Identifying External Uses of Discussion and Communication Skills to Increase Student Investment

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ABSTRACT

Students who are highly proficient in English may not find value and need for target language in a language course. Norton Pierce's strategic investment principle (1995) points out that learners must identify ways to make the target language beneficial to them in order to gain motivation to use it. To challenge advanced students and to test Norton Pierce's principle, over the course of a semester, 14 students in two discussion classes were tasked with not only orally reflecting on their progress with the target language, but also with considering external uses for the target language, such as in other courses, circle/club activities, and part-time jobs. This paper shares how the activity was carried out and possible variations for when it can be done during a lesson, as well as potential patterns in student responses and examples.

INTRODUCTION

One of the required English-language courses for first-year students at Rikkyo University is English Discussion Class (EDC). Students are placed into one of four levels based on TOEIC scores, with Level I as the highest (680 and above), often including students who have lived overseas, bilingual speakers, and/or students who have always had strong proficiency in English. Students at this proficiency level are sometimes regarded as having a dismissive attitude of EDC, as they believe they are already capable of talking extensively in English on a variety of topics and do not require skills and feedback on how to have a discussion in English. Though there are fewer Level I students compared to other levels in EDC, they have needs that are different from the other levels and their lessons may require separate planning from the other levels. Taking these beliefs into consideration, I wanted to find a way to capitalize on Level I students' perceived knowledge of the course's Discussion and Communication Skills, sets of target language targeting various aspects of discourse, interactional, and strategic competencies, as well as have such students consider uses and needs for the skills beyond the classroom. In doing so, I hoped it would increase their investment in the course itself.

DISCUSSION

Strategic investment relies on learners to identify personal needs for learning and using target language, whether it is for a class assignment or for everyday survival (Norton Pierce, 1995). Learners who initially viewed a new language as unwieldy zero in on experiences and situations where they can benefit from new language use. This principle takes students away from worrying about how hard they have to work to achieve proficiency and encourages them to make the language work for them (Darvin & Norton, 2015). Strategic investment can include repetition of target language, a key feature of the CLT approach used in EDC, until it "becomes practical sense" (Darvin & Norton, 2015).

In previous EDC classes, I have tasked students to reflect during peer feedback and goal-setting between two in-class discussions (Sturges, 2018). After identifying strengths and weaknesses, students can select a goal either from the feedback form (Appendix 1) or, as was the case with Level I students, from their own perceived needs that were beyond the "assessment criteria of the course", such as "ask more interesting questions" (Buck, 2017). In addition, Level I students can be asked to consider uses of the target skill beyond the EDC classroom. Where else do people give opinions? In what other situations do people define vague words? Are there other

courses where checking understanding is used? Rather than only drill the necessity of the Discussion Skills and Communication Skills within the classroom, I wanted students to invest in their own needs for English beyond the scope of the classroom, appreciate their high proficiency and language-learning backgrounds and journeys (Yphantides, 2013), and hopefully bring that awareness back into the classroom to increase in-class discussion motivation.

The activity described below was piloted in two Level I classes in the spring semester of 2018. One class was majoring in Tourism and the other in International Business. There were 14 students in total (seven in each class), five males and nine females. Some had lived abroad prior to university for as little as a few months to several years.

PROCEDURE

In a standard EDC lesson, this activity is carried out between Discussions 1 and 2, after the students have had sufficient practice with the target language and a 10-minute discussion, and before the students have another chance to further practice and refine the target language in a longer second discussion. Students are given a feedback card (Appendix) in which they have one minute to silently self-evaluate their first discussion. They consider if each affirmative statement in "Check Yourself" is true or false for them and use that as a basis to discuss their first discussion in pairs or trios (in the case of classes with an odd number of students) from the other discussion group.

Next, in the "Ask a Classmate & Make a Goal" section on the feedback card, students talk about their self-evaluation and impressions of the first discussion with a partner from the other discussion group. Students are given about 3 minutes to complete this part of the activity. Students have a chance to compare with one another how their respective groups handled the discussion topic and questions as well as talk about their own successes and points to improve. The partner may offer feedback. This activity is usually done in a "mixer style", where pairs/trios have the freedom to stand or sit anywhere in the classroom they wish. The style of the first question, "How was your discussion?" is intended to be conversational in tone. The combined effect is to make this stage of the activity more relaxing and less formal than the discussions themselves.

The second feedback question is a thematic or metalinguistic question about the topic or target language. In the Appendix, this is "Which is easiest to use to support your opinion: reasons, examples, or possibilities?" (A thematic example might be: "Have you ever talked about values before in English or Japanese?") These questions are meant to gauge if the students have any deeper understanding of the topic or target language. These questions can also indirectly inform the instructor of any issues or difficulties students are having with the topic or target language.

Students are asked to consider external uses of the target language with the third question: "Other than the EDC, where else can you use [target discussion/communication skill]?" There is no required amount of examples or depth for students to give. Students can give examples in English-speaking or Japanese-speaking situations. They do not have to justify their examples unless their partner requests clarification.

This is done in addition to the goal-setting component captured in the final question, "What do you want to try in the next discussion?" To answer, students set a goal based on one of the statements from "Check Yourself" or from their own self-reflection. The teacher may then elicit and board these goals from students. Next, students begin preparing for the second, longer discussion. The teacher should remind students of the goals they have set and encourage them to remember that the target language is not limited to the classroom discussions only.

VARIATIONS

Challenging students to consider external uses of discussion and communication skills can be daunting at first. The question, "Other than the EDC, where else can you use [target discussion/communication skill]?" can yield examples of target language use occurring in other classes, part-time jobs, interpersonal relationships, or things seen on TV or read about in the news. Students may initially struggle to consider the wide variety of examples of external uses and that there are rarely, if ever, wrong examples. It can be helpful to board a list of examples, as shown in Fig. 1, which demonstrates goals for the discussion skill Definitions. Alternatively or additionally, instructors can volunteer examples to help students generate ideas, and students can also discuss this question with a partner before volunteering examples for the board.
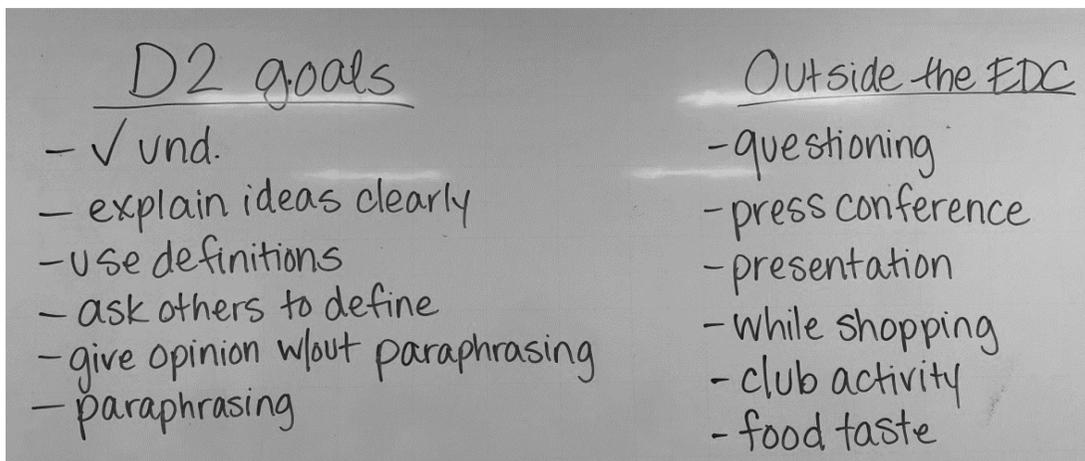

Figure 1. Discussion goals and examples of uses of Definitions Discussion Skill outside of the EDC by International Business students.

Once the students are acclimated to all the feedback card questions, teachers can allow more time for feedback and student-student conversation. If other activities and discussions are timed appropriately, this feedback and goal-setting activity could go for up to five minutes. Students can be recorded with no instructor interlocution. With this variation of the activity, examples do not have to be boarded, only summarized orally.

The question of external use could also be posed at the end of the lesson after both discussions, at which points the students have had more time to practice using the target skill. This could perhaps help them generate more examples based on the discussions, as well as better connect self-perceptions of performance between the two discussions and project this beyond the classroom. Or, to go to the other extreme, this question could be included as part of the skill presentation done at the beginning of the class to help students not only learn what the skill is and how it is used in discussion, but to also know right away that it has uses far beyond the walls of the classroom. Students could carry this impression with them throughout the lesson, which may have a better overall impact on their strategic investment.

There are also variations to consider with how students approach this question regardless of when it is posed. While piloting this question with two Level 1 classes, there were three patterns that emerged in the types of examples students offered. I classified these as ready, recycled, and reticent/refused. *Ready responses* came from students who had immediate, applicable, and detailed examples of the target skill. *Recycled responses* were examples that, as far as the students could tell, could be applied to any target skill. This was evident with the Business Majors, who

suggested that every target skill could be used in their Business and Leadership BL0 course. In recordings from their feedback sessions from Lessons 7-12, BL0 was mentioned every single time. *Reticent/refused responses* came about when neither student in the pair could readily think of external examples, or when one student tried to attempt an example and his or her partner did assist. Examples of these three example types are provided in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Summary of examples of ready, recycled, and reticent/refused responses.

Ready response	Recycled response	Reticent/refused response
M: Uh, I think, uh, I think daily conversation with our friends. We can use	T: Possibilities? Ahh, ehh, I'm sorry, but I have, I need time to think about it.	I: Ehhhh possibilities
K: Like, what kind of daily discussion?	M: Okay. I think possibilities, hmm, the usual.	M: Other than…ehhh
M: No, not daily discussion, not discussion, it's conversation.	T: The usual	I: Mmmm, yeah, um
K: Oh, I see. I'm sorry.	M: Yes, BL0. I think future possibilities if we have the plan	M: Yeah, I don't come up with any ideas because maybe we use possibilities unconsciously
M: For example, um, we have to make sure others can ask to join, for example, uhh, if I, if I continue to speak. If I only, if only I speak to my friends	T: Yeah, that's right. Possibilities. Ahh yes, so, for example, to decide which university to enter	I: Yeah
K: Yeah		M: So
M: My friends cannot say anything. It is not good, so we must check others' understanding and make sure that they can ask to join our conversation.		I: Um, is that, um, I have, um, idea. I'm not sure if we talk about, like, boys and dating things. If I say, uhhh, "I love you" to a boy, if he date with me. Is that right?
		M: Yeah
		I: I think it's possibility and if
		A: I'm sorry, I don't come up with any idea.

Gathering examples from the class and boarding them can help students who struggle to think of ways to use the target language outside of the immediate classroom context.

CONCLUSION

Over the course of the spring semester, in addition to peer feedback, reflection, and goal-setting, I tasked my Level I students to consider external uses and examples of the target Discussion Skills and Communication Skills. This was an attempt to increase their motivation and strategic investment in the class based on concerns that such high level students would be more reluctant to take up the target language. While further research is necessary to determine any actual increase in motivation, the activity itself can be done in conjunction with discussion feedback and goal-setting at the end of class or during the target language skill presentation. In addition, it can be done in a limited timeframe so as not to impede upon other necessary class activities and tasks.

If the students are willing, they can consider and offer examples of external uses of the

target language. Some students are ready with detailed and varied examples. Some students may recycle the same examples from lesson to lesson due to the links they recognize between the class and other courses in their major. Some students may struggle to consider examples for a variety of reasons. It may be helpful in the beginning to help students generate examples of external uses, but ultimately, if this activity is done consistently each lesson, the students should be prepared to consider at least one example of external use.

Level I students, because of their relatively high proficiency and rich and varied background in English, can be challenged beyond the regular scope of EDC lessons. As Yphantides (2013) explains, it would be detrimental to deny their high proficiency and focus rigidly on the textbook topics and uses of the target language, in this case Discussion Skills and Communication Skills. Instead, having students use their proficiency and awareness to their advantage can add to their unique EDC experience and entice them to make the skills work for them (Darvin & Norton, 2015). If they can consider and identify needs, uses, and examples of the skills at their part-time jobs, with their friends, in their other classes, or even by watching the news, that not only amplifies their EDC experience but also extends the reach of the EDC skills beyond the textbook and classroom.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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APPENDIX: Feedback card for Lesson 11, Possibilities

Spring Lesson 10   **Discussion Feedback and Goals – Level 1**

CHECK YOURSELF: true or false	ASK A CLASSMATE & MAKE A GOAL	
1. I asked about possibilities using **IF** or **WHAT IF**. 2. I talked about possibilities with **IF**. 3. I chose a topic. 4. I closed a topic and summarized. 5. I asked for/gave definitions. 6. I paraphrased others' ideas or my own. 7. I used active listening and checked understanding.	1. How was your discussion? 2. Which is easiest to use to support your opinion: reasons, examples, or possibilities? 3. Other than the EDC, where else can you ask about or give possibilities (If)? 4. What do you want to try in the next discussion?	Choose a goal from "Check Yourself." **"In the next discussion, I want to try…"**