Improved Autonomy via Student-Created Questions
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ABSTRACT

The goals of discussion classes at Rikkyo University's Center for English Discussion Class (EDC) are to increase student speaking, listening, and fluency abilities. Attention is also paid to the learning of forms that are used throughout those domains. In order to improve student interest in class discussions, I modified the curriculum by having students create their own original questions for class discussions. Too often I found that students would not think critically about the in-text questions, so those questions were removed, which impelled students to think critically about the topic at hand. The underlying purpose of this activity was to increase student autonomy and to have them apply critical thinking skills. By using their own questions, ideally, students would have more of a stake in the discussion and would participate more actively. This paper describes the problem with autonomy as I observed it, my intervention with handouts and alternative activities, and the results of those changes.

INTRODUCTION

Rikkyo University's English Discussion Class (EDC) is a strongly unified curriculum based on the goals and outcomes of communicative language teaching. The EDC aims to provide students with a variety of discussion skills so that they can have an extended discussion in English without intervention from their teachers (Hurling, 2012). For 14 weeks each semester, students practice these skills in discussions on general topics, such as the environment and university life. In each lesson, students participate in two extended group discussions, and for each of these, the topic is prescribed by the student textbook. As there are two discussions on the same overarching theme (e.g., crime and punishment), the themes are split into sub-topics for the two separate discussions (e.g., petty crime and serious crime). Preceding the discussion, these sub-topics are discussed somewhat less formally, during an activity which should activate the students' schemata, or prior knowledge on a topic. This time can be considered as "the discussion before the discussion," and it is an important step in which students are given time to generate ideas and build on previous knowledge, usually with just one other student in pairs. Once ample time for this preparation is complete, the students are then ready to begin the larger, more formally arranged group discussion. In between these two stages of the class is where I introduced the writing activity.

The purpose of this activity was to improve student autonomy, though the term itself is problematic to define (Bruce, 1995). An early advocate of learner autonomy, Holec (1981) emphasized the need to simultaneously enhance learners' abilities and address the constraints on their freedom to exercise those abilities. At its base, autonomy means students making their own decisions rather than being influenced by someone else, as well as showing a capacity for "detachment, critical reflection, decision making, and independent action" (Little, 1991, p. 11). A complementary aspect of student autonomy is the ability to think critically about a topic, or independent, reasoned analysis. Critical thinking is in itself another term subject to various interpretations—defined as "reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do" (Ennis, 1987, p.12); Halpern (2002) explained critical thinking as "…thinking that is purposeful, reasoned, and goal-directed—the kind of thinking involved in solving problems, formulating inferences, calculating likelihoods, and making decisions" (p. 5). It would seem these skills go hand in hand. For one to think critically, he/she needs to think independently, namely without specific dictates of an instructor, and for autonomous competency, learners must make

decisions without the intervention of the instructor. For this class activity, the goal was for students to gain autonomy to help facilitate classroom discussions, and the primary means used to attain that autonomy were through the application of critical thinking skills. To that end, students were asked to think of and write their own questions for the discussions rather than simply use the pre-written questions from the textbook. In this course, past interventions (James, 2015; Hurrell, 2016) have shown the efficacy of bringing critical thinking and creative choice to the attention of the students, and as a way to increase student involvement and understanding of the multifaceted goals of the EDC through rigorous discussion. By replacing the textbook's prompts with students' own questions, students needed to use their discretion and responsibility for the successful initiation of a discussion. At the same time, this change allowed students the freedom of choice.

DISCUSSION

Normally in EDC discussions, students will read one of two questions in the textbook to begin, and while this would seem to be an ostensibly straightforward method for initiating a discussion, I observed that a certain problem occurred with this portion of the class, a problem frequent enough to warrant an intervention to adapt and attempt a different approach, one that utilized the students' critical thinking (and creativity) in order to increase student autonomy.

Because the discussion questions were imposed by the text (and/or the instructor), this inadvertently allowed for a form of passivity to have a negative influence and be the source of confusion, at least at the start of the talk. It was possible, even frequent, that students would read these discussion prompt questions, usually for the first time, without thinking deeply about the questions' meaning. The result of this was that discussions began with the students confused and unsure about how to start, and only after long, drawn-out silence would any student attempt to get the discussion on track. In short, many students often did not think critically about the discussion questions at the very onset, which unsurprisingly had an adverse effect on the quality of the discussion, and that is what I wanted to prevent.

It can be argued that this issue extends from the very nature of the course's unified curriculum. While a unified curriculum offers many benefits to both students and teachers such as equal educational opportunities (Brown, 2001) and collaboration among teachers (Brereton, 2019), unintended consequences of employing a unified curriculum can still occur. An inadvertent effect of using a unified curriculum and textbook is a negation of student choice. Breen and Littlejohn (2000) point out that a pedagogy that does not call for or allow students to make their own decisions could convey that they are not allowed to or are incapable of that autonomy (p. 21). Further evidence shows that many learners are placed in a responsive and passive role in the classroom (Chaudron, 1988; van Lier, 1988). In light of this, the pre-written discussion questions seemed to be the heart of this problem of passivity and disconnection. Therefore, in the Fall semester, in order for students to avoid this issue associated with the unified text, they were instead instructed to write their own questions. These questions were used to initiate discussions, and in this way, the students were thinking critically about the topic and establishing more autonomy.

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

The activity was done with eight classes in total throughout the Fall semester. One Level I class (TOEIC listening and reading combined score 680 and above), five Level II classes (TOEIC 480-679), and two Level III classes (TOEIC score 280-479) were chosen as participants. At the beginning of each lesson, students participate in language-focused learning that is a partial focus of the later discussions. Following this, the class began the pre-discussion activity outlined above, and after this point of the class, the intervention was used. The textbook was used as normal until this part of the lesson.

Then handouts were provided to students (see Appendix, for example), which referred to the textbooks' pre-discussion activities, and in pairs or groups of three, students discussed the topic and came up with ideas. In this phase, if not earlier, the schemata on that topic should have been raised in students' minds. The significance of the separate sheet was that it drew attention away from the text to the new task. The handouts contained instructions and blanks where there had been, in the previous semester, questions in the textbook. Students were asked to write one question (more if time permitted) for the discussion, and they were encouraged to choose a topic or sub-topic that was most interesting to them. This was to emphasize their own choice and interests, which is at the core of autonomous learning. This was a timed activity, and students were told they only had two to three minutes to think and write a question; in practice, this time limit was often stretched, depending on the general speed of each student, and their progress was closely monitored. Even with the extended time, students were aware that time was an important factor and that they should work diligently, if not quickly, to complete the task.

For the first few weeks of this activity, scaffolding was provided to help students write questions, something that, for many, was likely a novel (and challenging) task. Example opinion questions were given, and students often used those templates. Although autonomy was one of the goals of the activity, it would have been inappropriate for simply any question to be asked; some prescribed parameters were necessary, and in fact helpful to achieve autonomy. The stipulations were that questions must be a) on topic and b) an opinion question, one that could be answered with "In my opinion,..." Though the general topic was determined by the course text, students could introduce new elements to the group discussion by writing an original question on a new sub-topic while still staying within the confines of the topic domain. For example, one discussion topic was "traditional Japanese culture," and for the pre-discussion activity, some examples of traditional games like *shogi* and sports like *sumo* were provided in the pre-discussion material. Based on informal observations of questions at this writing stage, most students chose one or two of the topics listed, but frequently some students would introduce a new sub-topic, like traditional architecture, or religious customs, something not found in the textbook at all. This novelty, or the introduction of new ideas, showed that those students were thinking critically and synthesizing their knowledge to bring originality to the discussion. If students reached this stage of production, then the intervention could be deemed successful; those students were clearly participating actively, with none of the passivity displayed by reading question prompts by rote. Bloom's taxonomy regards synthesis, or creation, as the highest-level thinking skill, in which students "compile information together in a different way by combining elements in a new pattern..." (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001, p. 1).

The time limit was an intentional restriction, as there is a large variance in writing speed among students, i.e., some students write faster than others. Because there was an added pressure of producing a question within a certain timeframe, there was little wasted time waiting for everyone to complete their questions. Most students were able to complete a question in that time, though a small number of students found it difficult and were unable to finish because there were always more questions than they had time to discuss, this did not negatively affect discussions. I reiterated with each activity that correct spelling and perfectly grammatical sentences were not important to the activity, that communicating their ideas was much more important. As long as their question was understood, it was fine. In fact, if a student wrote a question that others did not understand, it was a good opportunity for all group members to use negotiation of meaning to achieve understanding, but through discussion. I hoped that by lowering expectations in terms of the writing form, students would feel uninhibited in writing without strictures of perfection.

Once students finished writing their questions, they then began their discussion, in groups of three to five. Rather than having one student recite the pre-written questions, now students had

at least three, sometimes many more, of their own questions that reflected their own ideas and interests. Before the discussion, students were instructed to share by reading their questions aloud to the others, so that all questions could be considered. A discussion skill used to begin a discussion or change topic was simply to ask "What shall we discuss first/next?" Students then began a quick phase of negotiation, which further strengthened their autonomy as a group. Among the several questions, the ones to be chosen by everyone was most likely one that a majority of students were interested in.

This activity was given to students starting in week two in the Fall semester and continued until week fourteen. It was helpful to provide help in the form of scaffolding to help students write their questions, but after several weeks of practice, this scaffolding became unnecessary for the vast majority of students. Within a few weeks, I found the handouts to be unnecessary, but I continued to preclude the usage of the textbook questions; students wrote their questions in blank spaces in the textbook or on separate paper. By the end of the Fall semester, students became more comfortable in writing questions, which was noticeable in the writing speed and fluency most (but not all) students exhibited.

CONCLUSION

Because the goal was to increase student autonomy, by the students completing the activities shows that it was successful in fostering their own interests as well as employing critical thinking. By using their own ideas, students had more of a stake in discussions and participated more actively. In the first few weeks of the activity, the majority of questions were simply opinion questions on content from the pre-discussion activity. However, by the end of the semester—after students had several weeks of practice and had written several of these questions—the number of "outside" topics and subtopics increased, and students seemed to grow more comfortable in using more original ideas. For example, in a discussion on the theme of the influence of celebrities, a few sub-categories were provided in the pre-discussion activity, like politicians and musicians. While some students chose these subtopics as the source of their written questions, there were also many original questions such as "*Are YouTubers like Hikkakin good or bad role models*" and "*Do you think businessmen and business women are good influences? For example, Bill Gates and Masayoshi Son*?" These questions were on topic and kept the same overarching theme, but they also displayed original and creative thought, a sign that students were thinking about the main topic more critically. Some tweaked a given prompt to ask about a different viewpoint or comparison, and others directly introduced a new subtopic.

One drawback was that some students tended to dominate the discussions and the question selection, which was also an issue before this intervention. One adaptation that could be made would be to assign a "selector" role that changes with each discussion; in this way, the quieter students would be able to–would in fact need to–participate by choosing the topics at hand. Perhaps the biggest challenge for most students was the double task of a) using their critical thinking and imagination to think of a question and b) writing that question within the timeframe without feeling confined by writing "perfect" English. As writing is not a skill that was taught in the course, students had the responsibility to utilize this skill, and within a limited timeframe. I found there was a range of writing ability, even among the higher-level students, and many students struggled with that above-mentioned perfection most were used to. As the semester progressed and students realized that ideas were more important than strict adherence to writing rules, for many a greater ease developed and the writing times decreased. In the future, this activity could be improved by having students select the topic itself, arrange pre-discussion materials, and determine the outcomes and goals of the individual discussions. This would entail a greater amount of autonomy on the students' parts, but could also prove challenging in some ways.

Making sure that students choose appropriate topics would perhaps be the central concern of instructors. It would be difficult for instructors to ensure students choose a "Goldilocks" topic, one that is not too easy, not too difficult, and one general enough to be interesting for most students. Though challenging, this further adaptation could create the conditions for a course that could be closer to a true tasked-based system of communicative language teaching.

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APPENDIX – Example handout for a pre-discussion activity

Discussion 2: Traditional Culture

Write Your Own Question!

The four main topics are historical places, games and sports, literature, and arts.
Which of these topics do you want to talk about in the discussion? Which is the most interesting to **you**?
Write ONE question for the group discussion on the most interesting topic to you.
Use your imagination and be creative! You can write an *original* question on this larger topic of "Traditional Culture."

For example: Is Japanese literature important or not important (for young people)?
                         What are some traditional Japanese games and sports you think are interesting?
                         Which is better, traditional Japanese arts (like kabuki), or traditional Western arts (like opera)?
                         Etc.….

Your question(s):

_____

_____

When everyone is finished writing, SHARE your question with the group. Then use Choosing Topics to begin your discussion: "What shall we discuss first?" "Let's discuss…[TOPIC]."