

Teamwork in an English Discussion Class

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at instances of teamwork in five different classes within the English Discussion Class at Rikkyo University in Tokyo, Japan. Using notes from a field journal that was kept over a nine week period in the fall semester, forms of teamwork that were observed are discussed. Possible factors contributing to higher and lower instances of teamwork are explored. Finally, this paper highlights efforts made by an instructor to foster teamwork among students and attempts to draw some general conclusions from the observations made and overall experience of the journaling process.

INTRODUCTION

Rikkyo University has a mandatory English Discussion Class (EDC) for all first year students. The class runs for fourteen lessons for each of two semesters. During the fall semester, beginning in week five and ending in week thirteen, I kept a journal on classroom behavior. Farrell (2007) views journals as a good way for teachers to reflect on what happens in the classroom, and then use these reflections as a way to improve one's teaching methodology.

For the purpose of my journal, I chose to focus on *teamwork* among students. Forsyth (2010) says that teamwork is the means by which members of a team pool their knowledge, skills, abilities, and so on to achieve an outcome. Borrowing from this idea, I chose to define teamwork as unsolicited peer-to-peer assistance towards a goal easier. To make writing down any post-lesson reflections on the teamwork I observed, I elected to keep the journal for the last class I had each day Monday through Friday. I hoped that this would allow me to think back on the lesson and any instances of teamwork I observed uninterrupted by the necessity of having to prepare for another class, but also provide a good mix of classes on which to take notes. As Burns (2003) suggests, it is important to record notes quickly after events occur to ensure accuracy of recollection. I took notes on specific instances of teamwork I witnessed during each lesson, noting how assistance was offered and during which part of the lesson it was given: fluency, presentation, practice, discussion preparation, or discussion.

Over the course of an EDC lesson, there are many opportunities for pair and group work in which students must negotiate meaning with each other in English. As part of the class, students are taught phrases to use to ask, and respond to, each other when meaning breaks down and something is not understood. One student will use these expressions to request an explanation, clarification, or the English meaning of a Japanese word, and usually someone they are working with will oblige by offering an explanation, making a point clearer, or translating a word into English.

Since the focus of the journal I kept was on unsolicited peer-to-peer assistance, such instances of students asking for help were not considered. I was more interested in students offering to help of their own accord during pair or group work when they saw that a classmate was struggling or did not understand something. It is my belief that teamwork and cooperation are important in any classroom setting. By working together, students can accomplish tasks that would otherwise be difficult on their own. Within the context of the EDC, peer-to-peer assistance is beneficial to weaker students within a single class, as their more fluent or knowledgeable peers can offer guidance.

DISCUSSION

The five classes I observed were each distinct, though there was often inter-class overlap in how members worked together to achieve common goals. Before I began keeping my journal, I knew that the level of teamwork shown by each class was not equal, though I taught each class in the same way. Over the nine weeks I observed my last period class of each weekday, I tried to foster greater inter-student dependence in an effort to improve teamwork, particularly in the classes where I felt it was lacking the most. Observations on teamwork in each of these five classes is summarized in the corresponding sections below.

Class A

Class A was an EDC Level-IV class that had displayed very solid teamwork even before I began keeping the journal from week five, and they continued to work well together and help each other throughout the remainder of the fall semester. Some students had been in the same EDC class in the spring semester, and most seemed to know each other at least a little from the very first class. They quickly got along well with one another, and in particular, the students with an apparent greater degree of English ability were always willing to assist the two students with considerably lower ability. All students understood well what was expected of them in class, and stronger students would assist weaker ones in playing the appropriate roles in discussions. For example, the very first class in which I observed them was a discussion test class, and students had previously learned to connect their ideas to those of the speaker before them, which they understood would be important to do during the test. This skill involves repeating the previous speaker's main point, which for lower level students can be difficult to do since they might not have been able to process what the main point was. Weaker students would begin by saying something like "I agree with you. As you said...", but then be unable to complete the function. To assist their classmates in performing this function, stronger students would repeat their main point for the speaker without any prompting.

Other common forms of teamwork used by this class were pointing to correct expressions to use in response to questions during practices, and whispering complete or partial expressions to use during discussions. For example, once during a discussion, a stronger student said "Is there anything...?" in a hushed tone to prompt a classmate to ask "Is there anything to add?" when they seemed to be struggling to recall how to say that expression. Translations from English to Japanese during preparation activities were also common, with the stronger students frequently helping their classmates with difficult vocabulary as soon as they saw them struggling to understand something. Another common form of unsolicited assistance in this class was recasting, or saying a classmate's expression in clearer English. Philp, Adams, and Iwashita (2014) said that recasts are typically given when the meaning of an utterance is clear, but the form used is non-targetlike. In one lesson, when talking about hobbies, one student said "Have low hobby...? Small hobby...?" and then another student recast this with "Few hobbies." to the delight of the initial speaker who used this expression themselves to complete their idea. Finally, stronger students in this class would often help their classmates with things like pronouncing difficult words when asked to read questions out loud, understanding the meaning of questions and how to correctly do class activities, and sometimes strategy and ideas for discussions.

Class B

This class was an EDC Level II class (the second highest among four proficiency ranges), and all members displayed similar levels of fairly strong English proficiency. However, students would often come to class tired and ill prepared, and there were frequent absences. The first time I took notes on this class for my journal was during a discussion test lesson, and the students displayed

fairly good teamwork, with some students taking on the roles of group leaders to ensure that the discussions went well. Group members offered help to one another with regards to what expressions to use during practice and translated my advice for each other after their practice. They also prompted each other on what expressions to use during the discussion test by whispering the first few words of expressions as hints when a classmate could not remember how to begin or what to say next. And since it was a discussion test, one student encouraged his group members to speak more quickly to ensure everyone could speak equally. However, after this lesson, the class frequently displayed very poor teamwork in regular lessons until the next discussion test. The leaders who had been so active in the discussion test were less engaged in regular lessons. Some students deliberately tried to steer discussions off topic by asking unrelated questions, or simply chatting in Japanese. They also would interrupt each other when one person was talking and seem to disengage from discussions. Other students would show good teamwork and help each other with ideas or understanding questions.

Since I wanted to promote teamwork among all my classes, but especially this class, I thought of ways to encourage inter-student dependence in earlier parts of the lesson as a way of encouraging students to work together. I began asking students to think of how and why the expressions they learned were important together with their group, or calling on specific students to explain things to others. Over time, most students in the class became more engaged in discussions, and as a result, assisted each other more with what to say next during discussions, such as offering hints or helping someone else summarize when that person was struggling. During later discussion test lessons, students in this class would again show stronger teamwork than in a regular lesson by doing things like offering speaking turns to someone who had not had many chances to speak and whispering expressions or partial expressions to a classmate who could not remember how to respond.

Class C

This class was an EDC Level III class that mostly got along well and in which most members came to class prepared. Some members would occasionally give very long and difficult answers to discussion questions, but most students in the class worked together to ensure that everyone had equal opportunities to participate. They frequently helped one another by pointing to the expressions a classmate should respond with during practices, or recasting when a student used an incorrect expression. For example, once a student asked “Is there anything to add?”, which is an expression they learn to close topics after everyone has shared their thinking. However, in this instance, it was used before everyone had had a chance to speak, so another student in their group whispered the more appropriate expression “What do you think of my idea?” to allow someone else to join the discussion by agreeing or disagreeing with the previous speaker. Sometimes teamwork was lacking, though. In particular, I tried to encourage two students to work together to do summaries of topics, but usually only one student in this class would summarize a topic.

Another common form of teamwork seen in this class was vocabulary help, such as one student offering up the word “salary” during a speaking fluency activity when their partner stopped mid-sentence and appeared to struggle to recall the correct word. Students in this class also would repeat their ideas for their classmates when they struggled with connecting ideas, just as the students in Class A had done, and also explained the meaning of questions or how to do activities to each other.

Class D

This class was an EDC Level II class comprised of very highly motivated students that got along well with each other from the beginning. Every member had a good deal of English proficiency,

though some were stronger than their peers, and the class as a whole was prepared for each lesson, very active, and always participated well in all class activities. During discussions, some members would take on leadership roles and try to not only ensure their peers had equal chances to speak, but also reminded them of what expressions to use when someone had trouble responding smoothly. They also worked together to understand how to do activities, and also assisted one another with very difficult vocabulary when it became apparent that the person speaking could not recall a word that someone else knew. Unlike students from Class C, this class's students worked together to summarize topics, with at least two students almost always working together to summarize the group's opinions and thoughts on a topic. Very often, others offered reminders of what was said to facilitate summarizing as well. The students in this class also worked together to plan very carefully how to answer discussion questions, especially before a discussion test. They also reminded each other to pause during discussions, or wait before switching speaking turns, to ensure that questions could be asked appropriately. As an apparent result, all students were very engaged in class discussions, and discussions were very balanced throughout the semester with no students dominating too much, speaking out of turn, or not participating enough.

Like was seen in other classes, the students of this class would whisper partial expressions to classmates who could not remember what to say, but they also reminded each other to ask questions. For example, once a student asked "Is there anything to add?" and someone else said "No", but then another student reminded the group that they should ask about the first person's source of information, so the second student asked "Where did you learn about that?" This level of teamwork helped ensure that everyone consistently used the skills and expressions they had learned, and as a result the students of this class scored very well because they worked together to achieve the class's goals.

Class E

The final class on which I made a journal for was another EDC Level II class. This class had a couple of students who seemed much more motivated and proficient at English than their peers, and not everyone came to class equally prepared. Sometimes, some members seemed very sleepy or had not done their homework reading, but their classmates were always patient with them and tried to help. The class worked well together during the semester, though not as well as Class D perhaps. Common forms of teamwork displayed by this class included help understanding questions and suggesting vocabulary when one student would pause too long because they could not recall a word that someone else they were working with knew. Once, one person at one table offered a word suggestion to someone at another table during a discussion.

Like in other classes, members of this class also reminded each other what expressions to use next during practices and discussions by either pointing to a phrase or giving a whispered hint. In addition, students in this class would remind each other to use English instead of Japanese when one member slipped into their L1, which was unique among the classes I took notes on for this journal project. The stronger members of this class also helped their peers understand how to use new expressions during practices when a partner or group member was struggling. As with Class D, they also worked together prior to discussions to work out how best to use the expressions they had learned because they understood that they were expected to do so and likely wanted to ensure everyone was able to do well.

CONCLUSION

I used my journal during the fall term to take notes and reflect on the forms of teamwork I witnessed in five EDC classes over a nine week period. I felt that two classes had exceptional teamwork (Class A and Class D), one class had very good teamwork (Class E), one class had

moderate teamwork (Class C) and one class had somewhat poor teamwork (Class B), though they did improve slightly over the course of the semester, and certainly worked well together in the final lesson I observed, which was a discussion test lesson. It is interesting to note that the way I regarded teamwork (i.e. unsolicited peer-to-peer assistance) is in conflict with some of the communication skills taught by EDC, such as ways to ask for clarification or explanation. Students are encouraged to use these skills within the EDC, but using them is a way of soliciting assistance. I perhaps could have tried to stress their usage more, but on the whole I was grateful for the help students gave one another as it allowed discussions to flow more smoothly and I felt this contributed to better student performance within the class.

Various factors could contribute to a class's level of teamwork, such as student English proficiency, how well students are able to get along, individual student disposition, student motivation, and student goals. What is interesting is that English proficiency across classes may not affect teamwork, because both a highly proficient class (Class D) and a not very proficient class (Class A) displayed good teamwork. English proficiency may affect teamwork within a class, however, because I felt that Classes B and C had the least variance among members with regards to English ability, but were perhaps the worst with regards to teamwork. One reason for this could be that without clear stronger and weaker students, no one takes on leadership or strategizing roles within a group, and so there is less clear direction for a team. Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) mention that within a group, a task specialist is important to ensure the group stays focused on its aims, and so having a clear leader can help keep a group on track and organized. The data from this journal project is insufficient to make any definitive conclusion in this regard, but it could be worth investigating in the future.

For the most part, I think all students in the classes I observed for this project were able to get along well with each other, as I had no overly shy students in any of these classes. Student motivation and student goals varied widely across classes, and even among students of the same class, and I think these two elements can play a big role in how well students work together. If students do not take the class seriously, they may be disruptive to their peers, which is problematic. Similarly, if some students in a class want to do as well as they can, their goals will not align with those of students who only want to do the bare minimum, and this can also hinder teamwork. If "teamwork is the psychological, behavioural, and mental work that members of the team carry out as they collaborate with one another on the various tasks and subtasks that they must complete to reach their desired goal" (Forsyth, 2010, p. 367), then it is very important to ensure that students have the same goal. In as much as possible, I tried to motivate students and set basic goals for them in class, such as using certain expressions or skills during a discussion. This helped remind students what they needed to do, and perhaps also made an opportunity for some groups to strategize with one another how best to achieve these goals. I also tried to create group accountability, rather than individual accountability, on the accomplishment of these goals by checking with groups after their practice activities or discussions if they had been successful. These efforts, along with posing questions to groups to work out an answer for and then present it to the class, were intended to foster group unity and inter-student dependence, with the aim of improving teamwork.

I initially thought of these strategies in response to the poor teamwork displayed by Class B, but applied them to all classes. By the end of the semester, I thought that Class B's teamwork had improved slightly, as well as that of Class C, while the teamwork of my other classes appeared very strong as well. However, I am unsure if it is due to my efforts to specifically develop their teamwork, or simply because students got along better with one another and so their teamwork improved naturally, or they began to put more effort into the class on their own accord. It would certainly be an interesting point of research to see if strategies such as these and others to promote

teamwork have any bearing on improving teamwork in an English Discussion Class setting and whether ultimately this leads to better student outcomes.

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