first is simply whether or not to teach critical thinking, as my activity presumes a need to encourage critical thinking about the topics that students discuss. The aim of EDC is primarily to develop discussion skills rather than to develop content knowledge, but I would argue that a stronger focus on critical thinking can help with this aim (and as I shall explain later, also helps in building discussion skills). However, teaching critical thinking in second language classes has been challenged as inappropriate.

One line of argument is that it is a 'soft' form of cultural imperialism, whereby teaching critical thinking amounts to teaching cultural thinking (Atkinson, 1997). A similar view holds that critical thinking is essentially a sociocultural practice, and so many learners struggle to exhibit critical thinking because the culture in which they were raised means they are unfamiliar with the practice (Ramanathan & Kaplan, 1996). However, these attitudes have in turn been dismissed as essentialist, for assuming that cultures and human thinking are intrinsically different, and have been attacked as perpetuating stereotypical views of Asian learners (Littlewood, 2000; Stapleton, 2002; Cooper, 2004; Floyd, 2011; McKinley, 2013). What is more, on a practical level, critical thinking is regarded as an essential skill for preparing students to be global citizens in the 21st century (Trilling & Fadel, 2009; Wagner, 2010). It is widely accepted that learners need some degree of instruction and training in this area (Feng, 2013). As such, teachers have a responsibility to equip their students with the critical thinking skills that are becoming more and more integral to success in today's knowledge-based society (Liaw, 2007). Simply put, critical thinking is a necessary skill and requires specific instruction.

This leads to the second question, which is about the meaning of critical thinking itself. This has been a widely debated issue. Lai (2011) provides a useful overview by identifying general differences in conceptions of critical thinking. It is sometimes viewed as a cognitive skill that can be consciously utilised, and alternatively as a general disposition towards thinking. Another difference is between viewing critical thinking as a content specific skill, versus a generalised skill that is transferable to any kind of problem. Lai goes on to group four areas of critical thinking that have been identified in the literature: the first is analysing arguments, claims, or evidence, the second is making inferences using inductive or deductive reasoning, the third is judging or evaluating, and the fourth is making decisions or solving problems (2011, p. 9). Although this suggests disagreements about what exactly constitutes critical thinking, the lack of consensus can be overstated. As Liaw (2007) says, while a variety of definitions of critical thinking have been provided there is little essential difference in these definitions, and as Davidson (1998) points out, a lack of clarity in definitions does not mean critical thinking does not exist. So relating the ideas discussed here to my activity, the idea of critical thinking underlying the present activity can be described as cognitive skills to be consciously utilised, as content specific (as it aims to develop background knowledge), and the thinking skills involved are analysing arguments and evaluating.

The third question concerns the kind of difficulties students may face when doing critical thinking. Such thinking skills are not easy (which reinforces the argument that they need to be taught and developed). One simple reason is that it is harder to critically think in an L2 because it is harder to express ideas (Luk and Lin, 2015). This places an extra cognitive burden on students, because as Campbell et al. (2007) demonstrate, learners require part of their working memory to process information in an unfamiliar language, which can hinder effective processing of information about a question (in Lun et al., 2010). What is more, on a practical level it may be hard to articulate ideas because students may lack topic knowledge. In particular, the content-specific view of critical thinking described in the previous paragraph implies that students need to know about an issue before analysing it. Most researchers see background knowledge as essential if students are to demonstrate their critical thinking skills (Lai, 2011). Without the requisite background knowledge of a situation, students can be disadvantaged in constructing and deconstructing arguments or making other critical observations about it (Lu & Singh, 2017; Tian & Low, 2011). Stapleton (2001) has shown how content familiarity plays a role in critical thinking, whereby students with more knowledge of a topic can exhibit greater critical thinking. Essentially, then, critical thinking is difficult, and it requires knowledge.

Bringing this back to my activity, in EDC students read a textbook article about the topic before class, and are quizzed on the contents at the start of each lesson. This textbook reading

therefore provides a certain level of topic preparation. However, the reading is divided into two versions covering wide-ranging ability levels and as such cannot be too complex. Furthermore, it presents many simple points of view on a topic. My activity is designed to supplement this preparation work by offering additional perspectives.

PROCEDURE

In the spring semester I trialed a number of activities which aimed to encourage a deeper discussion of the topic. Based on this, the activity I decided to use in the second semester is an activity to enhance the preparation that students do before group discussions. Prior to group discussions students often perform an activity in which they compare their opinions about statements written in the textbook, so that students have formulated some ideas to contribute in the group discussion. For example, a common preparation activity in the textbook is to circle "agree'" or "disagree" with four statements on the topic to be discussed. These statements are often concisely worded, simple ideas about the topic, or are paraphrases of ideas that appear in the preparation reading article. For instance, when preparing for a discussion on the importance of traditional Japanese culture, students discuss this idea: "I'm not sure, but I think that traditional Japanese games and sports are not important. Not many young people play *shogi* or do judo now" (Brereton et al, 2018, p. 18).

The strength of this approach is that it is easily accessible – the ideas are easy to understand and easy to articulate, and this simplicity also allows students to expand on the ideas if they want to. Furthermore, talking about these simple ideas makes sure students are familiar with the most common, or 'standard', stances they can take on the discussion topic. However, the drawback of this approach is that these ideas are often very obvious things that students can come up with by themselves, or are ideas that students already know because they have featured in the preparation reading article. This means that discussing these points may not generate new content for the discussions and may not help students to develop the topic in detail. It also means that students tend to concentrate on these familiar ideas in the group discussion that follows.

My activity involves substituting these ideas for different ideas. The principle is to provide alternative opinions that students are less likely to come up with. By this I mean views of the topic that students may not have thought of by themselves, or views of the topic that challenge students' preconceptions. Such ideas are fairly easy for an instructor to generate, because after hearing students discuss a topic numerous times an instructor has a good knowledge of the common opinions that come up among students and has a good understanding of the ideas about a topic that students typically do not cover. This experience is therefore the basis for the ideas that I added in my activity. For instance, in the discussion of Japanese culture mentioned above, I substituted the statement that young people do not play traditional games with "I'm not sure, but I think that traditional Japanese games and sports are not important. People can learn the same things from Japanese games that they can learn from non-Japanese games." This offers an alternative that students have probably not considered, in that it challenges the idea that Japanese games have unique values that do not exist in other sports. To be clear, the statements I provide are not necessarily negative or critical. For instance, an alternative example that I used is "I'm not sure, but I think that traditional Japanese games and sports are important. Watching Japanese games and sports gives people an easy topic of conversation with other people."

I used this substitution activity over a number of lessons throughout the semester, whenever I felt that students needed more exposure to different ideas before starting the discussion. I allocated the same time period for discussing these ideas as with standard preparation activities. Before the extended group discussion, students discuss the alternative prompts in pairs for four to five minutes. Students are instructed to discuss at their own pace and begin with any idea they

found interesting. At the close of the activity students are reminded that they can use these prompts, and their responses to them, during the following group discussion. A full example of textbook ideas and substitution ideas is included in the Appendix.

The premise of this activity is that students can come up with obvious ideas about a topic by themselves, and therefore do no need prompting on these ideas. My observations strongly supported this idea: whenever I did this activity, students had no problem expressing the "baseline" ideas without reference to the textbook. Importantly, then, in this respect giving students newer ideas likely would not pose significant problems in terms of content generation. In other words, this is an easy way to make the discussions more varied. It is also a useful way of making sure students have enough material to discuss, and thus it avoids the problem of students racing through the discussion questions because the group holds similar opinions and has a limited number of reasons to support these opinions.

Another advantage is that discussing more complex ideas has knock-on effects in terms of Communication Skill use. If students are expressing more sophisticated ideas, it follows that they will have more instances of misunderstanding and so more need for communication repair. In addition to more of these situations occurring, these instances of Communication Skill use will be *genuine* rather than automatic trained behaviour on the part of the student, or a perfunctory going through the motions that can sometimes be the case. The final advantage is that a deeper exploration of the topic could be more satisfying for students, on a personal level, as they have more chance to genuinely learn something new about a topic. In this way it may increase intrinsic motivation and make the discussion more authentic. While students certainly appreciate the chance to develop English skills in terms of phrases they can use to structure a discussion, they also value the chance to discuss the issues themselves. This may particularly be the case with some of the topics covered in the second semester, which are typically more complex or multifaceted than those in the first semester. With respect to developing critical thinking, the points raised here could all contribute to analytical skills, as students are encouraged to have a deeper, more varied discussion, and are encouraged to adopt a more inquisitive approach to the topic.

VARIATIONS

The principle of this activity is very simple, and there are a number of variations that can be done. One possibility is to mix the statements that students discuss. This can be done by providing each pair of students with different new ideas to discuss. In this case the instructor would have to prepare a number of original ideas about the topic, and distribute different ideas to each pair of students. The advantage of such mixing is that it increases the variation of ideas throughout the class. Alternatively, half the students could discuss new opinions provided by the instructor, and the other half could discuss the opinions in the textbook. As well as increasing variation of ideas, the advantage of this method is that the instructor can assign the simpler textbook ideas to lower level students in the class and assign the more advanced ideas to higher level students, thereby customising the preparation activity.

Another option would be to have half of the students discuss the ideas in the textbook, and present the other half of the class with opposites of the ideas in the textbook. For instance, if the idea is "I think TV programs have a positive effect. It's mainly because they show us interesting stories that we can discuss with our friends and family", the other half of the students would discuss an idea such as "I think TV programs have a negative effect. It's mainly because they are not serious and they do not discuss important topics such as war or poverty". This is an easy way to make sure the class has been exposed to differing viewpoints. Finally, if more time were available for preparation, another method would be to have students complete the preparation activity in the textbook, then do a more advanced alternative version. For instance, in this situation

students could be given a minute to circle "agree" or "disagree" about the opinions in the textbook (without talking), then move on to talking about the alternative opinions. Although more time consuming, this would have the benefit of covering more possible ideas.

A more challenging variation would be to give students the alternative opinions, then to have students practice a specific critical thinking skill rather than focusing on expressing their own opinion. For instance, to force a critical reaction the students could be instructed to *disagree* with the opinions they are given. This would allow students to practice disagreeing phrases, or practice talking about disadvantages, as well as practice the cognitive skill of coming up with opposing ideas. For instance, a student could use a structure such as "I see your point, but one disadvantage is . . ." or "You said . . . , but in my opinion . . .". Another example of this kind of specific critical thinking activity would be to make students add a reason to support the idea they are given by the teacher. Again, this would allow students to practice Discussion Skills, such as saying "As Eri said . . . Another advantage is . . ." and would also force students to brainstorm new ideas. The example phrases given here are drawn from the Discussion Skills that students learn during the course. A fourth variation is that students would have to disagree with whatever their partner has said in response to the opinion, so they would have to generate an opposing idea. These approaches all have the benefit of training in specific critical thinking skills, in addition to covering more background knowledge about the discussion topic.

CONCLUSION

In all, I believe that adding complexity to the opinions that students are exposed to in the textbook preparation activities is a simple way to improve discussions, and I will continue to use this activity. I will experiment with some of the variations that I discussed, and in particular I will try using both the preparation activities in the textbook (which involve choosing "agree" or "disagree" with statements), then having students move on to considering alternative, more complex, ideas. I feel this may be the most effective method. As I argued, this kind of activity is an efficient way to increase the variety of content and the level of detail in group discussions. It also caters to students who value discussion in the sense of exploring a topic, meaning those who are interested in learning about an issue as well as developing practical English skills. In this sense it may be an additional way for teachers to get students to invest in the course.

Finally, however, a note of caution is required, as expressing less obvious ideas may be a double-edged sword. An important consideration when implementing this kind of activity is student level. More complex statements require a higher English level, and this could be a problem if students cannot understand or cannot quickly respond to the alternative opinions they are provided with. As mentioned above, one of the difficulties students face when thinking critically in a second language is the extra processing time it requires, which takes attention away from other cognitive functions. Moreover, even if students do have a sufficient level to comprehend and respond to statements, there may still be drawbacks. More complex statements and ideas which are not immediately obvious require a heavier cognitive load for students to decipher. There is a danger that students may become too focused on explaining detailed views and not focus on using the Discussion Skills and Communication Skills that are the goal of the course. In this way the activity could be counter-productive, such as if grammatical accuracy or use of target expressions suffers. This underlines how the teacher needs to carefully judge the suitability of this activity, and underlines the teacher's role in monitoring to make sure students can understand the statements. This is an area I would have liked to investigate more empirically. To improve this activity, it would be useful to measure how often the alternative ideas from my activity were used by students in discussions. For example, the teacher could count how many times each idea is included in the group discussions. Based on this, the most frequently used alternative ideas would be kept, and

those which students did not include could be replaced by new ideas.

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APPENDIX – Alternative Preparation Opinions

The four opinions about Japanese customs from the textbook, (Brereton et al, 2018, p. 18) with possible alternatives in brackets.

Ryo: In my opinion it's important to always follow New Year's customs. For example, I send New Year cards to my friends and family and I visit a shrine on New Year's day.
(Ryo: In my opinion New Year's customs are not necessary. Most people are not religious so going to a shrine is not necessary, and writing New Year cards is a waste of holiday time.)

Aki: I'm not sure, but I think it's important to always follow food and eating customs. One example is saying *itadakimasu* and *gochisousama*. Another example is using chopsticks and a knife and fork correctly.
(Aki: In my opinion food and eating customs are not important. It is more important to relax and enjoy food.)

Eri: I think it's important to always follow school customs, for example, wearing a school uniform and bowing to the teacher at the start of each lesson.
(Eri: I don't think it is important to always follow school customs, because school customs are not useful after we leave school.)

Jun: I think it's important to always follow family customs. One example is eating dinner together. Another example is visiting relatives during holidays.
(Jun: I think it is not important to follow family customs. One reason is that some families do not like each other, so it is stressful if they get together to celebrate.)