

Effective Teacher Questioning in EDC Classes

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ABSTRACT

This paper documents my process of applying reflection-for-action while keeping a teaching journal as a first-year instructor teaching at Rikkyo University's English Discussion Class. I begin by discussing how I observed patterns arising in student performance, and detail how I used reflection-for-action as a way to make changes in my lessons. I document how making changes to the questions I posed to students during the feedback portion of each lesson resulted in a consistent use of necessary skills, as well as increased students' motivation and awareness of their own performance.

INTRODUCTION

All first-year instructors teaching Rikkyo University's English Discussion Class (EDC) keep a teaching journal in their second semester, the aim of which is to encourage reflective teaching. In doing so, as mentioned by Thomas Farrell (2007), teachers can look for patterns that may emerge following which they can investigate this pattern in more detail (p. 112). It is thus a way in which they can monitor their own practices. Furthermore, it can be used to fulfill other purposes of reflection such as, as John Murphy (2014) suggests, deepening understanding of teaching-learning behaviours, and making informed changes in said teaching-learning behaviours (p. 615). In doing so, one can engage in reflection-for-action, where teachers can use reflections to "develop action plans for what to do and for what to do differently in the future" (Murphy, 2014, p. 616).

Keeping this in mind, one of the patterns I observed in students, particularly those which had a higher ability in English, was that they rarely used the functional language (what we called discussion skills) in their discussions.

A typical EDC lesson is structured in such a way that a discussion skill (such as giving opinions or joining a discussion) is first introduced to the students, followed by practice, then two discussions. The expectation is that by the second discussion, students would be able to fluently engage in a discussion on the given topic in English only, using the functional language taught to them. To facilitate this, at each stage of the lesson, instructors give feedback to students to encourage them to analyze their own output so that they can have more fluent discussions (Hurling, 2012, p. 1.2). At this time, one of the aspects that students would receive feedback on would be their use of the taught skill.

Additionally, students in EDC classes are sorted based on their TOEIC scores, with Level II students, the level of students which I focused on, having TOEIC scores that range from 475 and above. I observed that students of this level, while demonstrating a thorough understanding of the purpose and the way to use taught discussion skills in practice, they usually did not use them in their extended discussions. This was the case even after feedback was given to them after the first discussion.

For this paper, I focus mainly on two Level II classes, each with eight students that were expressive, highly motivated and fluent, but who did not use discussion skills consistently, if at all, even after feedback. My goal was to observe how it could be that the students who should have no problem using the skills used it less compared to their lower-level counterparts.

At the same time, I document how I modified the questions that I posed to them after the first discussion to increase awareness, skill use, and help them take charge of their learning, without compromising fluency.

DISCUSSION

High Level Students, Low Discussion Skill Use

The situation where high level classes use discussion skills less frequently than low level students is not new in the EDC. In fact, former EDC instructor Yusha Lu (2019) stated that one of the reasons for the low skill use of those students, “could be that low level students had greater reliance on DS (discussion skill) while high level students were able to express ideas more freely in their own way” (p. 47). That certainly seemed to be the case for the students in my classes. They were able to confidently and smoothly engage in the discussion topic and questions posed to them, but neglected to use the skills they were being assessed on.

The question, then, was how I could get them to see the value of using the skill in their discussions, without saying that it would increase their score. Additionally, in the first part of the lesson where students are taught the discussion skill, they are already made aware of why and how to use the discussion skill. Therefore, on top of that, how else could I help students be motivated to use the skills?

Reflecting on Current Practice

As part of reflection-for-action, I began to reflect on the questions above, as I looked at the feedback given after the first discussion. Typically, I would ask the students if they used a certain skill or not. At times, I would give them an opportunity to discuss in a group what they did well, and what they needed to improve on. The expected answer was always with regards to skill use. Students were only required to state what they did use, and what they did not use. I would then follow up with boarded examples of student utterances, either of good usage or to show how there were missed opportunities.

This way of doing feedback worked well with lower level students. It was clear, and generally, students would take note of the advice and use them in the second discussion. However, for the two classes I focused on, this method of giving feedback was not so effective – students seemed attentive, but not motivated enough to incorporate the skills into their second discussion, thus making the feedback redundant.

I thus focused on finding ways to see if feedback could be more applicable to students, and one way I felt that I could do so was through modifying questions I posed during feedback time.

Effective Teacher Questioning

Penny Ur (2014) provides a checklist for effective teacher questioning in *A Course in English Language Teaching*:

1. Clarity
2. Interest
3. Accessibility
4. Level of Answer
5. Learning Value
6. Teacher Reaction

The types of questions I was using during feedback were clear and could be understood by these group of students. It was accessible to them and the level appropriate as they could answer them. However, upon reflection, close-ended questions like “Did you use this skill?” were too easy, as they only needed to reflect briefly and state whether they used a skill or not.

Additionally, even if time was given for student-to-student interaction, and for students to report, most of the input given was from me. That was not necessarily a bad thing, but did not

have much learning value for them, as made evident by how they would not act on feedback, even if it was something that they stated that they needed improvement on.

Questions I posed, such as whether or not they used the skill, were also inadequate in that they failed to capture the interest of the students. They were not challenging or stimulating for them. For students with a good command of English, I found it was probably better to challenge them more.

As such, I changed my questions to ones that were more challenging, and instead of feeding them ways in which they could incorporate the discussion skills into their second discussion, I had the students think about it instead. My questions, while slightly varying in wording from lesson to lesson, were as follows:

1. Were you able to use today's discussion skill in your discussion?
2. If no, why not?
3. How can you help each other to use the discussion skill in Discussion 2?

By asking these questions, I also hoped to fulfill some other purposes of teacher questions as outlined by Ur (2014), such as allowing students to be active in their learning by probing more deeply into issues that have might have occurred in their discussions, and to inform the class through students' answers rather than through the teacher's input. In allowing students to inform their class through their answers, and adding my input only where necessary, I also hoped to communicate to students that I, as the teacher, was genuinely interested in what they thought (p. 229).

Teacher Intervention

I first posed these new questions in the fourth lesson of the fourteen-week course. It was a review lesson, where they had to use the two discussion skills they had been taught in the previous two lessons. These skills involved connecting their ideas with their classmates' ideas, as well as closing topics by checking if their classmates had more ideas to add, and by summarising everyone's ideas.

In the first discussion, not everyone was able to use the discussion skills consistently. For the skill of 'connecting ideas', students were tasked with asking others to connect to their ideas by using phrases such as, "What do you think of my idea?" They also had to connect their ideas to what their friends had said, by agreeing or disagreeing and using the phrase "As you said..."

I observed that the students in one group were taking turns to speak in such a way that the person to start a new topic did not have a proper chance to connect their ideas with someone else. This was a common occurrence in other classes too. Because most students would not want to start first, I would suggest that they took turns to start a new topic.

However, when I posed the question to the students, one of the members of the group reported that the person who always started did not ask if anyone else wanted to start before he took the floor. He started so quickly that the rest of them had no way to indicate or asked if they could start first.

This was an answer that was the reverse of what I was expecting, and included a level of nuance that I had not noticed. Therefore, I was able to respond with more accurate feedback, asking them to use a discussion skill that they had learnt previously, namely asking if anyone wanted to start a discussion by asking, "Who would like to start?" Additionally, I gave them the advice I was already prepared to give, which was to make sure that everyone took turns to start, and that they did not need to speak in a circle.

Results

From this instance, I immediately noted two results. The first was that students were stimulated to reflect deeply on how they did. The students were able to be candid, and come up with honest reflections on what they did or did not do well, and why certain problems occurred. They were equally willing to report what they reflected on as a group with the rest of the class.

The second result was, because the open-ended questioning allowed them to reveal deeper reasons as to why they were not using the skills, I was able to give more specific feedback to them. Even though I have always been genuinely interested in what they said, this demonstrated to them that I valued and respected their responses, and would act accordingly.

Over the following weeks, I recorded more and more consistent usage of the discussion skills by the students, they were able to act on the feedback given before discussion two, including what they learnt from the other group in the class, and incorporate all they had learnt in their final discussion. They were also motivated to suggest unique solutions for their difficulties, without fearing that I would put them down.

For example, in Lesson 11, they were taught to ask for comparisons and make comparisons using phrases such as “Which is better/worse- x or y?” Typically, because the topic was crime and punishment, students would compare different types of punishments or penalties for each crime. When I asked my students though, they came up with the suggestion to use two discussion skills together. They could connect ideas by using “As you said...” and then proceed to compare their classmates’ opinions. After receiving confirmation from me that it was a feasible and unique idea, they confidently acted upon it in the second discussion.

Over the weeks the students’ awareness grew and they started taking more responsibility for their own learning, they also started to ask more questions. For example, in Lesson 5, students were given time for pair practice, followed by a practice discussion before they took their test. One of the students noted before the practice discussion that it might be difficult for all of them to summarise like they ought to (in order to demonstrate that they could all use this particular skill in the test), because of the limited time they had. Acting on that I gave them time to discuss possible solutions to that problem. Therefore, again, such questions resulted in more consistent usage of the skills. This supports what David Little (2003) says, that “if [students] are reflectively engaged with their learning, it is likely to be more efficient and effective, because [that is] more personal and focused, than otherwise” (p. 1).

During this time, I continued to support what students’ reported during feedback time with other student instances of good use or missed opportunities which I boarded while they discussed. This gave them a clearer picture of their performance during the discussion as a whole.

Further observations

When I started using the new questions, I was initially concerned that it would have a negative effect on the classroom atmosphere. The students, as noted, were candid about the difficulties they faced, and were not afraid to single out their classmates. I was thus worried that this would sour relations, and that would impact their learning and discussions.

However, this thankfully did not seem to be the case. In fact, students were able to light-heartedly reflect on their own and their friends’ opinions. They seemed to appreciate the honesty with which they could talk about their discussions, in a safe environment where no one would be judged by me or by their classmates. At the end of the day, I made clear that the goal was to better help each other. At the same time, the fact that there was no negative effect on the rapport of the students could also be due to the students’ personalities, as well as the mix of students in the class.

Another observation I made was that students were generally expressive and participated eagerly in discussions and overall, all students were able to use discussion skills more consistently

after the changes made to the feedback portion of the lesson. However, there were also other factors that contributed to this, such as the students' ability to take turns effectively, and the personalities of the students. All these factors worked together to make their discussions smoother.

CONCLUSION

While practicing reflection-for-action, I realised that making small changes to any part of a lesson could certainly go a long way in motivating students and challenging them to take charge of their learning. The changes just have to be appropriate for the level and designed to add value to their learning process.

In this way, keeping a teaching journal was indeed a useful way for me to reflect on my own teaching practice and make changes to my lessons. I found that the more focused I was, and the more I narrowed in on certain parts of the lesson, such as the feedback part of the lesson, the more useful it was for me. As such, I will continue to keep focused and use the teaching journal as a tool in my professional development.

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