

# Towards a Mastery-Based Lesson

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## ABSTRACT

This paper is an interpretation of a principled classroom activity which monitored English Discussion Class (EDC) students' ability to effectively analyze their own and each other's learning needs over three review lessons prior to Discussion Test classes. Under a unified teaching/lesson staging curriculum, the classroom activity also intended to assess, informally through observations, to what extent the students understood the sound pedagogical methodologies which underpin the course curriculum. Observations on student behaviors first led me to value a deductive instructional approach and to recognize the importance of instructing the "why". This study's observations highlighted the need to clarify to the students the rationale and reasoning behind the choices that educators make.

## INTRODUCTION

The English Discussion Class at Rikkyo University operates under a unified curriculum. Hurling (2012) describes the EDC as a mandatory course for all first-year students designed to develop fluency and communicative competence in English, and aims to develop students who will not only "have the ability to discuss contemporary topics with peers in English" (p. 2) but who will also "value discussing topics in-depth using English" (p. 4). There is, of course, a process to this outcome. The instructors and students adhere to a prescribed lesson staging over a 100-minute university class for 14 weeks. Typically, at the start of the lesson, students focus on fluency, exchanging ideas on the lesson's topic. The students and instructor then work through a target language presentation, followed by semi-controlled practices with timely feedback. The class then transitions into preparation for discussion and subsequently an extended group discussion. Each activity has distinct and clear objectives.

Over the course of the semester I carried out a small-scale observational study of 5 classes and this subsequent paper pertains to ask and answer two main questions:

1. Could the students effectively analyze their strengths and weaknesses without explicit "top-down" instruction/feedback?
2. And more pertinently, how much did the students want to take control of their learning needs?

In this particular context (an English Discussion Class), I pre-empted this may be a challenge as discussion class students, under a unified curriculum, were very much used to being told what, how and when to study. I was particularly interested in their comprehension of the "why?" Were the students aware of "why" they were studying a particular task. If the students felt they had arrived at a point of "mastery" or adequate comprehension, they should surely be permitted to move on at their own pace. This, of course, is hard to quantify what "mastery" means; for this activity, the students were instructed to move on when they felt they had a sufficient understanding to perform well in the following Discussion Test lesson.

Fundamentally this was a pilot study into mastery-based learning within a unified curriculum and aimed to offer the students an opportunity to advance through the review lesson staging at their own pace and in tune with their own (and partner's) learning needs. This small-scale study and activity focused on five Level II discussion classes of similar levels of ability

(TOEIC score range of 480-679). Also, I chose the classes based upon my perception of their cohesiveness and productive group dynamic and motivation.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Motivation/Autonomy**

One major concern I had prior to this study was a perceived lack of intrinsic motivation most generally amongst first-year English Discussion Class students. Over the past five years of teaching the English discussion course, I have observed common behavioral trends. One such trend being that the primary concern of most students is to attain the passing grade and gain their credit for the year, instead of seizing the opportunity to fully expand and develop their English communicative ability. The lack of motivation within the Japanese university system has been covered in detail by Ushioda (2013), who observed that “students’ sudden release from [university entrance] examination pressures means that they no longer have an unquestionable rationale or motivation for studying hard” (p.10). The classroom activity intended, partly, to buck this trend, to veer away from the tried, tested and somewhat formulaic teaching practices practiced under the unified curriculum. As a result of the activity, the students now had full control over what they wanted to study (or master) the lesson before their Discussion Test. Second language acquisition requires learners to exert control of their own learning; in a university language classroom, students benefit from setting their own goals and collaborating with their classmates to achieve these goals (Bain, 2004; Brown, 2007; Ehrman & Dörnyei, 1998).

During the lesson, I intervened with support (scaffolded guidance/instruction) and during a post-task debrief, I encouraged the students to have a more active role in their lesson. This is, of course, hard to quantify and prove whether it is actually helpful to the students, but one would hope timely teacher intervention would benefit the students, hoping that this would increase better collaboration in the classroom and towards a more autonomous learning environment. Littlewood (1999), in a study on East Asian learners, proposed that reactive autonomy—an organizational step toward proactive individual decision making—may be more prevalent amongst Japanese university students. Thus, giving the students staged prompts toward self-directed learning and better collaboration.

### **Emphasizing peer support and coaching**

By pairing students together, I had hoped that, through this process, students would take on the role of the “teacher” in an area that they felt more comfortable with than their peer/partner, thus achieving a sense of community or cooperation. This would have been hopefully a step in the right direction—fully underlining the importance of interaction between learners—and emphasizing peer support and coaching (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). In terms of the speaking fluency station, without the teacher leading the speaking fluency (3/2/1) task, I had hoped this might have reduced the pressure and anxiety in performance of such “public” speaking turns. The students themselves had an opportunity to support each other in the fluency skill more as a listener—as Nation highlights, a key component of a successful fluency activity is where “there is support and encouragement for the learner to perform at a higher level” (2009, p. 153). However, the speaking fluency turned into moreover of an informal chat, with the listener not encouraging the speaker to produce “better, more fluent” speaking turns.

## **PROCEDURE**

The students were placed in pairs or groups of three and for approximately 45 minutes (the first half of the lesson) the students were given the choice of the following areas to focus their attention

on. Whilst the students were taking part in the classroom activity if necessary the instructor intervened to scaffold the tasks and provide clarification where appropriate.

These areas of focus translate to the textbook lesson staging prior to the first extended discussion. The allotted time of 45 minutes also roughly corresponds with the optimal and prescribed curriculum pacing until Discussion 1. For each skill focus, an area of the classroom was set aside as a “station” and appropriate activities and tasks were placed on the table. The students were given an allotted time of 45 minutes and they could use this time at any of the stations as they saw appropriate. The instructor monitored the students’ interaction and offered timely help, where applicable, to answer questions, clarify and explain. At the end of the allotted time, the students returned to their tables to take part in the lesson’s first extended discussion.

### **Speaking fluency tasks**

Two types of prompts were placed on the station for the students to attempt the speaking fluency task. One set of prompts were designed to be more difficult than the other prompts. The rationale was that the listener in the pair would have to employ more communication skills (paraphrasing and clarification) in order to help the speaker during their speaking turn.

### **Target language review/explanation**

The students were given a set of cards of which they had to match the discussion skill phrases with an explanation of why they use them in discussions. This task is a feature of the discussion skill presentation that instructors in an EDC class employ to highlight the need for the discussion skill.

### **Target language practice (controlled)**

A dialogue gap-fill exercise was used by the students to place the correct discussion skill phrase in the appropriate place. The students were then asked to read the dialogue to increase their speaking fluency.

### **Target language practice (free/gamified)**

The students were offered a chance to use a PowerPoint game board on a PC set at the station to record how many instances of the target language they had used in a freer practice. Hopefully, by “gamifying” the target test language, students would have been better able to automatize the discussion skills of which they themselves had chosen to further practice.

### **Discussion preparation for Discussion 1**

With the focus being on idea and content generation for the discussion, infographics on the discussion topic were placed on the table at this preparation station. This is not a feature of the regular English discussion textbook and the rationale behind this was to give the students some visually presented data that they might be able to use in their discussions. The students also used their textbook discussion preparation as an alternative to generate ideas to discuss in the class extended discussion.

### **Goal setting for Discussion 1**

This station/task is not a feature of the discussion class textbook and I thought it might be advantageous to add an extra component to the lesson staging prior to Discussion 1. This goal-setting activity was designed to focus the students’ attention on the discussion question that they were to discuss. The worksheet (Appendix A) tasked the students to pre-empt which discussion skill phrases and ideas they could use in the two discussion questions. The students were

encouraged to do this task towards the end of the allotted 45 minutes so as they could carry these preparations smoothly over into Discussion 1.

## **VARIATIONS**

It became apparent during the first round of the study (Lesson 4 review) that the students, as a whole, were mostly unfamiliar with simply negotiating in pairs as to which area to focus on. For the most part, the students did not check each station first in order to make a decision of which skill to improve/review, or to agree a time limit that they would like to spend on a given task. Overall, there was a lack of initiative, enthusiasm and drive; the group pairings passively approached each task and appeared indifferent to taking the opportunity to ready themselves for the test in the next lesson. It might have been advantageous to prepare a “to-do” list before the activity began. The students would have to opportunity to negotiate together, in terms of priority, which stations to focus on.

I had hoped that constant teacher encouragement and appraisal of the few positives that came out of the task may have nudged the students forward for better collaboration in the subsequent two review lessons; however, this was not the case. In review Lessons 8 and 12, although the students displayed a slightly better improvement—I noted that the pairs were choosing which station to focus on and differentiating the objectives of each task—generally I did not observe an obvious and clear improvement in the students approach to the station task quite apathetically, the group pairings appeared to do the bare minimum. In hindsight, giving more specific individual feedback and how the students approached the activity may have produced better results in subsequent lessons.

Disappointingly, through my observations and interactions with the students during the station activities, I noted broadly the paucity of peer support. The speaking fluency task was a relevant example. During speaking turns in the fluency task, often students struggled with the more challenging prompts; the listeners, on the whole neglected to help and guide their partners through this activity through the use of paraphrasing or simple reactions to encourage. In view of this, I would certainly introduce a function of “leader” to each task or station. This may foster more peer support and empower “stronger” students to take more of an active role.

This activity, I feel, is generally applicable to the majority of EDC students (Levels II and III). However, with students of a higher communicative ability (Level I) I believe they would prefer to focus on content generation and goal setting more than speaking fluency and target language practice. The stations would have to be re-configured appropriately.

## **CONCLUSION**

There were limitations to this small-scale pilot study most obviously the sample size of 30 students. One mitigating factor was that of timing. This study was conducted in the second semester where first term routine habits had been set. Furthermore, the subjective nature of anecdotal observations (evidence viewed through the perception of the course instructor only).

In a broad generalization of the small sample, the students that participated in the study seem to be somewhat unaware of the clear distinction between each stage of the lesson plan/course textbook. From fluency to automaticity of the target language, through to discussion preparation and idea generation to goal setting for discussion. Each station was approached by the students as a casual conversation. Without teacher-led instruction and guidance, the students were reluctant to or incapable of focusing their attention on these precise objectives. To clarify, I was not monitoring the participants’ “mood” but making an observational judgment on whether the students were focusing on the exact skill that each station required. In consideration of these

findings and the study's line of inquiry, I do believe it is possible to foster and facilitate a more student-centered learning environment, but it is imperative that it is done on a macro-curricula level and not in the second semester of a first-year course. Good student practices and behaviours that encourage autonomous self-directed learning and peer-to-peer collaborative support must exist equally alongside any given unified curriculum.

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## APPENDIX A – Goal setting for Discussion 1, Lesson 12

*Q1. What is the best punishment for petty crimes?*

*Good ideas from the preparation to discuss more deeply*

*Viewpoints to consider* “How about from (X’s) point of view?” “OK, from (X’s) point of view...”

*Sources of information to share* “How do you know about that?” “I saw/read/heard (...)”

*Advantages and disadvantages* “What’s an (adv/disadv) of (...)?” “One (adv/disadv) of (...) is...”

*Disadvantages of paying a fine – difficult for poorer people to pay.*

*Ideas to compare* “Which is (...) A or B?” “A is (...) than B....”

*Useful adjectives to use; Serious/dangerous/effective/strict/light/hard*