

Teaching Journal: Reflections on Developing Interaction and Improving Turn-Taking in High-Intermediate Students

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I reflect on a journal kept over nine lessons with high-intermediate Japanese learners of English in Rikkyo University's English Discussion Class and their struggles with turn-taking and interacting with each other's ideas in small group discussions. Students were observed to often speak excessively and allow disagreements and uncertainty to remain unaddressed, changing topics rather than exploring these opportunities for further communication. As the semester progressed adjustments were made to the style of feedback and type of activities used to address these issues and many students showed progress in later lessons. I conclude that turn-taking and signaling comprehension are skills that will require pedagogical intervention and must be balanced with developing fluency in using the language skills that are introduced during the course.

INTRODUCTION

All first-year students at Rikkyo University in Tokyo are required to take two semesters of discussion classes run by the Center for English Discussion Class (EDC). The classes are taught using a unified curriculum with objectives that include acquiring functional target language (called Discussion Skills), affective values based around the students' personal values and beliefs, as well as practical objectives based around fluency and negotiating for meaning (Hurling 2012). There is some variation in content to account for the varied proficiency level of the students, but it is up to the teachers to ensure the class is appropriate for their particular students while adhering to the requirements of the unified curriculum. In my first semester working at the EDC I grew particularly interested in the challenges that appear with higher level students. These students can often communicate fairly effectively and are able to use the Discussion Skills fairly easily, but they often struggle with making their discussions interactive and meaningful.

In my first experiences with these higher level students, I was impressed with their fluency and ability to clearly explain their ideas. My expectation was that they would be more able than lower proficiency students to meet several of Hurling's (2012) affective objectives, including to "value discussing topics in depth in English" and "value other's opinions even when they conflict with personal beliefs" (p. 1-4). However, in my first semester I observed many of my more proficient students showing frustration during class and their discussions often ended with few speaking turns and few questions due to their tendency to excessively explain their ideas. Students would often share their own ideas very clearly but they would rarely interact with their classmates' ideas. This led me to believe that the students were struggling to reach these goals for reasons unrelated to issues with proficiency, the target language, or the content provided within the unified curriculum. Going into the second semester addressing these difficulties was one of my goals.

Teachers in their second semester at the EDC are expected to keep a teaching journal and I chose to take this opportunity to reflect more formally on the issues that appeared in the higher proficiency level classes that I taught. Farrell (2007) suggests that a journal should have a narrow focus and that keeping a journal can help a teacher reflect on their own thinking, beliefs, and practices and can help a teacher find insight into their own teaching. Murphy (2014) also suggests that reflection on teaching can be a valuable tool to increase the awareness and understanding of what happens in the classroom from the point of view of both the teacher and the students. I informally observed all five of my level two classes (the second highest proficiency level in the Rikkyo EDC, in my case, students with TOEIC scores ranging from 485 to 670) for the first four

lessons of the semester to verify that the issues I noticed in my first semester were present in these new classes and to make sure that my focus was not too broad.

In these four lessons I did in fact see very similar issues to what I observed in my first semester. Students would often speak for excessively long periods of time, leave few opportunities for questions, and make it difficult to interact with their ideas due to including too many different points within a single speaking turn. When given a set of questions groups of students would frequently each address the question only once, occasionally connecting their ideas to previous speakers' or answering questions, but then not speak again on the topic regardless of what was said by classmates who spoke later. I found that many of these students had interesting ideas on the topics we were discussing and had the capability to explain these ideas to their classmates, but they would rarely interact with each other's ideas during a group discussion, instead just taking turns sharing their ideas on a topic independently. I began my journal in the fifth lesson and continued through the 13th lesson. The target was the behavior of my five level two classes with regards to their tendency to structure their discussions as a series of speeches rather than an interactive discussion.

DISCUSSION

In the fifth lesson the second half of the class was devoted to a "Discussion Test:" a formal evaluation of the students' progress in using the target language they had been taught and their ability to negotiate for meaning in small group discussions. All students were expected to be able to use the target language to share their own ideas and to ask questions of their classmates to help further the discussion. The classes were split into two groups for the test, each group taking the test separately from the other. This was an excellent opportunity to more closely observe each student when compared to regular lessons where two groups are speaking simultaneously. I had already worked with these classes to encourage them to ask more questions and to curtail their speaking turns in order to avoid sounding like they were giving speeches, but I was unsure of their progress to this point.

I decided that I would keep this journal by answering a series of questions for each class after my final lesson each day. As Farrell (2007) says, waiting too long after a lesson to write the journal can impede a teacher's ability to adequately recall the events of the class. I would also make notes during each class as much as possible to make sure I was able to recall any important moments. The questions I began with were:

- What stood out as being speech-like or non-collaborative?
- What stood out as being positive, or more like a real discussion?
- How did this affect their scores and class performance?
- How did this affect their discussions?
- Are there any other general observations?

In the eighth lesson I began asking myself "What did I do? What could I have done?" as an additional question to be able to look more directly at the feedback I was giving and to consider opportunities to reflect-on-action and reflect-for-action as is suggested by Murphy (2014).

The Starting Point

The fifth lesson began with a review and some practice discussions before beginning the Discussion Test. Even in the practice I observed that many students tended to structure their speaking turns like miniature speeches. They would give an opinion, follow it with supporting information, and finish by summarizing themselves. I gave feedback that these self-summaries were unnecessary, but this behavior continued into the test. During the test, the majority of

students spoke only once for each topic and would not volunteer to speak again until the group moved on to a new topic. This was particularly problematic as one of the Discussion Skills being tested was “Connecting Ideas,” where the students were expected to invite classmates to comment on their ideas and paraphrase and respond to ideas shared by other students. This meant students who volunteered to be the first speaker rarely commented on other students’ ideas and the final speakers did not ask for input on their ideas. I also observed that students would frequently voice a disagreement with a previous speaker but they would rarely elaborate or delve into the reasons for disagreement, instead choosing to continue on, leaving the disagreement unexplored. To me, this led to the discussion feeling disjointed and incomplete. I was able to provide some feedback after each test to encourage the students to continue discussing a topic after each student has spoken once and the students did seem to understand why this was an issue.

New Discussion Skills

In the sixth and seventh lessons the students were introduced to new Discussion Skills. In the sixth lesson they were expected to consider viewpoints different from their own and in the seventh they were expected to provide the sources of their information. Many of the same issues from the test continued into these lessons. Most students would only hold the floor once per topic and while they would sometimes pause to allow other students to ask questions, few students spoke a second time on a topic. During the lesson I could not pinpoint any obvious reason, but students seemed mostly unwilling to address a topic further than their first idea. Students also gave extended speaking turns and far more information than I would have considered appropriate given the lack of interaction from their classmates. On a few occasions in these lessons I heard students give a clear idea, pause, and then continue speaking about the same topic in the way I would expect in a speech or presentation. In one lesson a student gave a clear, supported opinion about social media not being useful for children, then after a short pause, continued to give more reasons, a counterpoint to their own argument, and a self-summary with no input from other students. This may have suggested confusion in the group as to whether or not the floor was open, as Young (2015) observed in a conversation analysis of Japanese learners of English in group discussions. This difficulty with turn-taking may be common. Young (2018) suggested it was a common issue in need of pedagogical intervention and that linguistic differences between Japanese and English may contribute to uncertainty in turn-taking. Williamson (2019) suggested in response to Young that cultural differences with regard to politeness and a lack of confidence with appropriate turn-taking lead to Japanese speakers of English taking fewer speaking turns than English-language learners from other backgrounds. Regardless of the reason, my students were struggling.

There were also points of improvement in these lessons. Some groups were more willing to interact with their classmates’ ideas when compared to the fifth lesson and in one class I observed that a few students even changed their minds on a topic as a result of their discussion. In one class I noted that one particular group seemed far more natural than other groups and classes due to the participants asking questions to challenge their classmates’ ideas. I came away from these lessons confident that these students were capable of discussing topics more deeply but was still unsure why they over-explained their ideas and chose not to take additional speaking turns.

Review Lesson

In the eighth lesson all classes reviewed the Discussion Skills in preparation for the second evaluation in lesson nine. In the practice stage of the lesson I asked the students to work with a partner and challenged them to use all of the skills as fast as they could. Gatbonton and Segalowitz’s (1988) paper on Creative Automatization suggested that students need to be comfortable using new language in novel situations before they can use it fluently and I hoped

that this practice would help students become more comfortable using the target language, allowing them to focus on content. I also hoped by challenging them to use the skills as fast as possible they would attempt to shorten their speaking turns to have more chances to use the target language, ideally leading to increased comfort with changing speakers more frequently. During the practice activity this seemed quite effective. The majority of students were able to use the target language readily, rarely looking at the target language phrases for assistance by the end of the activity, and many groups seemed more comfortable than usual yielding the floor without excessively explaining an idea.

Some of this improvement did seem to carry on to the discussions. Many of the discussions were more connected than in previous classes and students seemed more able to concentrate on the content of their classmates' speaking turns. I also observed several examples of students challenging each other's ideas rather than leaving disagreements unexplored which led to more interesting discussions. However, I did note that it was still very common for students to offer additional information and repeat themselves without prompting. A comparison of two classes highlights this phenomenon. In the first, several students interacted quite well when working with a partner, but in a group discussion where their partners remained quiet and did little to show interest or understanding they would extend their own speaking turns. One student paused after she had finished an idea and when her groupmates did not respond she re-explained herself and offered more information. In the second class all students had a more positive and energetic demeanor and they were reacting and clearly showing understanding and interest when their classmates were speaking. It seemed that when a student was confident that their ideas were understood and that their classmates were interested in what they had to say they were more willing to frequently change speakers. Rather than each student speaking only once on a topic they bounced around the group with the majority of students taking multiple turns on a topic without a clear speaking order. These discussions were more interesting for me as an observer and they appeared more engaging for the students. Up to this point I had considered the issue of long, repetitive speaking turns to be primarily the responsibility of the speaker, but after this lesson I started to understand that listeners' contributions were significant as well.

The Second Test

In the ninth lesson the first half of the class was dedicated to skills review and the second half was the second Discussion Test of the semester. I was again able to listen to the entirety of each group's discussion to get a better sense of their progress. After noticing the benefit of communicating understanding and interest in the previous lesson, I chose to give each class the advice to react to their classmates to show that they understood what was being said. I also gave feedback on using the target language to take additional speaking turns and assist with content generation.

Some students showed a marked improvement from the first discussion test, giving less information each time they held the floor, asking questions, and reacting to classmates enthusiastically to show understanding. When compared to the first test, there were several discussions that felt more connected and students were willing to talk about their classmates' ideas and answer the questions together instead of each student answering independently. Other students continued to struggle. As I observed in previous lessons many groups chose a topic and each shared only one idea before moving on, regardless of what other students said. These discussions felt disconnected and students would often agree or disagree with something a classmate said and then follow up with an unrelated idea. As an observer it felt like they did not value each other's ideas. I also continued to see students give a clear, concise idea and then further explain it when their group did not react or respond. It was difficult to tell if the listeners actually didn't understand or if their lack of reaction just caused the speaker to fear they hadn't been understood.

One particular interaction stood out to me in relation to the students' perceptions of their own discussions. One group completed a relatively interesting discussion that was assisted by one student asking follow-up questions, challenging their classmates, and pressing for more information. When the test was completed this behavior was complimented by another group member and the student replied that he believed his behavior to be intrusive and expected his classmates to find it annoying. This surprised me at the time but this may have been due to students' preference for silence over having overlapping speaking turns; a preference also observed by Young (2015) among students in a similar setting.

More New Skills

By the tenth lesson I had adjusted my expectations with regards to speaking-turn length based on the actual performance of students. I felt that I had to acknowledge that, while there was clearly still room for improvement, my initial expectations were likely too ambitious. While introducing two new skills I continued to see improvement in most classes, but noted that natural turn-taking continued to be an issue. In some classes this manifested as a lack of reactions to communicate understanding or lack thereof, making it difficult for speakers to be confident in ending their turns. In these classes some students were able to work very well in pairs, but the entire class struggled when they worked in a larger group where multiple students were overly quiet as listeners. I also continued to observe students being unwilling to change the flow of their discussion based on the reaction of other students. In one class a student made a statement that clearly surprised the other students in his group; two students loudly and spontaneously reacted showing their surprise and one followed up by asking for an explanation. Unfortunately, after the group settled down the first student continued explaining his idea with no adjustments to account for his classmates' reactions and the rest of the group did not choose to pursue the idea any further. To me it seemed as if they thought it was inappropriate to question each other's ideas. I was able to give feedback to this class that they missed a great chance to ask questions and work together to have more interactive discussions, but this event did show me that they were still struggling with taking turns. There was even evidence of this struggle in classes that did have more interactive discussions. In one discussion a student interrupted his classmate to add something, causing the speaker to change her mind, but he followed up by apologizing for the interruption despite it seeming natural from the perspective of a native-speaker observer.

Classes were showing improvement in terms of asking questions in these discussions, but with the lack of confidence in turn-taking this often resembled a series of interviews, with one student holding the floor and answering a series of questions before changing to the next speaker. While this was an improvement from the beginning of the semester it still left later speakers with very little new content to add and didn't really help students to talk about their classmates' ideas. The variation between classes was also clear at this point, with some classes routinely showing interest in each other's ideas, others varying based on the topic, and others rarely showing interest.

In these two lessons I also made adjustments to how I structured my feedback. I participated in a peer-observation with another teacher who noted that the observed class, one of the five I was writing about in my journal, reacted positively to feedback I gave on their ideas. I began to split my feedback into two sections: one about the usage of target language and the second about the actual content and structure of the discussion. I focused on finding and pointing out interesting interactions from the students to include in my feedback. This seemed effective compared to primarily focusing on target language use in terms of helping students interact more naturally. Many groups did still struggle but several classes showed improvement between activities and some students showed more confidence in talking about their classmates' ideas.

The Second Review

In the 12th lesson the students again prepared for a Discussion Test and I used this lesson to emphasize having deeper discussions and continuing to discuss a topic beyond the surface level. The review was focused on the Discussion Skills to be tested but I also hoped to help students add depth to their discussions. I asked students to work with a partner to give their own answers to a simple question and then continue by considering different viewpoints, comparing other possible answers, and offering advantages and disadvantages to their own ideas. I focused my feedback on content and the interesting ways that they succeeded in using the target language to make their interactions more engaging.

I believe this approach was successful and my journal entries for these lessons were all positive. Every class did better than usual with regards to having discussions that felt connected and showing that they wanted to interact with their classmates' ideas. Several of my journal entries reference hearing students challenge their classmates' ideas and work together to better understand the nuance of each student's opinions. There were still some issues, with some students giving too much information, some students refusing to react as listeners, and some students not speaking more than once per topic, but overall they showed improvement.

I did however notice that some students seemed to struggle more with using the target language in this class and that some classes asked very few questions. This may have felt more natural with regards to turn-taking but it was negative in terms of meeting the objectives of the class. This also reminded me to focus on making the target language automatic to help address this, as suggested by Gatbonton and Segalowitz (1988). It is difficult to focus on content and target language at the same time, but both are required.

The Final Test

The 13th lesson was the final test and students were required to use more Discussion Skills here than in previous tests. The focus that students put on these skills definitely had a negative impact on the quality of their discussions, but given the need to use these skills that was understandable. While I did write in my journal that many discussions seemed to regress, with students rarely addressing ideas raised by a classmate and, in one case, a student in a four person discussion not getting a chance to hold the floor until more than eleven minutes had passed, I also noticed an obvious focus on ensuring that the students demonstrated mastery of the skills they were being tested on. One class had frequently forgotten to use the target language in previous classes and showed a much better mastery of the Discussion Skills in this test, but structured their discussion like a series of interviews to help ask a lot of questions in order to improve their test scores. In another class one student commented after the test that it was difficult to come up with good ideas when focusing on the target language.

Some students however showed significant improvement. There were a few discussions that really impressed me and it really felt like the students were more interested in their classmates' ideas than at the beginning of the semester. There was still some uncertainty with turn-taking, including one class where students were surprised when I told them it was okay if they did not all contribute every time they discussed a different point of view on a topic, but overall I saw improvement in the majority of students and I believe my feedback was helpful to them.

CONCLUSION

Students showed progress over the course of the nine weeks that I kept this journal and I gained a better understanding of what issues exist in these higher-level classes as well as some factors that contribute to these students' struggles. Farrell (2007) stated that teaching journals could help a teacher clarify their thinking and become more aware of how they teach, and I found this to be the

case. Going forward I believe I can structure my feedback more effectively to help students understand how to improve in turn-taking. This semester also made me very aware of the need to balance the ability to fluently use target language in novel contexts, as emphasized by Gatbonton and Segalowitz (1988), with the necessary pedagogical intervention on turn-taking, as suggested by Young (2018). The challenge will be to appropriately split the focus within a class so as to avoid allowing one to detract from the other.

I believe that explicitly limiting content in activities focused on target language could allow for students to gain fluency with these skills and following this with brainstorming activities to assist in content generation could help students become confident enough with the target language to allow for greater focus on turn-taking and signaling comprehension and interest. In the next semester I intend to address turn-taking from the first lesson and to emphasize to students that they will be expected to communicate their understanding to each other as listeners and to respond to ideas presented by their classmates. I also intend to explicitly focus on content generation that makes use of the target language during discussion preparation activities in order to reduce the cognitive load on students during discussions; ideally allowing them to focus more on appropriate turn-taking and interacting with their classmates' ideas.

Outside of the classroom I am interested in researching more into second language turn-taking and the role of the listener in signaling comprehension to a speaker to assist in speaker transitions. This is clearly an area where my students are struggling, but in the classes and discussions where students were more successful in their turn-taking the discussions were more engaging, more in-depth, and more fun for the students involved. I believe that continuing to focus on building interaction between students' ideas will improve their ability to discuss difficult topics and learn from each other.

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