Using Discussion to Make Group Decisions

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ABSTRACT

Individuals have discussions to exchange ideas and in certain situations, they use discussion to accomplish other aims (e.g., to reach an agreement or to solve a problem). For English Discussion Class (EDC) at Rikkyo University in Tokyo, Japan, exchanging ideas is the goal of each discussion; however, using discussion to accomplish other aims might also benefit students. This paper utilizes my reflective journal and other literature to explore arguments for and against varying the discussion's aim. I investigate instruction and feedback that might help students use discussion to make group decisions. Curriculum changes in 2020 such as adding a mandatory debate course and revising the current EDC might make this topic relevant to Rikkyo instructors in the future.

INTRODUCTION

Rikkyo University's English Discussion Class (EDC) is designed to build students' speaking fluency and develop their ability to exchange ideas within a group discussion context (Hurling, 2012). To improve their discussion skills, the course presents discussion and communicative functions. Each function comprise a group of lexicogrammatical forms that denote similar use (Wilkins, 1978). Discussion functions include connecting ideas (e.g., I agree with you. As you said…), summarizing (e.g., so we agree about…), and asking for sources of information (e.g., how do you know about that?). Using the discussion functions helps students think critically and foster academic discussions (Hurling, 2012). Communication functions include asking for repetition (e.g., can you repeat that?), checking understanding (e.g., do you follow me?), and paraphrasing (e.g., do you mean…?). These functions can assist students with managing and repairing breakdowns in communication (Hurling, 2012). Students practice retrieving functions automatically by using them repeatedly and appropriately within communicative contexts. For EDC, these contexts are in-class group discussions.

During class, students review target discussion or communication functions' importance. The EDC textbook defines the importance of each discussion function in relation to the aim of discussion, which is exchanging ideas. For example, the function of citing sources of information helps students support their ideas with facts and evidence (Fearn-Wannan, Kita, Sturges, & Young, 2019). That is, students gain a deeper understanding of others' ideas from knowing where the information originates. For the discussion function of summarizing, students confirm that they understand others' ideas before discussing the next topic (Fearn-Wannan, Kita, Sturges, & Young, 2019). Summarizing everyone's opinions shows that they know how group's ideas connect. The function of connecting ideas helps students express degrees of agreement or disagreement, which assists students in understanding others' ideas better. The importance of each discussion function indicates its purpose of use and the EDC course defines each discussion function's purpose of use in terms of idea exchange.

Journaling throughout the semester helped me to reflect on how the discussion functions are defined in terms of idea exchange. Researchers previously discussed the benefits of reflective journaling. Farrell (2007) wrote that teachers used journals to reflect on their teaching practice, which upon systematic reflection and interpretation could help them attain insights into their work. Bailey (1990) suggested that teachers used journals to experiment, generate questions, and express doubt. Jarvis (1996) analyzed language teachers' journals and found that teachers used their journal to solve problems and legitimize their practice. Farrell (2007) recommended that teachers ask four questions when writing about a specific incident: (a) what occurred before the incident;

(b) what occurred after it; (c) why this incident mattered to you; and (d) what the incident showed you about yourself as a teacher. After a month of writing reflections, teachers can find patterns that they might not have found, which they can use to investigate questions or hypotheses (Farrell, 2007).

One aspect of student performance that I chose from my reflective journal was student issues when they performed discussion functions. I decided not to focus on one particular class or student proficiency, but common tendencies in all classes. Other EDC instructors were encountering similar student tendencies with the discussion functions so I hypothesized that the issues arose from the discussion's aim and from defining the importance of discussion functions according to exchanging ideas. This paper adds to the existing EDC literature by using a reflective journal to investigate the advantages and disadvantages of having the discussion aim of idea exchange. As there are advantages and disadvantages, readers might be more informed to determine whether benefits of limiting the discussion aim to idea exchange outweigh the drawbacks. Lastly, this paper adds to EDC literature by investigating intervention and feedback that could help students use discussion to accomplish other aims.

DISCUSSION

In the first section, I present student performance tendencies of discussion functions. I focus on three discussion functions: sources of information, summarizing, and connecting ideas. For each function, I follow Farrell's (2007) recommendation of noting (a) what occurs before the incident; (b) what occurs after it; (c) why this incident matters to me; and (d) what the incident shows me about myself as a teacher. Next, I describe changes students made after intervention and reasons for the changes. In the second section, I describe the connection between discussion performance tendencies and the aim of idea exchange, and then weigh the aim's advantages and disadvantages. In the last section, I discuss intervention and feedback that could help students use discussion to exchange ideas for specific aims such as reaching an agreement or solving a problem.

Student Tendencies Using Discussion Functions

Below are two examples [1] of student performance tendencies with citing sources of information from lesson 11:

Dialogue 1
A: I disagree with you.
B: Why?
A: One reason is if foreign people work in Japan, then Japanese people's skills in English will improve.
B: How do you know about that?
A: It's my idea. Do you agree with me?
C: Yes. I agree with you. As you said…

Dialogue 2
A: I think giving more vacation time to employees improves work-life balance.
B: How do you know about that?
A: From my experience.
B: Okay.

[1] All examples have been paraphrased.

For citing sources of information, students commonly reply, “it’s my idea” or “from my experience”. From my reflection journal, students seem to say, “it’s my idea” for hypothetical circumstances which they have not personally experienced. After such incidents, students rarely respond to “from my experience” by asking for more specific information (e.g., what experience?) and they never respond to “it’s my idea” by asking for more detail. This tendency matters to me because for “it’s my idea”, students cannot cite themselves as sources of information so they are using the discussion function incorrectly. For the phrase “from my experience”, the response matters because students do not gain a better understanding of others’ ideas as “from my experience” can encompass any situation. From these incidents, I realize that it is necessary to become an enforcer of content standards so that students give responses that are more specific. In Lessons 11 and 12, students reverted to using these phrases again so I continued to remind them to be more specific so that everyone can understand their ideas better.

Dialogue 3 is one common example of a student performance issue for summarizing from lesson 11:

Dialogue 3
A: I agree with you. As you said from the point of view of younger people, sleeping on public transportation is appropriate.
B: Okay. Is there anything to add?
A: No.
B: Let’s discuss the next topic.

Before such incidents, students usually connect their ideas to one or more students so they state whether they agree or disagree with the previous speaker. After, students respond by using phrases such as “what shall we discuss next” and “let’s discuss the next topic” once everyone has spoken. This tendency matters to me because one aspect of having a good discussion means understanding each member’s ideas. To show understanding, they can summarize the discussion group’s ideas. However, it might feel redundant to students especially if they have already connected their ideas with other students in the group. From these incidents, I realize that it is necessary to give students discourse patterns, which end with the function of summarizing to help them to remember to do so. However, during lessons in which I did not remind students, they usually forgot to summarize.

Below is one common example of a student performance tendency for connecting ideas from lesson 11:

Dialogue 4
A: Do you agree with me?
B: Yes, I totally agree with you. You said Tokyo is the best city in Japan for international tourists to visit. I have another idea. In my opinion, Osaka is the best city in Japan. What do you think of my idea?

For this performance tendency, students disagree, but they initially say that they agree. After such incidents occur, other students never ask for clarification. For example, in Dialogue 4, asking for clarification would entail inquiring whether Student B believes Tokyo or Osaka is the best city. This tendency matters because students understand the meaning of agreement, but for some reason, they do not use it correctly. In addition, from the listeners’ viewpoint, it is interesting that students accept this response as it provides contradictory ideas. From Dialogues 1, 2, and 4, listeners might be showing a form of politeness by not pursuing information sources more

extensively because they do not want the speakers to lose face (i.e., feel uncomfortable). Some students might not want to disagree or they might have unstated nuances that explain the discrepancy. For example, from Dialogue 4, perhaps the student believes that Osaka is the best city, but has different reasons. To help students, I told them to use "partly agree" and in future lessons, and they tended to remember to do so.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Varying the Discussion's Aim

These discussion performance issues might arise partly because the EDC textbook defines the aim of discussion in terms of idea exchange, which limits reasons for using the functions. The stated rationale for using functions when the aim is to exchange ideas is limited to helping others to understand ideas better. However, when the discussion aim changes, the rationale for using discussion functions expands. For example, the primary purpose for using sources of information is arguably to persuade. Individuals ask for information sources to evaluate whether the sources are reputable. From student discussion tendencies of "from my experience" and "it's my idea", it is not clear that students are trying to persuade others or evaluating whether the sources are reputable. The task aim of idea exchange might be an insufficient condition for using the function to reflect real world use. However, one can argue that "from my experience" and "it's my idea" are inadequate when the aim is idea exchange because they do not help students gain a better understanding of where their information originates. Yet, the rationale for use is limited to better understanding because the aim of discussion is limited to exchanging ideas. The same argument can be made for the functions of summarizing and connecting ideas; namely, changing the discussion aim changes the rationale for function use, which can help students better understand different reasons language users use these functions. For example, in a discussion to reach an agreement or solve a problem, summarizing can acknowledge and confirm completion of the task (e.g., so we agree that…). Students might acquire a better understanding of why and how to use these functions by varying the discussion aim.

Additionally, by having students use discussion to make group decisions, in-class discussions mimic the discourse norms of certain real-world discussions outside the classroom more closely. Sturges (2019) created an activity to help EDC students brainstorm contexts they could use discussion and communication functions; student answers included press conferences, club activities, presentations, part-time jobs, interpersonal relationships, and while shopping. Some students from my classes also acknowledged contexts in which the purpose of discussion would be to solve a problem or reach an agreement. For instance, one student said that she used discussion to choose a restaurant with her friends and another student stated that his high school classmates used discussion to decide on a class leader. In theory, mimicking the conditions of using discussion to reach an agreement or solving a particular problem might help students transfer their knowledge and use of discussion functions to real-world discussion equivalents because students have the opportunity to practice using discussion and communication functions in these contexts. Another benefit of partaking in discussions to make group decisions is that the aim might uncover different aspects of sociolinguistic competence, which is one aspect of communicative competence. Canale and Swain (1980) defined sociolinguistic competence as the ability to use language appropriately in various social situations in regards to register, politeness, and style. Arguably, when the aim of a discussion is to make a decision as a group, there might be some need to help students with ways to soften the language for disagreement.

However, there are some disadvantages of expanding the discussion aim. Lesley and West (2019) investigated the effects of group-decision discussion tasks (i.e., convergent) compared to discussion tasks in which the aim is to exchange ideas (i.e., divergent). Lesley and West (2019) questioned whether group-decision discussion tasks would challenge highly proficient students

more than discussions with the aim of idea exchange. Researchers trialed group-decision discussion tasks on EDC students with a TOEIC range of 680 or above. For the 2018 academic year, instructors created supplementary materials for these students so they could receive repeated practice and feedback. Data was collected from seven EDC instructors who tested 112 student performances. Researchers found that students performed discussion functions significantly less for group-decision tasks compared to discussion with the aim to exchange ideas (Lesley & West, 2019). Lesley and West (2019) hypothesized that the decrease in discussion functions' usage was due to task complexity. Increased task complexity equates to adding an additional task within the same time limit. Group-decision discussions require students firstly, to exchange ideas and secondly, to reach an agreement or solve a problem (Lesley & West, 2019). Researchers found that higher levels of agreement equated to lower frequency of discussion function use because students equated agreement with task completion. They also found that students could complete group-decision tasks successfully without the need to use the discussion functions. Thus, students focused mainly on task outcome of agreeing or solving the problem, which would be problematic as EDC instructors assess students on their ability to utilize a variety of discussion functions. Lesley and West's (2019) concluded that if group-decision discussion tasks remain on the EDC course, then course designers should (a) modify assessments to accommodate discussion and communication function use differences or (b) find ways to increase skill use (Lesley & West, 2019). No study has tested group-decision discussion tasks on lower proficiency students to determine whether they would encounter similar difficulties.

Teacher Intervention for Varying Discussion Aims

As described above, there are advantages and disadvantages for incorporating group-decision discussion tasks in the classroom. For teachers interested in group-decision discussion tasks, I list five recommendations on how to teach them. Firstly, teacher intervention should emphasize the process rather than the product. In other words, create instructions that request students to find the strongest argument rather than instructions that ask students reach an agreement or solve a problem. As Lesley and West's (2019) study showed students will want to focus on completing the task rather than focusing on how the quality of the idea exchange can help them to better determine the best decision. In addition, instructions should request that students discuss a specified number of options before determining the strongest argument. By doing so, discussing different options might help students consider more ideas as they tend to focus more on the task outcome. For feedback, teachers should focus on the process of how students determined the strongest argument more than the idea that the students agreed on. For example, ask them how many viewpoints they considered and the potential disadvantages of the idea they have agreed on. Secondly, teachers should encourage students to question the strengths and weaknesses of their ideas or others' ideas. Chien (2020) assigned roles such as 'the devil's advocate' to make disagreeing more comfortable for students. Students might feel more pressure to conform to the majority's opinions if the discussion's aim is to converge so assigning roles might help them to feel more at ease with disagreeing.

Thirdly, define the importance of functions in terms of the convergent discussion aim to show how their use and purpose can change. Redefining function use to reflect different aims helps students gain a better understanding of how and when to use functions for group-decision discussion tasks; for example, in these tasks, students can combine the functions of giving different viewpoints with connecting ideas (e.g., from children's point of view, they would also agree with me because…). Fourthly, anticipate problems with the reasons students might initially give for converging. For example, one group that I experimented with using a group-decision discussion task decided that the best way to determine the strongest argument was to choose the student who

graduated from the most competitive high school. Another group decided that the strongest argument was the one that most students in the group agreed with. Problems can be opportunities to show students how discussion functions such as giving different viewpoints (e.g., How about X's point of view?) and balancing ideas (e.g., what are the disadvantages?) can strengthen their arguments. Lastly, T. West (personal communication, January 22, 2020) stated that he found that more controversial issues such as capital punishment were more effective than less controversial issues because students had more disagreements, which increased their discussion function usage. So introducing topics more controversial might also be more beneficial for increasing the use of discussion functions in these types of discussion tasks.

CONCLUSION

From my reflective journal, I noted student performance tendencies with discussion functions. I hypothesized whether the task aim and defining functions in terms of idea exchange might partly cause these tendencies to occur. The advantages of using discussion to accomplish varying aims might: (a) expand students' rationale for using discussion functions helping them to gain a better understanding of the functions; (b) help students transfer their skills outside of the classroom more effectively in such situations; and (c) assist students in navigating the sociolinguistic challenges of coming to a group decision. However, the disadvantages include the possibility that: (a) students focus mainly on task completion at the expense of discussion skill use; (b) tasks do not require students to use discussion skills to complete the task; and (c) changing the aim changes the discussion discourse so EDC assessments might inadequately reflect student performance (Lesley & West, 2019). Lastly, I recommended ways to help students with tasks in which the outcome is to converge. Future research questions could examine what types of discussion function tendencies are common in group-decision discussion tasks and what kinds of transfer occurs between discussion tasks with different aims. Changes to the curriculum in 2020 such as a mandatory debate course gives students the opportunity to practice a different type of divergent discussion tasks in which they are assigned viewpoints. This course might change common discussion tendencies because the discussion aim in debate expands to include an element of persuading others, so an additional research question could be how debate compared to discussion affects students' discussion function use.

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