

Providing Scaffolding Through Opinion-Based Gap-Fills to Boost Student Confidence and Comprehension

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ABSTRACT

This project will focus on the implementation of a controlled practice gap-fill activity in two low-level (defined by Rikkyo's English Discussion Center as students with a combined TOEIC Reading and Listening score of below 280) English Discussion Classes. The activity is based on H.D. Brown's Willingness to Communicate principle as described in *Teaching by Principles*. It focuses on generating student content while providing scaffolding, particularly modeling of Skill Phrases to students who struggle organizing their thoughts.

INTRODUCTION

Brown's Willingness to Communicate principle states, "Observations of language learners' unwillingness to communicate, or what we commonly label as 'shyness', have led us to emphasize classroom activity that encourages learners to 'come out of their shells' and to engage communicatively in the classroom" (Brown, 2007). This principle is relevant for not only "shy" students, but for students who lack confidence when placed with classmates they are not familiar or friendly with. In these classes, unwillingness due to communicative inability may be seen in the same students.

A typical English Discussion class is 100 minutes in length, and consists of target-language presentation and practice stages, followed by two discussions on a single topic. Each discussion has its own preparatory stage where students talk in pairs. The discussions themselves are held in groups of 3-5 students. The first discussion is typically 10-12 minutes long, and the second discussion is 12-16 minutes. The English Discussion classes use textbooks that have been produced in-house, and which help to provide structure to the lesson.

The aim of each lesson is to practice using Discussion Skills (in the form of functional phrases), which help students to structure their discussions. Some Discussion Skills taught in the course include giving and asking for Opinions, Reasons, and Examples. Students also learn Communication Skills, which include functional phrases intended to help facilitate negotiation of meaning. Examples of Skill Phrases taught throughout the course include, "Why do you think so?", "Can you give me an example?" and "Do you follow me?" The Skill Phrases are listed as part of the presentation section of the textbook.

Using Discussion Skills and Communication Skills facilitates group discussions and prevents or repairs breakdowns in coherence. Students are expected to use both a speaker and listener side of the Discussion Skills, meaning they must ask questions (listener) and share their ideas (speaker).

The course format includes regular lessons, Reviews, and Tests. There are two regular lessons where new Discussion Skills or Communication Skills are introduced, a Review lesson, and then a Discussion Test. The Review lesson implements the Skill Phrases practiced in previous lessons, and the Discussion Test is a 16-minute group discussion held on the topics previously explored in class. The cycle of lessons, reviews, and tests continues until roughly fourteen classes have been taught.

To support low-level students both in terms of confidence and communicative ability, I decided to implement an activity that encouraged them to communicate in their group discussions. Since discussions focus on one topic and often have elements of agreeing or disagreeing, it was important to show students how they could use the Skill Phrases to express their ideas more clearly

and effectively. I decided the activity should have a conversational tone in order to make the students feel more comfortable with each other before moving to a more academic tone.

DISCUSSION

Helping to overcome shyness was my major goal for these students, despite being unsure of the exact reason for their hesitancy to participate in class. Not all students are confident in voicing their opinions or ideas in foreign language classes, reasons being - "Some students are naturally quiet or shy; others, however, do not feel confident enough in their English proficiency to volunteer their opinions for fear of making mistakes and thus losing face. They may also feel that they would waste class time if they take too long to formulate their thoughts and express them in English," (Campbell, 2007).

I assumed at the beginning of the course that the students experienced a mix of these factors. The lowest level students would sometimes say, "No," or "Next," during a discussion where another student asked a question they were unfamiliar with. Sometimes they would ask for the question to be translated into Japanese, and then their answer in Japanese would also be translated for them into English. Occasionally after answering they would apologize for taking up time. These utterances led me to believe later that their main fear was wasting time trying to think of content.

There were at least two students in these classes with very low English levels (combined Reading and Listening TOEIC scores were under 200), to the point where they could barely speak in discussions except when using the Discussion Skills that did not require much content. For instance, during a lesson when talking about parts of university they thought might be helpful for making friends a student might say, "For example, club." The Examples Discussion Skill was used, but the response lacked content to have a proper discussion.

As time went by the students became more comfortable with their classmates, and they began speaking very limited English (often at the expense of someone explaining or paraphrasing in Japanese or English for quicker understanding or proper response). However, I wanted to give these students the opportunity to formulate their own ideas clearly with the Skill Phrases as a framework without having to ask their group members for help each time they decided to speak. This, I hoped, would boost their confidence when participating in group discussions.

This activity was conducted in Review lessons. Most students were confident in their use of the Skill Phrases, but not in generating their own ideas. During Review lessons, I wanted students to feel comfortable sharing their personal views on the new topic introduced in the lesson and not worry about wasting time during discussions.

The *What Do You Think?* textbooks for levels II-IV used by the EDC provide a gap-fill activity as part of the Practice section and it requires students to fill in the appropriate Skill Phrase. The gap-fill I created was very similar in format, except that the Skill Phrases were filled in and the student had to generate a variety of content in the gaps - otherwise known as an opinion gap-fill or reverse gap-fill. Even the lowest-level students had demonstrated that they were able to understand the Skill Phrases and apply them quickly and appropriately; it was the content that was creating difficulty.

With the newly created gap-fill (Appendix), language used to support the content was made available but students had to fill in the blanks with their response to the question posed at the top of the sheet. I wanted to avoid the following - "...the teacher has devised a situation that makes the meaning clear, but the situation also makes the question inappropriate in terms of the principle of information gap because the answer is already known" (Liao, 1997). The purpose of the new gap-fill activity was not to provide students with pre-made responses to the questions, but

to challenge them to think of answers which could provide scaffolding for their group discussions later on. An example is as follows:

A: “What do you think about Question 1 – ‘Is it better to shop alone or with friends?’”

B: “I think _____ is better.”

A: “Why do you think _____ is better?”

B: “In my opinion shopping alone/with friends is better because _____.”

This allows the students to see examples of topics they can discuss as well as ideas they may use during discussions, and emphasizes how the Skill Phrases can support their content in a meaningful communicative context.

Lastly, it was decided that an activity involving pair work would be best. One benefit of pair work before a discussion is described in the following quote, “This can be beneficial for shy students, because students who are particularly hesitant to speak to a large group may be more willing to do so after they have practiced with a smaller audience” (Schulman, 2013). By pairing the students they get support from their partners, and are also prepared to discuss the topic later in the lesson.

PROCEDURE

The procedure for conducting the activity is as follows:

1. To begin, students are put into pairs and decide together who will be Student A and who will be Student B.
2. For the next step, the teacher explains that A should only write in the blanks for A, and B should only write in the blanks for B. The teacher then hands out the worksheet.
3. Students are given 2-4 minutes to fill in their answers.
4. Students are permitted to speak to each other if they are having trouble coming up with content or using the correct English word or phrase. Some of the gaps must be left blank because they require one student to listen carefully for the information.
5. The teacher monitors the activity by walking around and checking student progress.
6. When the students have finished filling in the appropriate blanks, they are asked to read their lines with their partner. A reads the A lines, B reads the B lines.
7. The students must listen carefully to their partner’s responses in order to ask appropriate questions, and also use the Skill Phrases effectively.
8. The teacher should give brief feedback, one or two points, that includes student content and the target language.
9. The activity should be completed within 5-10 minutes.

VARIATIONS

This activity can be adjusted to best suit the learner's needs in a variety of ways. Firstly, when creating the material for this activity it is vital that the Skill Phrases (such as the Opinion Skill Phrase, "In my opinion") are already typed for the students. The topic of the dialogue between the two students should reflect the overall subject of the lesson, or directly correlate to questions that will be discussed later in the lesson. The area of content should be left blank. This may only occur for a few lines for each student.

The language of the worksheet should match the level of the students. It may be helpful to note common student utterances in other classes and use those in the worksheet. Again, the focus is for students to feel comfortable with the topic and Skill Phrases while sharing their own ideas in an organized manner.

It can be useful to sit down with the lowest level students and work with them to ensure they are filling the gaps in correctly. It may be necessary to give these students more explicit examples instead of suggestions that may be listed in parentheses on the worksheet. Permitting students to discuss the activity together also gives lower level students an opportunity to ask their peers for clarification or help with vocabulary.

Another variation is to provide students with options to either fill-in-the-blank, circle the best choice (to allot them a starting point only in the very first one or two lines of the dialogue and provide scaffolding), or fill-in-the-blank with a hint in parentheses following the space. Examples can be seen below.

- *Fill-in-the-blank* - "In my opinion, students feel pressure from _____."
- *Circle* - "In my opinion, students feel pressure from friends/family/teachers."
- *Hint* - "In my opinion, students feel pressure from _____ (who)."

An alternative way to vary this activity is by using initials of the Skill Phrases (an example can be seen below) which can increase the difficulty of the worksheet for higher levels. Schemata is activated by reading the sequence of the dialogue or by discussing the initials with peers:

- *Full phrase* - It's mainly because _____.
- *Initialed phrase* - IMB _____.

CONCLUSIONS

There were many positive effects on student performance due to this gap-fill activity. One benefit, from the teacher's perspective, was that students were familiar with the topic and time was saved explaining vocabulary that would be used later in the discussion preparation activities.

The gap-fill also activated student schemata in terms of what they knew about the topic, but also with regard to the Skill Phrases. Students quickly became comfortable with the flow of the dialogue because of the automaticity formulated by specific utterances. "Why do you think so?" usually generates a "It's because...", generally followed by "Can you give me an example?" and "One example is...", and so on. The automaticity meant there was little distraction due to the Skill Phrases, and students were able to focus on the content of their answer.

Brown (2007) states, "Overanalyzing language, thinking too much about its forms, and consciously lingering on rules of language all tend to impede this graduation to automaticity." If students are given the chance to become comfortable with and generate their ideas on a topic with the basic grammar and form already provided, their overall shyness and fear of wasting time can be reduced. This was a major positive effect that was evident in group discussions later when the

lowest-level students were able to participate by sharing their ideas without having to ask others for help.

However, the most significant effect was that students had generated their own ideas related to the topic and were therefore better prepared for group discussions. Because the basic frame had already been supplied and they had practiced sharing their thoughts in conjunction with the Skill Phrases, students were far more confident when exchanging ideas in both the discussion preparation activities and group discussions.

Negative effects did occur, particularly when students used exact examples taken from their gap-fills during discussion prep and the first short discussion. Utterances sometimes were strictly adhered to according to the order provided on the worksheet. For example, in a discussion preparation activity students may have said –

A: “In my opinion, students feel pressure from parents.”

B: “Can you give me an example?”

A (referring to second answer recorded on worksheet): “It’s because parents want their children to get good jobs after university.”

In the utterance above, A did not listen carefully to B’s question and instead used the worksheet’s sequence (giving a reason first and then an example). These types of mistakes occasionally occurred later in the lesson.

There are also limitations of this activity, one being that this is probably not appropriate for a large-scale class since the teacher should monitor each student’s written answers before beginning the speaking portion. It is also likely not beneficial for higher-level students due to their ability to create content in discussions without concern or stress. This is not to say that higher levels may not experience lack of confidence, but that this particular activity may not be useful in encouraging more communicatively-abled students.

Possible ways to assess effectiveness of the activity formally in the future might be to compare class scores with classes who have performed this activity with those who have not, or to ask the students to reflect on the activity themselves in a survey provided by the teacher. A reflection on the first group discussion after the activity has been completed could also be useful. Some reflective questions a teacher may consider asking their students can be seen below:

- *Do you feel the activity helped prepare you to discuss the topic of the lesson?*
- *Did you feel more confident during discussions because of this activity?*
- *Do you feel you were able to generate content effectively and use the Skill Phrases while speaking with your partner during the dialogue?*
- *Do you feel you wasted time sharing your ideas during the group discussion?*

Nguyen Minh Hue (2010) states in *Encouraging Reluctant ESL/EFL Learners to Speak in the Classroom*, “[a] sense of success and high self-perceived communication competence can be easily achieved by students if easy tasks with clear and simple goals are used in the first place.” Overall, this gap-fill activity is meant to boost the confidence of low-level students by supplying them with the Skill Phrases in a sequence that needs to be filled with student content. It allots time for students to focus on generating their own ideas in an organized manner that they can work off of in later discussions. Willingness to Communicate can increase, which in turn can lead to deeper and more meaningful discussions that are supported by student-generated content as well as Skill-Phrase use.

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APPENDIX

Question 1 – Values (価値、価値観)

Is it more important to be kind, honest, or respectful to others?

- A. Who would like to start?
B. CIS?
- A. Sure, go ahead. WDYT?
B. IMO it is most important to be _____ to _____ (who).
A. WDYTS?
B. IB _____.
- A. I see. CIAAQ?
B. Go ahead.
- 1) What if someone _____ (lies, is rude, etc.) to you?
2) If someone _____ to me I would _____. DYU?
A. Yes, I understand / Sorry, I don't understand. Can you explain?
B. Would you like to say something?
A. Yes.
B. WYO about this question?
- A. IT it is most important to be _____ to _____.
B. Okay. CYTMW?
A. IB if we are _____ to _____ it makes us _____.
B. CYGMAE?
- A. FE, _____. DYFM?
B. Yes, I understand / Sorry, I don't understand. CYE?
A. Do you have any questions?
B. No, I'm okay.
A. Okay, what shall we discuss next?
B. Let's discuss Question 2.