

Using Paraphrasing to Reduce L1 Use in Discussion

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ABSTRACT

In this paper the author discusses the observations made in a single semester of an English discussion class. The observations were recorded in a teaching journal aimed at monitoring and reflecting on students' L1 use during discussions and the author's attempts to reduce it through a series of strategies. The paper begins by providing some background information about the discussion class. A brief outline of the journal style and process is then presented. The author then discusses students' initial behavior the strategies used in attempt to reduce L1 use and student behavioral responses to the L1 use reduction strategies. *The paper concludes with retrospective remarks and potential research ideas.*

INTRODUCTION

English Discussion Class (EDC) is a mandatory course for all first-year students at Rikkyo University. It follows a unified curriculum to ensure students learn and practice English discussion skills in a manner that is fair and cohesive across all sections of the class. Discussion skills covered include providing examples and asking for reasons, which assist students in carrying out deeper, more meaningful discussions. The class meets once a week for 100 minutes and is designed to provide learners with the tools to have two student-facilitated discussions every class. The course content covers an array of topics from becoming independent to being eco-friendly. The components of each class include a fluency activity, presentation of the target discussion skill, practice time, two discussions, and two short post-discussion feedback sessions. As an instructor of this course, I not only have the privilege of teaching and facilitating in the classroom, but I also have several opportunities for professional development. One such opportunity includes a project during which I kept a teaching journal. This introspective process helped bring to light the ways I can develop and modify my approaches based on student needs.

Reflecting and documenting classroom occurrences can serve as tool to bridge the gaps between what was initially envisioned, how it actually panned out, and what can be improved upon for future instruction. Further, it allows instructors to notice patterns Farrell (2007) and correlations between teaching practices and student behavior. Schön (as cited in Murphy, 2014) outlines three types of reflection: reflection *in-action*, *on-action*, and *for-action*. Reflection *in-action* refers to decisions made based on real-time assessment of the classroom climate. Reflection *on-action* refers to retrospective analysis of strong and weak aspects of the lesson as well as their potential causes. Finally, reflection *for-action* considers prospective modifications that can aid in improving subsequent lessons. The latter two types of reflection were the primary focus of my journaling process. Benefits of journaling include the opportunity to release thoughts and emotions in immediately post-lesson as well as the chance to track progress (or lack thereof) over time. I personally find journaling to be helpful, but taxing if done in a rigid manner. Therefore, my journaling style and process were simple and informal to aid in maintaining consistency. I chose to journal in a free-writing style rather than answer a set of questions. I felt this style gave me the freedom to express thoughts that may not have directly answered a specific question.

My journaling process spanned for 10 weeks of a 14-week course. The first four weeks were comprised of informal observation. During these weeks, I monitored learner behavior and took mental note of similarities or anomalies I encountered across my 13 classes. It was at the 4-week mark that I decided to journal about student reliance on L1 as they occurred in instances of communication breakdowns or unsuccessful word retrieval during discussions. One reason I

thought it important to journal about students' L1 use is because teaching the EDC was my first experience teaching in context where all learners shared the same L1. This is very common in EFL settings but varies from the ESL setting I am accustomed to in the U.S. There, learners come from a variety of backgrounds, and although some students have common L1s, rarely would entire class have the same L1. This means students have to use English in order to communicate with classmates and it greatly lowers the chances of L1 use during student-to-student collaborative work. In EFL settings, however, giving into the temptation of using the shared L1 during collaborative work is likely far greater. In these EFL contexts, L1 use continues to be a topic of much debate (Hall & Cook, 2012) and therefore seemed to be a thought-provoking subject to reflect on during my journaling process.

Another reason I decided to journal about learners' L1 use is because these occurrences can serve as moments that draw students' attention to the various ways in which their EDC communication skills can be employed. Additionally, I believe teaching students circumventing strategies can aid them in their ability to convey their ideas despite a lack of vocabulary. In this paper, circumventing strategies are defined as methods of negotiating meaning in English so the gist of an idea is mutually understood. I hoped the observations would shed light on what circumventing strategies would be most effective to introduce in the future. I chose to observe my three highest and three lowest proficiency level classes. I wanted to see if there were any parallels in how frequently students reverted to their L1 and in what situations they occurred. Upon selecting L1 use an area of focus for the remainder of the semester, I immediately hypothesized that the lower-proficiency students would be relying on their L1 more frequently than higher-proficiency students. The results of my subsequent observations, however, ultimately seem to disprove my initial hypothesis.

DISCUSSION

Initial behavior

During the informal observation stage of this project (Lessons 1-4), I noticed that, when compared to the Fall 2018 classes, the students in my Spring 2019 classes were using considerably more Japanese. It did not seem as if students were using their L1 to be defiant or out of laziness; students were genuinely stuck. This may have been, in part, due to the fact that these students had recently graduated from high school and may not have been accustomed to an English class demanding extended periods of spoken English. Further, many students admitted to not using spoken English very often. That consideration combined with the nature of the topics they were required to discuss may have led students to fall back on Japanese in times of communicative struggle.

In observing my students' L1 use, I discovered some patterns with regard to when they were reverting to Japanese. By far, students used Japanese most frequently when they were unable to recall a word in English. This would usually mean all of the student's utterance would be in English except for the word they could not remember. For example, a student might say something such as, "In my opinion, joining clubs or circles is a good way to make friends. It's mainly because Rikkyo *daigaku* has many choices for students." Additionally, students' inability to recall a word would occasionally spur them to ask a classmate for assistance in Japanese. This would also occur when they did not know how to say something in English. For example, "*Senmon gakkō eigo de nani?*" meaning, "What's vocational school in English?"

An additional observation made during the first weeks of the semester was the difference in how higher-proficiency students and lower-proficiency students used Japanese. I noticed that higher-proficiency students began to preface their Japanese use with the phrase "In Japanese...". For instance, a student might say something along the lines of "In my opinion, going to university is important. It's mainly because you can earn a lot of money. In Japanese, *kyūryō*." This was

something unique to this student demographic. It seemed that the higher level classes, though having larger vocabularies, wanted to express very complex ideas and therefore interjected more Japanese terms in their explanations and opinions. Further, some Japanese concepts do not have a direct translation and higher-level students seemed to gravitate to these expressions. Since Japanese use is penalized with point deductions on the discussion tests that occur three times a semester, I suspect lower-level learners, due to their wariness of losing points, may not have employed this tactic.

Stacking strategies for remedying L1 use

A few attempts were made to address L1 use during discussions. Over the course of the semester, I used instances of Japanese use to draw students' attention to the EDC communication skills. This was done during the first of the standard lesson's two extended discussions and during the post-discussion feedback. During the discussion, I would make learners aware of their L1 use through sounds such as gasps, gestures or body language such as shrugging, and, occasionally, EDC communication skills phrases such as "I'm sorry, I don't understand" or "What do you mean?". This would usually cause the student to rephrase or prompt a classmate to step in to help translate the Japanese into English. The other point in time when I would call attentions to students' L1 use was during the post-discussion feedback. During the feedback session following the first discussion, I often write a series of three questions on the board that help students debrief in pairs or as discussion groups (made of three or four students). To address L1 uses, I added, "Did everyone speak only English?" to my repertoire of questions. When students would respond to this question in the negative, I would then ask them what they could do about it in the next discussion. Student responses were mixed. Most students, however, eventually concluded that they could employ paraphrasing as a useful tool and appropriate strategy to support one another in negotiating meaning in English. This was fitting since one of the affective objectives of the course is to "[a]pproximate unknown words in English by explanation using high frequency items." (Hurling, 2012, p. 1.4). However, some classes were better at actually following through this strategy than others. Students often noted that they found paraphrasing to be very difficult.

In Lesson 6, I introduced paraphrasing into the fluency stage at the beginning of the lesson to reinforce the idea that paraphrasing can be used as an L1 reduction strategy. In this lesson stage, students are divided into listeners and speakers with each speaker being paired with a listener. During this fluency exercise, an adaptation of Maurice's (1983) 4-3-2 activity, each speaker talks about a series of questions meant to activate schema about the day's topic and give the students a chance to warm-up their English speaking skills. The speaker first shares their thought with their partner for three minutes. Students then rotate so that each speaker now has a new partner. The speaker repeats the idea they shared with their first partner at a slightly faster pace as they now have only two minutes of speaking time. This process is repeated again with the last round lasting for one minute. When initially introducing this exercise, I told listeners that their role was to give reactions, show understanding, and ask one follow-up question. However, once students identified paraphrasing as a useful strategy for maintaining English use throughout a discussion, I decided to ease them into paraphrasing by including it on their fluency cards (Figure 1) and verbally encouraging it before and after the 3-minute round of the fluency activity.

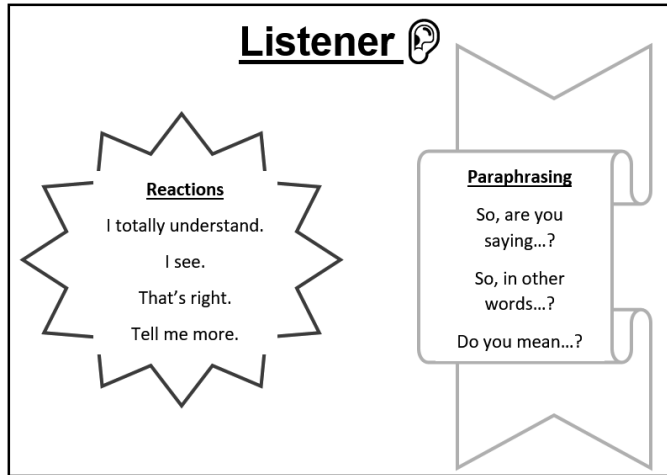


Figure 1. Lesson 5 Listener side fluency card.

The third tactic I added to aid students in reducing L1 use during discussion was introducing a phrase formally used in the EDC curriculum. I decided to introduce the phrase “How do you say {X} in English?” because it allows whoever is speaking to seek assistance from their discussion group members in English. Further, it creates the opportunity for the speaker to recall English vocabulary word(s) they might have forgotten or to learn a new English word or phrase.

In Lesson 8, I tried one additional tool to help students better grasp the concept of paraphrasing. In this lesson, I distributed a paraphrasing practice worksheet created by EDC instructor Justin Rooks (Appendix). Students were instructed to complete this in pairs. On the worksheet, there were four statements on the left hand side. Parallel to those were four responses with sentence stems that students had to complete. Sentence stems included phrases such as “Do you mean...?” and “So in other words...?” Further, the bottom of the worksheet had a phrase bank from which learners could match each paraphrased statement with the original statements above. The rationale for using this worksheet was to allow students to see examples of how one statement could be paraphrased into another. Additionally, the sentence stems presented them with phrasal units they could remember for future use.

Student behavioral responses to L1 use reduction strategies

When providing real-time indicators to signal Japanese use, both higher and lower proficiency students responded well. I found that these lighthearted and well-intentioned reminders usually invoked some laughter and encouraged students to make an effort to reword their ideas. More specifically, EDC communication skill phrases such as “Sorry I don’t understand” seemed to pressure students into making sure I understood what they were saying. This outcome was good in the sense that students were eventually able to express their ideas in English knowing that their teacher does not understand Japanese. However, one of the aims of this course is to give learners autonomy over their discussions and use the tools they learn to negotiate meaning among one another. Therefore if students’ English grammar, pronunciation, or vocabulary use does not make sense to me, but does make sense to the other group members, students should not be concerned about ensuring that I understand everything they say. As previously mentioned, I began to include “Did everyone speak only English?” during the post-discussion feedback. Because the question includes the word “everyone”, students could debrief in broad terms without singling out any specific discussion group member. During debriefing, some students, owned up to their Japanese

use. These students would make statements such as “I couldn’t use only English” or “Sorry! I said [insert Japanese word].” In these cases, the most common response to “Did everyone speak only English?” was “*almost* everyone.” I believe having the accountability of other group members and the desire to have a high-performing discussion group gave students motivation to maintain English use throughout the second discussion.

Student response to paraphrasing during the fluency exercise was positive in the higher-proficiency classes. In fact, these students seemed to use it as a way to confirm understanding. This transferred well into the discussion portions of the lesson. In subsequent weeks, when a classmate would show signs of difficulty expressing an idea clearly in English (expressed through lengthy pauses, hesitations, self-repairs, or Japanese filler words), these higher-proficiency learners would often use paraphrasing as a form of other-repair or modifications of utterance made by the listener (Levinson, 1983). Contrarily, the success rate of paraphrasing during fluency was much, much lower among the lower-proficiency classes. These students often noted that they found paraphrasing to be very difficult, despite modeled examples. This is a valid and understandable difficulty, as paraphrasing requires some lexico-semantic awareness in order to manipulate the language to achieve a similar or clearer meaning.

As previously mentioned, students used Japanese to ask their classmates how to say a word or phrase in English. This prompted me to introduce the phrase “How do you say {X} in English?” Student response to this was enthusiastic, and many students stated it was very useful. Both the higher and lower level students began to replace their Japanese questions with this phrase. Among the higher-level students, it served as an effective exchange of vocabulary when discussion group members could assist one another. I also noticed when a group member provided a new word or phrase, not only did the student in need of help use it to complete their ideas, other students would continue to use it throughout the discussion. Among the lower-level students, on the other hand, introducing this phrase did not exactly bring about my intended outcome. Two issues emerged with the use of “How do you say {X} in English?”

The first and most common issue arose when none of the other students in a discussion knew how to say the Japanese word in English. This in itself is not a problem if students work together to construct a descriptive synonymous phrase to circumlocute what was trying to be said. For instance, when a student was attempting to talk about part-time jobs, they became stuck when they did not know the term “night shift.” Other students chimed in with phrases like “deep night,” “midnight working,” and “start work at 10 and finish at 5”. However this kind of teamwork did not always occur. Instead, if the other discussion participants were unsure of a word or phrases in English, they would simply respond with “I understand” and continue with the discussion. The issue here is that, to save time and effort, learners would end up bypassing negotiation of meaning in English, the very objective behind introducing this phrase.

The second issue that surfaced was students overusing the phrase. This was not nearly as frequent as the aforementioned concern and only became problematic with one specific class. With these students, asking other how to say something seemed to become an escape from having to put in the mental energy needed to try expressing their ideas in English. Students would ask others for help three or four times in one short speaking turn. This not only hindered the flow of the discussion, but also led to more frequent use of the “I understand” response so as to keep things moving. As such, it was necessary for me to discourage this before it became a habit.

Finally, with regard to the paraphrasing practice sheet, many students found it relatively easy to match the ideas together. Unfortunately, however, this did not transfer well into the discussions. Lower-level students still struggled to understand how to use these phrases naturally. In fact, one student repeated a phrase from the sheet verbatim despite the ill-fitting context for its use. For higher-level learners, the task was incredibly easy and served more as reinforcement of

how paraphrasing can be done. However I still believe it was a somewhat valuable for the students who equated paraphrasing with confirmation by repetition. Although the exercise did not result in reduced L1 use in discussions, further research could examine the degree to which such an activity does or does not reduce reliance on the L1

CONCLUSION

To conclude, keeping a journal was worthwhile method of keeping track of challenges students' faced with having English-only discussions. By reflecting *on-action*, I was also able to monitor learners' responses to the various attempts I made to help them help themselves through the communication skill of paraphrasing. In retrospect, I believe it would have been more advantageous for students if I had put stronger emphasis on paraphrasing oneself. The EDC textbook, *What Do you Think?: Interactive Skills for Effective Discussion 1* (2019) divides the paraphrasing communication skill into two parts: paraphrasing oneself and paraphrasing others. In this semester, students practiced paraphrasing others as a way work around L1 use. However, had I devoted more time to modeling and practicing paraphrasing oneself, perhaps students would have felt more confident in their abilities to express their ideas autonomously.

In subsequent semesters, teaching more concrete circumventing strategies could be an effective way to reduce L1 use in discussions. One such approach is using synonyms and/or antonyms to give listeners a more clear idea of what they want to convey. This strategy would be particularly useful in instances when other members of the discussion are unfamiliar with an English word used by the speaker. An example of introducing this is through a simple matching exercise. In such an exercise, students can begin with easy synonyms such as *big* and *large* as a warm-up and then progress to matching synonyms that correlate with the lesson's topic. Another circumventing strategy to integrate is using descriptions and/or definitions. This strategy could serve students when they are struggling to retrieve a specific vocabulary word. Students can practice using relative clauses. In the future, it would be interesting to research what circumventing strategies work best in the EDC context and across varying levels of learners. Additionally, I would like to experiment with how these strategies could best be woven into the unified curriculum.

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APPENDIX

Paraphrasing Practice – Choose one phrase from the box to paraphrase the speaker



I like to build and make things.

Do you mean...



I like working with lots of people.

So, are you saying...



I don't want to work because I want to focus on my studies.

So, in other words...



I want to work with computers.

Do you mean...



- | | |
|--|--|
| a.) ...you like working with technology? | b.) ...you like to work with your hands? |
| c.) ...you want to work with a team? | d.) ...you are a serious student? |