How a Fishbowl Got Students to Notice the Gap
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ABSTRACT

Fishbowl activities are utilised by teachers or discussion organisers to manage group discussions. Generally speaking, in a fishbowl activity, a group participating in a discussion is observed by others sitting around the group. Such an activity was used in a language classroom focusing on academic discussion skills in a Japanese university. In three separate review lessons, a fishbowl activity was used to help students reflect on their discussion output in order to help them lessen the gap between output and the target input. It was observed that the fishbowl activity guided students to understand how to participate in more balanced ways during their discussions, among other benefits. Activity parameters and limitations, as well as variations on the fishbowl activity, are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Rikkyo University's English Discussion Class (EDC) is a mandatory course for all first-year students. The hallmarks of EDC are small classes (seven to nine students per class), a unified curriculum, students' participation in 16-minute discussions at least once per regular lesson, and standardised discussion tests. Students' learning is partly assessed through the 16-minute discussions as well as tri-semesterly discussion tests. In each regular lesson, students are taught one discussion skill, for example, giving opinions or suggesting advantages or disadvantages. After presentation and controlled practice, they are tasked to use that skill (and other appropriate discussion skills learnt in previous lessons) to discuss topics that range from social media to poverty. After every two regular lessons, there is a review lesson to help students consolidate what they have learnt and prepare for the discussion test in the subsequent lesson.

All these lesson activities culminate in students being able to produce a lot of spoken output. Each student can participate in 30 or more discussions per semester. However, every discussion is different and contains a variety of strong and weak points. A strong EDC discussion is one that is "balanced, interactive and constructed by all participants", and to achieve that, fluency of sharing ideas is also important (Hurling, 2012, p. 2). In contrast, a weak EDC discussion would see an imbalance in participation due to more active participation by one or two students, or students being unable to share relevant ideas because they do not have the appropriate language skills to do so.

To teach students to carry out strong discussions in the EDC context, feedback is usually given by the instructor. There are many areas that the literature on feedback delves into (Shute, 2007), but some of the more important characteristics of effective feedback in the EDC context are as follows: feedback should be explicit, clear and easily understood, concise, individualized, and memorable, in addition to engaging the learners and providing goals (Doran, 2013). However, one drawback of students receiving group feedback from the instructor is that there is no individualised feedback and it does not engage the learners (Doran, 2013). Furthermore, students know what a discussion looks like from the inside, but not holistically, from the outside as well, since students are always participating in discussions concurrently. To help students be further cognizant of what makes a strong EDC discussion, it would help if they were given the opportunity to observe a discussion, and then guided to reflect on what they observed.

It is to that end that a fishbowl activity was implemented in each EDC review lesson during the fall semester of the 2018 academic year. Related to Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis is the idea called *noticing the gap* that suggests learners can improve their output when they compare their

output with relevant input (Schmidt, 2010). Essentially, the fishbowl activity is one way of facilitating learners to notice the gap not only as related to target language usage, but also to the notion of what makes a strong discussion.

DISCUSSION

Schmitt's (1998) Noticing Hypothesis foregrounds the importance of awareness and attention in learning a second language. Contrary to behavioural methods or naturalistic methods of teaching, the Noticing Hypothesis favoured cognitive learning theories when it claimed that the "learner must attend to and notice linguistic features of the input that they are exposed to if those forms are to become intake for learning" (Schmidt, 2010, p. 4). It situated itself in the debate between the Input (Krashen, 1980) and Output (Swain, 1985) Hypotheses by suggesting that input is essential, and that learning (in the form of a processing of intake) will happen when learners' attention is focused not only on their own output, but on input as well (Ünlü, 2015). The correlation between input and output could be further cemented when we look at the related hypothesis of noticing the gap, which is "the idea that in order to overcome errors, learners must make conscious comparisons between their own output and target language input" (Schmidt, 2010, p. 4). If students are aware of what areas of improvement they need to work on, and are given a goal to reach, they can begin to make efforts towards reaching that goal. This is the connection between noticing the gap and the fishbowl activities used in my EDC review lessons.

A *fishbowl activity* is a way to organise large group discussions, and takes its name from the relatively mundane activity of watching fish swimming around in a fishbowl. Basically, a small group, usually four to six people, discusses a topic while the rest of the people attending observe and take notes without participating in the discussion.

The idea behind using the fishbowl activities in EDC lessons this past year was based on the desire to help students make an informed comparison between their own discussion performance and the target discussion skill or discussion performance. For example, if a certain discussion group had members who wanted to be able to paraphrase others' ideas more naturally or suitably, observing a discussion in which the members are able to paraphrase appropriately at suitable times during the discussion would allow the EDC students to learn the timing of a paraphrase, or a more concise or purposeful way of paraphrasing. The role of the EDC instructor then, is to draw the students' attention to the specific input points that students could use to improve their discussion output.

The entire fishbowl activity takes about 15 to 20 minutes in total, including the time taken for students to move into groups. A review lesson has the advantage of allowing the EDC instructor slightly more flexibility as to how to use class time, compared to the stricter lesson plan instructors follow for regular lessons. Additionally, since the fishbowl activity is intended to direct students to compare their own output with the output of others (which serves as input for the observing students), students need to have been given opportunities to produce some output that they can then use to compare with target input. There are more opportunities to make such comparisons in a review lesson in which students consolidate previously learned target language.

PROCEDURE

The materials needed for the fishbowl activity are a textbook (or some sort of content that forms the basis of what students talk about) and a content organizer. The content organiser can be presented however the instructor or teachers wants, but in this case, it was presented in the form of a paper handout. The information on the handout (Appendix A) is divided into two parts, the top part that directs students to take notes on their partner's (usually the student sitting beside them) discussion performance, and the bottom part that guides students to reflect on the whole

fishbowl experience. After students are sufficiently warmed-up, either through a fluency building exercise or a short pair work activity, they complete a brief individual preparation using the textbook activity, which can usually be completed in a minute. The instructor then gives each student the fishbowl activity handout. Students are told not to write anything on the bottom part of the handout until otherwise instructed. This ensures that students take enough time to complete the reflection and also focus on observing the discussions.

The instructor then arranges the students into two groups. Partners are not allowed to be in the same group. Groups then decide who will do the discussion first based on which group's representative wins at a quick rock, scissors, paper competition. While the observing students (*humans*) move their chairs into positions from which they can observe their partners (*fish*), the fish choose a discussion question from those provided in the textbook. Then, the instructor places a timer with five minutes on the counter, and when both humans and fish are ready, the fish start their discussion.

Once the five minutes has elapsed, fish and humans will talk, with the humans giving feedback to their fish partners about what has been observed about their discussion skills usage (the instructor's guideline was usually around a maximum of three specific feedback points). This feedback session lasts about two minutes, after which time the humans and fish switch roles and the cycle is repeated. When both groups have completed their discussions and feedback sessions, students take a minute to reflect on what they learnt from observing the discussion, using the bottom part of the handout.

Overall the preparation for this activity by the instructor is rather minimal, requiring some time spent on designing the content organiser and printing it out for the students. Based on what aspect of their output the instructor would like students to be aware of, the information on the content organiser can be edited. As such, the fishbowl activity was adapted and modified to allow the instructor to guide students to be more independent learners. The modified fishbowl activities are described in the next section of this paper.

VARIATIONS

The first fishbowl activity (Appendix A) took into account the possibility that many students would not have done a fishbowl activity before, hence the content organiser actually contained a *script* that helped students to know how to give feedback to their partners. This activity was easily completed by students with a range of English proficiency levels, although it was not carried out with the lowest proficiency level in EDC (Level IV, TOEIC scores of below 280).

Other than helping students to compare their own output with target input, another goal that the instructor had was to teach students to be peer evaluators, thus helping students to be more autonomous learners. As a result, each succeeding fishbowl activity featured less and less words, and more blank space for students to note their observations. For example, instead of the script that was in the first fishbowl activity, the content organiser of the second fishbowl activity (Appendix B) was just three boxes that directed students to take notes on their partners' discussion and communication skills usage, and think of what their partners could do to improve. In the last variation of the fishbowl activity (Appendix C), the handout consisted of mostly blank spaces where the students could write their observations or reflections. For the first two fishbowl activities (Appendices A and B), there was a space on the handouts dedicated to students' reflections on what they had learnt from their observations. However, in the last fishbowl activity (Appendix C), there was less instruction on what they needed to write in the space provided. Students could write anything they thought was necessary.

Another modification made to the last fishbowl activity (Appendix C) was the inclusion of goal-setting. Partners were given some time before the start of the fishbowl activity to share about

what they wanted to try to do in the discussions, the rationale being that it would structure the later feedback session more as the students were expected to lead the feedback session with no help from the instructor.

It is entirely possible to carry out the fishbowl activity with lower-level students, especially if they are confident speakers. In this case, the feedback focus points for the students should be scripted and made available to the students either through handouts or on the board. For the purposes of this paper, the students who participated in the fishbowl activities were given handouts that could be collected, but if there is no need for instructors to have a written record of the students' observation notes, the students could write their observations in their textbooks, and the instructors need not prepare any handouts.

CONCLUSION

The fishbowl activities implemented in the fall 2018 semester were met with some trepidation from the students. Being observed by others often makes one feel like one is being put on the spot, and yet the students gamely took on the challenge. One reason could be that it being the fall semester, students were already accustomed to doing discussions. Indeed, having participated in over 30 discussions since the spring semester, students were able to push through the discomfort of being watched, and all of them got through the fishbowl activities with some ease. Hence, it is recommended that fishbowl discussions be used at least from the latter part of the spring semester or from fall semester, or when students are more confident in carrying out group discussions.

The fishbowl activity, as expected, brought up some issues that were important in discussions, the first being that of discussion balance, particularly that of balanced participation (Reid, 2018). Because the discussions are not concurrent, and because there is a time limit of five minutes per discussions, the observers can see how the discussion is organised within the group. Five minutes is not a long time for four people to share in a discussion, so it is very obvious when one person dominates the discussion and takes up two or three minutes just to share their opinions. Many a first discussion in the very first fishbowl activity ended with half the group being unable to even speak or ask questions, and not only did the observers notice that, the discussion group members did as well. Being aware that one is being observed seems to be imbue one with the ability to look at one's actions more objectively, a variant of Labov's (1972) *observer's paradox* where speakers being observed tend to change the way they speak even though no instruction to do so had been given.

In many of those unbalanced discussions, the members who had unwittingly dominated the discussion apologised immediately and profusely to their group members when the time elapsed. Accordingly, in the reflections that followed, many students wrote that watching their partners' discussion impressed upon them the importance of balance and being able to let everyone have a turn at speaking. Also, the discussion that followed the first fishbowl discussion was often more balanced in terms of participation, and it seemed that the following group put in some effort to ensure each member of the group had a chance to participate in the discussions. Additionally, as the semester progressed it was observed that balanced participation became a natural feature of students' discussions, though it is unclear what role, if any, the fishbowl activity played in this trend.

Another apparent benefit of the fishbowl activity was that it helped students to understand the issue of timing, or, when to use certain discussion skills. After many weeks of EDC, students had been taught a variety of discussion and communication skills, but now, faced with a multitude of phrases to use and no fixed template to use them, some of them were flummoxed. They could learn from their group members during their own discussions how and when to use the phrases, but observing other discussions showed them new ways to use the phrases. They were able to

point out to their partners when to use certain phrases and learn for themselves how to use phrases they were unsure of.

It was observed that the fishbowl activity was most useful in drawing students' attention to gaps in their own output when there was less content to review. The last fishbowl activity seemed to be the least effective, in that students struggled to bridge the gap between their output and the target input. Since it took place in the very last review lesson, in which students were trying to review and use the skills they had learnt in the entire fall semester, it could be that some of them found the target input a goal too difficult for them to reach. Hence, this could also have challenged student observers' perception of the discussions as target input. Students were unable to use all important target discussion skill phrases in the fishbowl discussions, and there was barely any observation notes recorded by the observing students. Some reasons could be that the students were not ready for the amount of autonomy afforded them by the instructor, or that the lack of direct instruction to reflect on the observed discussion led to them not taking notes at all. The feedback sessions went well enough, though. Unless the content to be reviewed is decreased, it is not recommended that a fishbowl discussion be used in a final review lesson.

More formal assessment of the effectiveness of the fishbowl activity would likely help in determining whether it is really suitable for a large-scale discussion course like EDC. For example, the particular gaps that students noticed within their own output could be recorded, as well as their output following that noticing, to see if students were successful in noticing the gap and "overcome[ing] errors" in their output (Schmidt, 2010, p. 4).

The fishbowl activity has not been used widely in EDC lesson due to the amount of time it takes to carry out, added preparation for discussions, and decreasing of talk-time for students. However, as this paper has shown, there is some usefulness of a modified fishbowl activity in EDC, provided it is used circumspectly, sparingly, and with clear instructions attached.

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APPENDIX A – 'Fish' Feedback Instructions

Name: Group 1 / 2

How to give your 'Fish' feedback on his / her Discussion performance

Please tell your 'Fish':

1) "You used the important Discussion Skills phrases like (   ) and (   )."

2) "You used Active Listening responses like (   ) and (   ). You also used Checking Understanding phrases like (   ) and (   )."

3) "I (couldn't understand / could understand) what you were saying."

By listening to my 'Fish's' discussion, I learnt (how / what / when / that) _____

_____

_____.

APPENDIX B – 'Fish' Feedback Form

Name: Group 1 / 2

Give your 'Fish' feedback on his / her Discussion performance

Did your fish use the important Discussion Skills?	Did your fish use the important Communication Skills?
For example -	For example -
If your fish didn't use the important Discussion Skills, give them advice on how to improve (e.g.: how or when they should use the Discussion Skills):	

By listening to my 'Fish's' discussion, I learnt (how / what / when / that) _____

_____

_____.

APPENDIX C – Fishbowl Discussion Goal-Setting

Fishbowl Discussion Goal-Setting

My Fish's goal is to _____

(check understanding / use Different Viewpoints phrases more etc)

Fishbowl Discussion Notes (or Reflection) :

1.

2.

3.