

Scaffolding Techniques: The Use of Dialogue Patterns in Order to Optimize Fluency

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a critical analysis of my reflective teaching journal. The journal focuses on a selected class of eight freshmen students taking the English Discussion Class (EDC) program at Rikkyo University in Tokyo. The journal's primary focus is on dialogue patterns, a teaching technique used to encourage fluency. The Introduction will begin with comments on the EDC textbook and a program overview followed by reflections on my first semester teaching at Rikkyo University with relation to using a teaching journal in my second semester. The Discussion section documents classes (lessons 6-10) during the 14-week program. The successes and failures of using dialogue patterns are discussed with reflections and future considerations. The Conclusion will consolidate on the general use of scaffolding techniques in EFL classes and will question its effectiveness. Remarks on keeping a reflective teaching journal and its validity will finalize the paper.

INTRODUCTION

The EDC textbook is structured using the following format: After the introductory lesson, students learn and use Discussion Skills (two consecutive lessons), followed by a review lesson and then a Discussion Test. Discussion Skills consist of functional language which is intended to help facilitate group discussions. For example, students learn phrases which allow them to share opinions and manage turn-taking within their group. Communication Skills (Comprehension, Paraphrasing and Clarification) run continuously throughout the program (14 lessons), and give learners the tools necessary to negotiate meaning and repair communication breakdowns. Instructors assess the students' use of both the Discussion Skill and Communication Skills. A typical EDC class has eight students, who participate in two extended discussions in each lesson. Discussion 1 is generally 12 minutes while Discussion 2 is extended for 16 minutes. Lessons 4, 8, 12 and 14 are review lessons and act to consolidate previously learned Discussion Skills.

In Rikkyo University's English Discussion Class (EDC) program, all teachers work within a unified curriculum. Using the Communicative Approach, the program is strongly unified. I had previously taught in a different context which also employed the Communicative Approach. The EDC program puts a strong emphasis on the fluency aspect and as a result, after teaching the spring semester, the EDC program dramatically altered my beliefs (Hurling, 2012). Where I had previously put more emphasis on accuracy, my focus now has shifted to developing techniques and strategies where I could implement stronger fluency and enable classes to be more student-centered.

During my first semester I taught classes of mixed abilities. There are four levels in the EDC, with Level 1 being the highest and Level 4 the lowest. In my first semester I taught 13 classes a week and the majority of the classes were Level 2 (eight classes). The students in those classes produced a strong degree of fluency and were able to participate in discussions of 16 minutes or more. In that respect, my role as a facilitator for high level speakers was less demanding. However, in classes where discussion breakdowns were prevalent and behavior could border on being disruptive, my role in the class changed dramatically. Alternative strategies in class management approach were needed in order to meet the EDC ethos and course objectives appropriately. I recall two challenging classes in the spring semester; one class where personality

clashes were consistently an issue and the other class where motivation was low and disengagement was a threat which prevented discussions from being meaningful. Hesitation and misunderstandings during discussions meant my intervention was generally needed to repair broken or sluggish group discussions.

During the semester, taking notes allowed me to document student behavior and characteristics as well as my own teaching practices. The notes assisted my planning and preparation considerably. Commonly known as a reflective teaching journal, it allowed me to foresee difficulties and prevent problems (Farrell, 2007).

For my second semester I chose to journal a low-level class. From early observations, it was clear that this was a challenging class in which I had to intervene at points during group discussions in order to repair breakdowns. Some characteristics of the students which had been documented early in the semester included characteristics such as short speaking turns, limited justification for their opinions, low participation in group discussions, unwillingness to start discussions and frequently waiting to be asked questions as opposed to asking questions. It was these characteristics that led me to realize the importance of scaffolding in developing fluency in low-level learners. Therefore, the focus of my teaching journal was to analyze strategies used to optimize fluency. Primarily, this revolved around the use and effectiveness of context-adapted dialogue patterns.

DISCUSSION

Taking the observations I made into account prior to commencing my teaching journal, in order to help students develop their fluency with the target language, I prepared a simple pattern dialogue in Lesson 6. I consider the semi-controlled practice of the target language to be the most important stage of the lesson. It is key that my example(s) of the dialogue flows without confusion in order for the Discussion Skill acquisition to be successful by the Discussion 2 stage of the lesson. After the Presentation stage of the lesson, before beginning semi-controlled practice, the following dialogue pattern was modeled with selected confident students:

A: Ask the Question + Ask for Different Viewpoint + Ask for Opinion

B: Give Opinion + Give different Viewpoint + Check Comprehension + Ask others to Connect

A: Agree + Connect to Others' ideas+ Give another Reason OR Disagree + Give Opinion + Give reason

The model dialogue pattern simply demonstrates how and when to use the target phrases. The student was not required to generate extended answers. The modeled examples were performed carefully. For instance, as the modeling was in progress, I made encouraging comments and pointed to phrases used from the textbook each time the student used the phrases. The whole modeling process may seem a little long-winded, however I had to consider that there were three or four students in this particular class that struggled with retaining Discussion Skill phrases and formulating their ideas logically.

The students performed the semi-controlled practice activity using Stations. For the Stations activity, four students remain at a particular station in the classroom while the other four students rotate around the different stations. With strategy planning in mind, I placed the stronger and more capable students at the stations while the weaker students rotated. Therefore, the weaker students would move around the room. That way, the weaker students could feel less anxiety and could be encouraged by their stronger partner. The activity went smoothly. However, as anticipated, there was quite a lot of hesitancy and searching for the correct phrase to use from the weaker students. The stronger students supported with verbal hints. For example, I noted the following behavior:

B: Looks confused, hesitates and utters something in Japanese

A: Responds by being supportive and utters discussion skill phrase as a cue

B: Appears relieved, understands and repeats the phrase

Another observation surprised me. In order to simplify the activity, the model dialogues used in the semi-controlled practice did not include any of the previously-learned Discussion Skills phrases, such as Asking for Reasons phrases ('Can you tell me why?'/ 'Why do you think so?'). However, some students were asking for reasons after their partner had stated their opinion. This supports the notion that, when structured dialogues have been used repetitiously, automatic speech produces fixed expressions and phrases with a fair degree of coherence (Gatbonton & Segalowitz, 1988).

In the next lesson the Discussion Skill involved students being able to ask for (listener side) and give (speaker side) sources of information, such as books or newspapers. For semi-controlled practice, a very simple dialogue pattern was used. I thought the use of the Discussion Skill would not be too challenging. However, to my surprise, many students found it challenging to back up their opinions by giving sources of information as evidence. As a result, there was much hesitation, or I often heard the brief and inconclusive utterance, "*From my experience*". During feedback for points to work on, I wrote the phrase, 'When I was...'. It was encouraging to get some ideas. For example, a confident student uttered, "*When I was an elementary school student, I watched a TV show on NHK.*" I praised the idea and wrote it on the whiteboard. I then indicated it was important for the students to try to include the *How?*, *Where?*, and *When?* when giving the source of the information.

Ellis (2009) discusses strategic planning in order to promote oral production. The dialogue patterns devised for Discussions 1 and 2 comprised of Discussion Skills previously learned in Lessons 2 and 3 as well as the new Discussion Skill. I had every confidence that the students would be able to complete the task successfully. As a result, with consistent repetition, the Discussion Preparation ensured a stronger command of fluency and complexity (i.e. a greater willingness to take risks) and fewer pauses and less hesitations. I felt that the feedback given after the semi-controlled practice was key to the success of the activity. It made a big impression during the discussions, especially in terms of lexical richness and elaboration. (Bygate, 1996).

In the following lesson the students reviewed all the discussion skills previously learned, in anticipation of the following week's Discussion Test, in which students would be expected to discuss a set of provided questions in small groups. While planning, it was important to keep an eye on the test questions. Discussions 1 and 2 would be a dress rehearsal for Questions 1 and 2 in the Discussion Test. So, to prevent any unnatural dialogue and cognitive overload, I devised three dialogues. Each dialogue contained at least two Discussion Skills combined with Communication Skills. During Practice 2, I was encouraged by how the students were using the dialogues. For instance, when beginning the activity, the non-risk takers followed the dialogues accordingly. However, the risk takers included additional Discussion Skill questions such as 'How do you know about that?' During the activity I praised students who were using 'Asking about Information' questions and, as a result, it created a knock-on effect as the non-risk takers followed by example.

As I was now starting the second half of the EDC program, I noticed quite significant changes. The reflections and entries in my journal were more positive. For instance, the class were now bonding much better than before especially in terms of being supportive to one another. When previously I had asked questions to the class, the students were generally inhibited to speak out in front of their peers, but now they were less inhibited. As a result, for some, taking a risk seemed a more audacious option. On this point, it is worth mentioning that successful learning can only happen if certain affective conditions, such as positive attitudes, self-confidence or low anxiety

exist in the classroom. When these conditions are present, input can pass through the affective filter and be used by the learner (Krashen, 1985).

For the next class, the students used a devised dialogue for Discussion 2 which incorporated all the Discussion Skills previously learned. As usual, I modeled only the start of dialogue. However, this time I specifically chose a weaker student who had not done a modeled example with me in front of the class. The student gave a flawless example and was praised by myself immediately after. I commented, “*Good job! You smoothly asked me the question followed by asking a viewpoint. Fantastic!*” The students then discussed the activity first in pairs while I unobtrusively monitored by walking around the classroom. Then, the students discussed in groups. Rather than place strong with weak students, I did exactly the opposite. I had every faith that the weaker students would still be productive without the stronger students who usually orchestrated and directed the discussions. In fact, I was very encouraged as there seemed to be little hesitancy and a greater use of language activated from the weaker group. At this point, I made a decision that strategically planning pairs and groups would not be needed in future lessons.

When planning Lesson 10, it was assumed that the new Discussion Skill phrases would be familiar to the students and therefore ‘Deep-end’ (students use the target phrases in a brief activity without pre-teaching) would be the most appropriate way to present the phrases. Fortunately, my assumption was correct. The class was able to use the phrases competently. A dialogue pattern for the semi-controlled practice was devised and previously learned Discussion Skill phrases were also incorporated. The considerations I contemplated when planning the dialogues were which phrases to incorporate. This made me reflect on my first semester teaching at EDC. After the midpoint of the program, by Lesson 8, I noticed that earlier Discussion Skills phrases were rarely used in discussions. As I had only focused on the present Discussion Skill, by doing so, the previously learned phrases were used sparsely unless the phrase had significant importance to the discussion. With these thoughts considered, for this semester, I planned to incorporate previously learned skills with the new discussion skill. During the semi-controlled practice activity the students were able to follow the dialogue pattern without any difficulty and it was encouraging to see stronger eye contact and less hesitation especially during the early stages of the lesson. At that point, I felt confident that I could further challenge the students. Before Discussion 1 I wrote the Discussion Skill phrase, ‘How do you know about that?’ on the whiteboard. I asked the class to try to incorporate the question (only once per student) during the discussion. During Discussion 1 the more vocal students in the group complied with my instruction and as a result, the weaker students copied by example. In feedback I praised their achievement and erased the question from the whiteboard. Before Discussion 2 I made a point not to encourage them to ask the same question. However, I was encouraged to hear most of the class using more Asking about/Giving Information phrases.

CONCLUSION

On reflection, I believe the dialogue patterns used in the chosen class to document encourage successful language acquisition. As a result, by employing a variety of scaffolding techniques, reduced the burden of cognitive overload, stress and anxiety for the students. Furthermore, I noticed a steady progression especially in terms of fluency and discussions being more meaningful. This characteristic became observable in other classes. By Lesson 10, I noted a prevalence of structured exchanges, though more noticeable with low-level classes. The use of dialogue patterns was by far more beneficial for weaker classes, in the Practice stage of the lesson. This has relevance to Ellis’s (2019) survey results as he states that rehearsing is advantageous to the learner in order to succeed with a fair degree of success in the same task at a later stage of the lesson.

Another area where I felt the use of dialogue patterns impacted the classes was when giving

actionable feedback. Before I would try to explicitly push the usage of the Discussion Skills (i.e. holding up the textbook and pointing to the list of phrases in front of the class), which would often lead to the students trying to cram in as many phrases as possible and by doing so, generate unnatural discussions. The dialogue patterns if followed correctly, provided the initial clear focus implicitly. It is true to say, my actions in my second semester were a reaction to my first semester.

The entries in my journal have predominately commented on the effectiveness of dialogue patterns in a low-level class. However, there is also the argument that forcing students to follow a set of organized forms and structures is a contrived exchange and possibly contrary to how the student would discuss the same topic in their L1. The focus of my journal has made me consider that discourse authenticity will always be questionable in an EFL class when the task involves the student applying a set of target phrases with their ideas. However, I do not feel discouraged by this fact as my objective was to facilitate the use of Discussions Skills encouragingly and implicitly. The ethos of the EDC program encourages target phrases to be used in a discussion in a meaningful way. The more repetitious and guided exchanges (in the form of patterns) from the beginning of the program build a framework for the students to communicate meaningfully around. My approach with using scaffolding techniques this semester changed radically, especially with the low-level class that was documented. Applying dialogues from Lesson 2 kept a focus, though the discussions often sounded inauthentic and awkward. However, by following a straight, narrow and repetitious approach, by Lesson 5 (just over a one third of the program), the students were able to successfully use phrases by memory, deviate from the guided dialogues, take risks and as a result, a more authentic-sounding discussion evolved.

I found the reflective journal to be an effective, key instrument throughout the semester. Being able to note success, failures and comment on student behavior and attitude, assisted me when either strategically planning or implementing techniques in classes. In order to make effective planning and preparation, I would definitely encourage, especially for new teachers, the use of a reflective journal.

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