

Overcoming Student Reticence in a Discussion Class

Context

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses three approaches to minimizing reticence among students on an English discussion course at a Japanese university. These approaches were explored through maintaining a teaching journal, in which observations and reflections were made on a lower-intermediate class, documenting the students' behavioral responses both prior to, and post-intervention. Through this process, the author was able to observe the effectiveness of implementing a selection of methods, based on the notion that reticence can be overcome by directly addressing *language anxiety* in learners (Cutrone, 2009), as well as employing strategies to lower the affective filter.

INTRODUCTION

The English Discussion Class (EDC) at Rikkyo University is a mandatory program for all first-year undergraduate students, consisting of discussion-based classes delivered weekly, over two 14-week semesters. The program's curriculum is strongly unified and lessons throughout the course largely maintain a near-identical procedural and methodological communicative language teaching (CLT) approach, whatever the topical or language learning objectives may be. Teaching groups are divided up according to the students' faculty of major study, and designated one of four ability levels, based on the student's TOEIC test performance: Level I (TOEIC score band 680 or above) to Level IV (TOEIC score band below 280). A level-specific textbook is also issued to all students, chronologically covering all target language and discussion topics for the semester. All scheduled classes last for 100 minutes and are typically made up of between seven to nine students, which is intended to facilitate greater student-centered learning and student-to-student interaction time. The intimate group learning environment is an essential element of the course, as one of its primary aims is to develop fluency through maximizing opportunities for student interaction, and enable students to better participate in the exchange of views by performing various oral functions commonly utilized in discussions (Hurling, 2012). These functions are introduced in the EDC curriculum as *Discussion Skills* (e.g., giving and asking for opinions, reasons, and examples) and *Communication Skills* (e.g., appropriately reacting to others' ideas and checking understanding). In a typical lesson, students are presented with new *Discussion Skills* phrases (e.g., "In my opinion,...") alongside a predefined topic on a contemporary issue, through which they practice and apply the new language. This is enacted through the EDC lesson plan, which follows a set menu of practical and interactive stages, i.e., the *Fluency* stage; the *Function Presentation* stage; the *Practice* stage; *Discussion 1*; and *Discussion 2* (Hurling, 2012). In addition, students are more formally assessed on their ability to apply the discussion skills at regular intervals throughout the semester, by way of a discussion test. These are conducted in the fifth, ninth, and thirteenth week, and account for 30% of a student's total grade (Hurling, 2012). Whilst similar in form to that of a regular lesson, discussion test lessons stipulate that instructors are to assess one discussion group at a time, allowing for a more in-depth assessment of an individual student's performance.

In terms of teaching approach and learning outcomes, the EDC course is prescribed through a principled, and clearly defined framework, hence the task of identifying a particular aspect of student behavior as the subject of the reflective journal was simply a matter of making informal observations and relative comparisons of student behavioral patterns among the roster of

classes being taught. As most EDC instructors are required to repeat teaching a single lesson to up to 14 times, any anomalies and/or derivations in student behavioral responses are usually quite apparent. The class selected through this process was a Level III group, initially consisting of eight students (reducing to seven students from week nine onwards) with combined TOEIC listening and reading scores ranging from 310 to 325. The observation and reflection period for this teaching journal took place from week 5 to week 13 of the second semester of the course.

The reflective journal was maintained in the form of *retrospective field notes* (Murphy, 2014) written shortly after the lesson had finished, and documented *reflections on*, and *for action* (Murphy, 2014) through observations of student behavior, as well as the effectiveness of the intervention strategies employed. This particular group was chosen as the subject of observation as the students were displaying an unusually high degree of reticence, or unwillingness to speak, specifically at the opening *Fluency* stage, and during the main *Discussion* stages of the lesson. As the EDC places great emphasis on student output, this aspect of student behavior was of particular concern. The lack of production was almost certainly preventing them from taking full advantage of the opportunities that each and every EDC lesson provides for fluency building, through interaction with others, as well as the development of discussion skills to enable the meaningful exchange of ideas.

Student reticence in class is a well-documented phenomenon, and is something that most EFL instructors in Japan, especially at the university level, have experienced at some point during their career (Anderson, 1993; Doyon, 2000; Marchand 2006). The study into the possible causes of reticence has brought the issue of *language anxiety* to the attention of researchers and the effect it has on Japanese EFL learners when asked to perform oral tasks (Cutrone, 2009). Furthermore, according to Horwitz et al. (1986) foreign language anxiety can be attributed to three performance anxieties: *communication apprehension* (i.e., the fear of the real, or anticipated act of speaking), *social evaluation* (i.e., the worry over how one's actions may be perceived by others in a classroom setting), and *test anxiety* (i.e., the fear of failure, especially when being summatively assessed, e.g., for an exam). One example of the effects of performance anxiety is that anxious learners have been observed to be less likely to take risks when communicating in L2 (Cutrone, 2009; Ely, 1986). These factors could be equally applicable to students of the EDC. Indeed, in the context of an EDC lesson risk taking as an interlocutor is an essential quality to develop, as it could be considered the ability to take the initiative and volunteer to put forward an idea (or respond to one) which naturally leads to richer discussions (Hurling, 2012). The observation class for this journal certainly fit this description, with the majority of students displaying a clear aversion to risk taking, as no-one would volunteer to speak at the start of most oral communication activities, except in the most scaffolded of tasks. It should be noted, however, this does not mean that the students failed to meet the main learning objectives. Indeed, in a typical lesson, most students would at least demonstrate the minimum required use of the target language during discussions. However, when compared to other Level III classes, their low engagement and participation levels at the start of the larger oral communication tasks was leading to a greater number of missed opportunities (as well as lost lesson time) for fluency practice, and the chance to genuinely engage in the role of an interlocutor.

DISCUSSION

As the teaching journal exercise was primarily observational in scope and remit, documentation of instances of student reticence focused only on lesson stages upon which student reticence impacted the most: the *Fluency*, *Discussion 1*, and *Discussion 2* stages. Also, any subsequent

interventions made in class were intended to be subtle in nature; low key strategies that could be incorporated with existing lesson procedures, and that did not conflict with EDC principles.

From observations conducted in week five and six (and in the weeks prior), students were supremely silent from the point at which they entered the classroom and sat at their desks, waiting for the lesson to begin. After completing the customary homework quiz, the *Fluency* stage (Hurling, 2012) is the first opportunity in every lesson for students to ‘warm up’ in English by orally communicating with a partner in a speaker - listener balanced interaction, and in response to several topic-focused questions set by the teacher. An additional time-pressure element is also included where students are to speak continuously to their partner in a series of three time-limited rounds, starting with three minutes, followed by subsequent rounds lasting two minutes, and then one minute. This is an excellent vehicle for building fluency, and students typically react with enthusiasm, as the challenge is to convey the same amount of information to a different partner within the diminishing time frame. However, the response from the observation class would be much more subdued. For the first three-minute round the majority of students would stand opposite their partner, looking to the floor with an embarrassed smile for at least 30-40 seconds, before any words began to trickle from their mouths. Spoken fluency for the first round is not expected to be anywhere near perfect, and whilst the length of silent pauses at the start of each round would decrease as the activity progressed, the speed at which information was conveyed would not increase. More noticeably, the volume of the students’ utterances would always be low, so low in fact that students in the listener role would have to lean into their partners at uncomfortably close distance in order to hear what they were saying. The cause of these issues could be linked to any one of the three kinds of performance anxiety- the students may have been reluctant to be the ‘first one’ to be heard to speak, or felt the need to speak at such a low volume, for fear of exposing any perceived inadequacies in their English proficiency.

The *Discussion* stages are the culminating stages of an EDC lesson, where students are given the opportunity to freely apply the newly acquired *Discussion Skill* in extended discussions of between 12 and 16 minutes, in small groups of three or four (Hurling, 2012). The *Discussion* stages of the class were somewhat less afflicted by the slow, reticent starts experienced during the *Fluency* stage, as it was later in the lesson after students had sufficiently warmed up and had become more familiar with the topic. However, reticence would still manifest itself during discussions as some participants would remain noticeably silent for lengthy periods, making only the shortest of contributions necessary to meet the minimum target language requirements. At times it seemed as though they wanted to say more, pausing to search for the appropriate words, but then gave up. Even if some students did make a longer contribution, the issue of vocal inaudibility would resurface, making it almost impossible for the teacher to make an adequate assessment of what, or if any, target language was being used.

It’s a *Whatchamacallit*?

Whilst the causes of the lingering reticence and associated symptoms can again be attributed to any one of the three types of performance anxiety, other cognitive and affective dimensions needed to be explored, especially when considering strategies to combat the problem. It is here that the EDC’s founding principles, specifically the guidelines defining the *Cognitive* and *Affective Objectives* of the course, could point toward a solution. One of the *Cognitive Objectives* state that students should be able to “...appropriately appeal to others for help (e.g., ‘How do you say X in English?’)”, and one *Affective Objective* hopes that, “Students will ...confidently appeal for help when a point is difficult to express in English” (Hurling, 2012, p.1-4).

Providing the students with an appropriate tool that could assist them in making appeals for help with English vocabulary more confidently would be a matter of coincidence, as another EDC instructor had just completed a paper showcasing a tool for this exact purpose. The *Whatchamacallit?* (White, 2020) is a tool "... to encourage autodidactic study of vocabulary in a communicative way (see Appendix A). The tool can be used [by students] ... at any point during a lesson to elicit unknown or forgotten words" (White, 2020, p.2). After receiving permission from the author, the *Whatchamacallit?* was introduced to the observation class at the start of Lesson 7. The initial reception to the tool was positive. Many students volunteered answers to simple eliciting question patterns taken from the *Whatchamacallit?*'s library, such as "What's another word for delicious?" and "What's the word for something that is used to keep food fresh?" as well demonstrating that they themselves could use tool to elicit English words from one another, using phrases like, "How do you say X in English?" The tool was then glued into the back of textbooks for easy referral, as recommended by the author. Observations were subsequently made of the students' use of the tool during the *Fluency*, and *Discussion* stages of the lesson. In the *Fluency*, there was no noticeable use of the question phrases, despite having introduced them only a few minutes beforehand. However, after reminding students of its existence just prior to the start of *Discussion 1*, uptake was much better, with at least two students in each group requesting the help of others for translation of Japanese words. This appeared to have the positive effect of not only increasing students' confidence in contributing more lengthy and complex ideas, but also in reducing the considerable gaps of reticent silence that some students would endure, due to a lack of confidence and vocabulary. Overall, implementation of the *Whatchamacallit?* was a partial success, with at least 90 percent of students making use of the phrases at least once at some point during the semester, and about 30 percent genuinely taking 'ownership' of the phrases, using them regularly at the *Discussion* stage, and without the need of reminders from the teacher.

Task Planning

Continuing with the approach of overcoming reticence through the provision of strategies to enable students to make a greater contribution in discussions, the concept of *preparation* was considered. A key tenet of the EDC philosophy is one of *pre-task planning*, which is derived from studies on *Task Planning* by Ellis (2005, 2009). For example, prior to starting the main *Discussion* stages, the lesson plan allocates time for students to prepare and generate ideas for discussion by way of multiple choice/classification exercises, followed by communicative pair work exchanges to orally rehearse their opinions (Center for English Discussion Class, 2019; Hurling, 2012). This is a form of pre-task planning referred to as *rehearsal* (Ellis 2005, 2009), and is effective for facilitating content generation and greater fluency. However, it only proved to have a minimal effect on students in the observation class with a disposition for reticence, as it did not fully negate the pressure of having to orally perform in front of a group of peers (causing the usual performance anxieties to resurface). In an attempt to address this issue, the second type of task planning was considered, which is *strategic planning* (Ellis 2005, 2009). A method already successfully used in the periodic discussion test lessons, strategic planning is where discussion groups are afforded approximately 1minute planning time immediately before the discussion test. It is here that they can negotiate the various aspects of the discussion that is about to take place such as what questions they will answer, the specific topics they may cover, and in what order they will take turns speaking—all crucially conducted in the students' L1. Therefore, it was after employing this method in regular classes, just prior to discussions, that observations revealed a profound change taking place among the quieter students, with a marked increase in contributions during

discussions from all participants. There were fewer periods of complete silence, less hesitation when students joined the discussion, and the content of the utterances were of higher quality.

Working in Concert

A more novel approach of employing background music (BGM) to counteracting student reticence was considered, however, doubt was initially cast on whether or not such a strategy may conflict with the EDC's principles and values. The use of music in lessons is not referenced in any of the course's curriculum or teaching guidance literature, however, preliminary inquiries into EDC instructor-led research revealed a prior study that sets a precedent for using BGM in the EDC (Gravillis, 2017). Moreover, the study of using BGM in educational contexts is not a new phenomenon, and a growing body of literature to support its use in EFL classes has existed for some time (Bartle, 1962; Cunningham, 2014; Engh, 2013; Jolly, 1975; Kang & Williamson, 2014; Krashen, 1982; Richards, 1969). When considering music for classroom use, background music (as opposed to foreground music) can be defined as "...instrumental music with non-specific words and performers to render the atmosphere" (Fang, 2015, p.1), and is not directly related to the teaching itself, but is present as a subliminal tool, and concerns the affective filter (Cunningham, 2014; Krashen, 1982). It could be supposed that BGM may be effective in lowering the students' affective filter, which may help to alleviate their performance anxiety. In addition, the cognitive benefits of BGM have also been reported, especially when learners have been exposed to the music of W.A. Mozart (Schellenberg, 2012). Therefore, the music employed for use in the observation class would be a selection of instrumental music by W.A. Mozart, arranged in a digital playlist and played via a classroom laptop.

Observations of the class from the seventh lesson initially revealed a neutral response to the BGM upon first deployment. The music was played at a very low volume as students were individually reading the questions for the opening *Fluency* activity. After students had formed pairs, the three-minute timer began; however, there was no discernible difference in the lengthy silence that usually pervades this stage. It was anticipated that the presence of the BGM might stimulate an earlier start to exchanges, but the majority of students would remain hesitant for at least thirty seconds, and then only speak in the quietest of voices. One noticeable difference was that it was even harder than usual to hear the quieter students speak as the BGM, as low as the volume was set, was drowning them out. On the realization of this, and whilst somewhat counter-intuitive, an experiment was conducted for the next round, whereby the volume of the music was *turned up* to a slightly more intrusive level. Surprisingly, all the students - quieter ones included - instinctively responded by raising their own voices to be heard over the music, and at the same time, the listener students reciprocated this effort by responding with more eye contact and reaction phrases. More remarkably, employing the music in this way significantly eliminated the long reticent pauses as students appeared to be less self-conscious about starting to speak under the 'cover' of the BGM. In the weeks that followed, BGM was made a regular, if subtle, addition to *Fluency* and *Discussion* stages which worked towards the goal of lowering the students' affective filter, enabling them to appear relaxed, and enjoy the act of communicating in English.

CONCLUSION

This reflective paper documented observations of instances of student reticence and the implementation of strategies to address it.

All approaches were effective to some extent, but for different reasons. Firstly, the *Whatchamacallit?* tool employed a limited number of phrases which were easy to assimilate and,

more importantly, were accepted by students as a legitimate, teacher and peer-sanctioned channel through which they could request the help of others, without appearing overly needy, or inept. Secondly, applying a *task planning* approach proved successful because it gave students the opportunity to clarify, and negotiate their position and contribution with peers prior to beginning a discussion, and all within the comfort and security of their L1, leading to greater productivity and a significant reduction in student reticence. Finally, the strategy of employing BGM as a subliminal tool at certain stages of the lesson, whilst not entirely founded on SLA theory, also proved effective at lowering students' affective filters, which ultimately led to greater student oral output.

Overall, the process of documenting observations in a teaching journal has proven to be invaluable in terms of raising an EDC's instructor's awareness of how they can better affect the learning experience and outcomes for their students, by drawing on a range of resources both intra-curricular, and extra-curricular. Looking forward, this experience forms part of a wider professional development regime the instructor will embark on to become a more reflective and informed practitioner.

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APPENDIX A – Handout for Whatchamacallit? (White, 2020)

| | |
|--------------------------------|------------|
| ...Whatchamacallit? | Name _____ |
| Words you see or hear | |
| What does _____ mean? | |
| Words you want to know | |
| What's a word for... | |
| ...a person who _____? | |
| ...a (thing) that _____? | |
| ...a place where _____? | |
| ...a situation when _____? | |
| Increasing vocabulary | |
| What's another word for _____? | |
| What's the opposite of _____? | |
| Spelling | |
| Do you know how to spell it? | |
| Can you spell it please? | |
| How do you spell it? | |
| Pronunciation | |
| How do you pronounce it? | |