

Experimenting with Improvisational Roles in Discussions with EFL Students

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ABSTRACT

At each English Discussion Class at Rikkyo University, students learn a discussion skill and practice applying the skill in discussions. Students tend to fall into a fixed pattern to maintain a harmonious group dynamic. This paper documents the reflective journey based on the teaching journal entries and the attempts to break fixed discussion flows by implementing improvisational roles. It also explores how the students performed their assigned roles and how different roles changed the interactions among students. The result supports that adding different roles positively influences students' behaviors and group dynamics. The paper concludes with reflections and possible modifications for future researches.

INTRODUCTION

English Discussion Class (EDC) is a required two-semester course for all freshmen at Rikkyo University. Students are placed into four levels based on their TOEIC band scores and each class consists of seven to nine students. In each semester, the students have a total of 14 lessons, including ten regular lessons, three discussion test lessons, and a final review lesson. The goals of the program are to provide students a platform to practice and perform different discussion skills and communication skills, and to develop the ability to discuss current topics in English (Hurling, 2012). A discussion skill helps share and support opinions, organize discussions, or challenge and evaluate ideas such as *asking for and giving reasons*, *asking and giving different viewpoints*, *summarizing the topic*, etc. (Fearn-Wannan, Kita, Sturges, & Young, 2019). A communication skill helps negotiate meanings, clarify, or enhance comprehension such as *reactions*, *paraphrasing*, *asking for explanation*, etc. (Fearn-Wannan et al., 2019). In each regular lesson, a discussion skill or communication skill is introduced and practiced in various activities. Students then have the opportunity to practice and apply the discussion skill in two discussions. The students are evaluated and assessed on whether they use the target discussion skills and communication skills. The students are expected to appropriately use all the discussion skills and communication skills by the end of the semester.

In order to reach the expectation of using all the discussion skills and communication skills and to increase academic performance, students tend to follow a specific pattern during discussions, and they often apply most of the discussion skills in one turn which results in giving a three-minute "speech" before another student gets a chance to share ideas. For example, when Student A talks, Student B only asks one or two questions in order to use the target skills. When Student B shares opinions, Student C asks questions. The group moves on to the next topic after all the group members give their thoughts. The questions asked and the ideas shared are usually similar. Eventually, the discussions turn into dialogues between two students with a fixed pattern.

As part of the professional development program, all the first-year instructors are required to start a teaching journal. Farrell (2007) suggested that by keeping a journal, an instructor can re-examine the teaching process and find a solution to the problems observed. After noticing the tendency of a fixed pattern, it is the instructor's job to make some changes to enhance the teaching-learning experience. Since Lesson 5, a teaching journal entry was generated at the end of each teaching day, and all the class notes were re-examined. Murphy (2014) mentioned reflective teaching could help instructors develop the abilities to examine the teaching-learning environment,

identify and clarify problems, and make changes. The instructor can also use the journal as a platform to express frustrations, raise questions, and make a remedial plan (Farrell, 2007).

After observing students' behaviors and journaling about Lessons 5 and 6, I decided to follow Farrell's (2007) suggestions and started to make remedial plans. From Lesson 7, an improvisational role was assigned to a student (agent) in each discussion group, and an observation on any change of group dynamics and behaviors was conducted. The agents were given a mission card (Appendix A) during the preparation period before the second discussion, so it did not occupy learning time during class. After each teaching day, I reflected on how the role influenced students' behaviors and group dynamics during discussions and made changes for the next lesson.

Assigning roles to students gives students a sense of independence and responsibility for their learning and supports a collaborative discussion (Wise, Saghafian, & Padmanabhan, 2011; Hancock, 2016 and Daniels, 2002). As part of the remedial plan, five discussion roles, as shown in Table 1, were chosen from Wise, Saghafian, & Padmanabhan's (2011) functionally based roles to help students develop the ability to break the repetitive flow. The titles of the roles have been modified for comprehension.

Table 1. Five Discussion Roles and Job Descriptions

supporter	challenger	summarizer	starter	digger
To start the discussion, and ask follow-up questions to everyone	To disagree with others and give reasons, and ask more follow-up questions	To paraphrase or summarize the key points	To start the discussion and ask follow-up questions to everyone	To ask more in-depth questions or reasons, and ask for evidence

Discussion Roles were assigned to the agents during the preparation time before the second discussion under the principles of maintaining the EDC lesson structure. First, the roles were only assigned to the students in Level II (TOEIC score of 480-679) and Level III (TOEIC score of 280-479) classes. Second, the mission cards were given out during the preparation time, so the lesson structure remained. Third, the agents were told and reminded that even if they did not perform the tasks, their daily grades would not be affected. Fourth, the tasks did not compromise students' opportunities to practice the target discussion skills. Instead, the students used multiple discussion skills, including the target skill of the lesson. During the second discussion, all the students were observed, and their behaviors were recorded for reflection. This paper will further explore the findings of the experiment.

DISCUSSION

Students tend to fall into a fixed pattern and follow each other's ideas in discussions. They do not ask follow-up questions, disagree with others, or ask for further evidence. Japanese students are taught to be part of the group and maintain a harmonious group dynamic (Martin, 2004). However, Hurling (2012, p.1-2) defined that EDC discussions should be "balanced, interactive and constructive." He further explained that "a rich discussion can be created by taking risks" (p. 1-3). Students in the EDC have shown that they can balance the talking time and share ideas, but there is little evidence that they are willing to take risks and interact with everyone in the group. According to the journal entries in Lessons 5 and 6, more than half of the classes observed did not ask for further details or challenge others' ideas.

Students started to show fatigue from repeating the same tasks. The EDC follows a unified curriculum, and the structure of each regular lesson is similar. By Lesson 6, the students had already experienced the same lesson structure more than ten times. Repetition can be a cause of demotivation (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). Students showed less interest in learning. It was evident that the robotic discussions and fixed patterns were demotivating. The students did not know how to change the situation, but they could only follow the pattern. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) implied that instructors also hold responsibilities to motivate and engage students in learning. Thus, the improvisational roles were implemented by me to help the students.

First Stage (Lesson 7)

The agents appeared to be embarrassed when assigned the role. The first role given to the agents was the supporter. When the students were given the mission cards, they all seemed surprised that they were chosen to conduct the mission, and some seemed reluctant. As a result, only half of the agents performed the roles, and there are three possible reasons. First of all, it was the first time the students experienced the activity. They were not sure what to do and how to perform the assigned roles. The second reason could be that the cognitive load was too high for the students to comprehend the mission card. The agents were given the mission card during the preparation time, so they might not have had enough time to digest the information. Third, some students were embarrassed to perform the role, as one of the instructions was to ask follow-up questions. This was particularly difficult for the students because they might not have wanted to break the harmonious flow during the discussions.

On the other hand, there were still some positive effects. For example, a student who had been less active than other students in previous lessons was assigned to be an agent, and he encouraged himself to perform the task. He asked questions and acted more actively than he used to be. At this stage, encouraging the students to execute the task is essential. To increase performance of the task, the mission would be assigned to individual students via weekly comments on the online learning management system which would allow them time to absorb the information.

The observation on other group members showed that the agents' behavior had an impact on others, but it was limited. One example is that the atmosphere was livelier than the previous lesson. The students used communication skills more frequently which indicated they were paying more attention to the discussion. Another example is that some students started to copy the agents by asking a small number of follow-up questions. Compared with the previous lesson, when students were not willing to ask any questions, there was a slight improvement. The impact of the role was still small, but it was positive.

Second Stage (Lessons 8 & 10)

At the beginning of this stage, the impact of the improvisational roles was still limited. Based on the change made after Lesson 7, the agents were expected to understand their role, which was as the challenger. One reason might be that the students did not read their weekly comments on the online grading system website. Some agents appeared not knowing they had been assigned a mission. Another reason might be that even though the students had read the mission cards before joining the lesson, the cognitive load was still too high for them to react to the role while having a discussion. The third reason could be the students did not want to be different since the challenger role could be seen as aggressive or disruptive (Hancock, 2016). As Martin (2004) stated, one of the distinguished Japanese characteristics is to maintain group harmony. Hence, the plan was altered again after a few attempts and falls. The first change was that two roles would be assigned to two students in each group. In this way, the students would not have a sense that they

were different from others as half of the group had a mission. The second change was in addition to the description of behaviors of the roles, and useful phrases that agents could use to perform the missions were added in order to reduce agents' cognitive load (Skehan, 2018). Students would feel supported by the choices of language provided (Culatta, Blank, & Black, 2010). As a result, mission agents felt more comfortable performing the roles, and eventually, all of the agents completed the tasks. With the new mission cards, agents seemed more confident when conducting the tasks. They were more focused during the discussion, and they were able to use the language provided in the mission card to challenge others and ask different questions.

The students without missions were greatly influenced by the agents and showed significant improvement. For example, it was evident that the students started to copy the agents' behavior. The students without missions were encouraged to ask different questions, challenge others' ideas, and disagree with others. They could genuinely express their ideas without following others, which resulted in deep and meaningful discussions. Further evidence is that the students had more speaking turns than they used to before the experiment. Since the flow had been broken, there was not a pattern to follow. The students and the agents increased their speaking turns and used more discussion skills than following a fixed pattern. Even the students who were shy or hesitant became more active and interacted with others effectively—the impact of the improvisational roles obvious and definite.

Third Stage (Lessons 11 & 12)

A new challenge of having three missions within a discussion group was given to the students. At this stage, students and agents were familiar and confident in terms of performing the roles during discussions. I decided to test where the limit was by assigning three improvisational roles to each group. The discoveries were both positive and negative. One positive discovery was that the students and agents not only completed the tasks but also kept the traits of the previously assigned role. For example, Student A was assigned to be a digger in Lesson 12, and they had been a challenger in the previous lesson. In this lesson, Student A completed the task as a digger and challenged others' ideas using the possible language for a challenger. This was witnessed in more than half of the classes. One negative discovery was that the agents entirely focused on their tasks, and they stopped copying other agents as they did in the second stage. With only two agents in each group, each agent could still notice what target skill phrases the other agent used and copy the phrases while performing their tasks and sharing ideas. However, when three agents were assigned, the amount of information overwhelmed the students, so the students chose to focus on their own tasks only. The result reflected the limit of the improvisational roles and tasks assigned to students.

After experimenting with all the improvisational roles and journaling the journey, evidence shows there were both positive and negative effects on students' behaviors. The main drawback of this experiment was the high cognitive load for students. Students found difficulties in performing the roles during discussions, but this was solvable. On the other hand, one positive impact was that students appeared to be more active and engaged during discussions. They focused on the content, increased their speaking turns, and interacted with each other lively. Second, the roles pushed students to talk more and ask a variety of questions. They felt more confident with asking genuine follow-up questions. Third, assigning two discussion roles was the most effective. When half of the group held a mission, the other half could follow and copy the tasks comfortably, and the agents could also notice each other's mission. The result supports that improvisational roles can be beneficial for EDC students.

CONCLUSION

Setting a goal for students motivates them to learn and creates urgency and purpose to use the target language (Dörnyei, 2001). Compared with the discussions in Lesson 5, the improvisational roles helped the students improve their use of discussion skills and communication skills. They are able to discuss in depth, embrace conflicts, negotiate meanings, and ask further details. Hurling (2012) mentioned that these are also the expectations for the students by the end of the course. After eight weeks of journaling and observing students' behaviors and progress, it became apparent that students could benefit from the improvisational roles, and these tasks encouraged students to achieve the goals of the EDC program.

The experiment in this paper has not yet been fully executed and has shown limitations. One limitation was that the students did not have enough time to familiarize themselves with the roles and tasks. Hancock (2016) suggested that instructors should allow learners time to understand the roles and comprehend the tasks. Another limitation was that students were not offered a chance to reflect on how they performed the assigned roles, but they were only given time to reflect whether they used the target skill of the lesson. When replicating the experiment in the future, a post-task should follow, or students should be allowed to reflect on how the assigned roles helped them in the discussions. Overall, students seemed satisfied with the outcome of the experiment, and the journal entries showed progress from the students. For future replication of the experiment, it might also be interesting to know students' views of the improvisational roles. A survey could be conducted to investigate learners' opinions towards the experiment.

The experience of how much teaching journals can inform instructors is valuable for not only novice instructors but experienced instructors. This journaling project provides a chance to evaluate discussion lessons, reflect on students' performances, recognize problems, experience attempts to solve the problems, and enhance the teaching-learning environment. By journaling this experiment, the result of experimenting with improvisational roles in discussions was positive and it has proved that instructors should invest in re-examining lessons and attempting new approaches. Mistakes might be made during the process as presented in this paper. However, the learning experience will be advantageous for both instructors and students.

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APPENDIX A – Mission Cards

<p>Hello,</p> <p>You have a secret mission in your 2nd discussion. You are going to be a supporter.</p> <p>You will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>support your friends</i> - <i>agree with their ideas</i> - <i>and ask follow-up questions.</i> <p>This can help them give more information.</p> <p>Thank you!</p>	<p>Hello,</p> <p>You have a secret mission. In the next discussion, you are going to be a challenger. You will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>disagree with others and give reasons</i> - <i>ask more follow-up questions</i> - <i>and ask questions from different viewpoints.</i> <p>You are not fighting others. You are going to encourage others to give you more ideas to convince you.</p> <p>Thank you!</p>
<p>Hello,</p> <p>You have a secret mission today. In the next discussion, you are going to be a challenger. You will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>disagree with others</i> <u>I'm sorry, but I disagree. You said.... I think...</u> - <i>and ask others to think deeper.</i> <u>What are the advantages/disadvantages?</u> <u>How about from ...'s point of view?</u> <p>Thank you!</p>	<p>Hello,</p> <p>You have a secret mission today. In the next discussion, you are going to be a summarizer. You will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>paraphrase or summarize</i> <u>Are you saying...?</u> <u>So, we think....</u> <u>Do you mean...?</u> <p>Thank you!</p>
<p>Hello,</p> <p>You have a secret mission today. In the next discussion, you are going to be a starter. You will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>start the discussion</i> <u>What shall we discuss first/next?</u> <u>Can I start?</u> - <i>and ask follow-questions to everyone.</i> <u>Can I ask a question? + Follow-up Questions</u> <p>Thank you!</p>	<p>Hello,</p> <p>You have a secret mission today. In the next discussion, you are going to be a digger. You will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>ask deeper questions or reasons</i> <u>Why do you think so?</u> <u>Can you give me more examples?</u> <u>Which is better/worse? - ... or ...?</u> - <i>ask for evidence</i> <u>How do you know about that?</u> <u>Where did you learn that?</u> <p>Thank you!</p>