

Reflections on an unexpected presentation of turn-taking difficulties in an English discussion class

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Abstract

In this paper, I reflect on a journal kept over the last six lessons with intermediate level Japanese learners of English in Rikkyo University's English Discussion Class. The class in question was observed to speak excessively without yielding the floor and then get stuck unsuccessfully trying to negotiate for meaning. Observations from other teachers' previous work and a review of the journal entries suggest that in addition to using language too far above the group's linguistic ability, problems with turn-taking and signaling comprehension are likely contributing factors to the difficulties that were observed. Feedback and advice targeted at beginning with simple, easy to understand utterances led to a positive improvement toward the end of the semester, but without repeating the advice in a later lesson, the improvements did not continue. It is suggested that identifying the problem earlier and repeating the advice for multiple lessons may have helped create lasting change and hope to better identify and address similar problems in the future.

Keywords: turn-taking, comprehension, teacher journal

Introduction

All incoming first-year students at Rikkyo University are required to take one semester of an English Discussion Class (EDC). The goals for the class are based around building communicative abilities with a specific focus on developing fluency and the ability to negotiate for meaning. Students are also taught specific "Discussion Skill" phrases to help scaffold their communicative abilities, helping to make themselves more easily understood and helping to take turns and share speaking time in their discussion groups. During the semester, students are expected to develop the ability to discuss contemporary issues with their classmates entirely in English (Hurling, 2012). In the spring 2021 semester, classes began in person for either two or three lessons, depending on the specific class, before switching to an online format using the Zoom platform as a response to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. This paper will follow the challenges and progress of one intermediate level discussion class that had three face-to-face lessons before continuing online for 11 out of the 14 total EDC lessons.

For most students, this is their first class that focuses so heavily on communication, and many of them have never tried to sustain a group discussion in English prior to starting in the EDC. As such, it is normal for students to struggle with navigating their discussions. In previous semesters, it was common for students to struggle to speak due to shyness or a self-perceived lack of language ability. However, in the spring 2021 semester, one class exhibited a different problem with communication. Some students would regularly hold the floor and speak for an excessively long period of time while simultaneously being unable to clearly explain the ideas that they were trying to share. It seemed that the speaker may have lacked the vocabulary to explain an idea clearly or that they may not have been able to simplify an idea to the level that their classmates could understand it. As these students were speaking, their classmates usually waited patiently despite their lack of understanding, without ever stopping the student during their turn to ask for clarification. In many

cases, this was followed up with failed attempts at negotiation for meaning as another student would try to explain the first speaker's ideas to the group and again often hold the floor despite their classmates not being able to understand this attempt at paraphrasing. In the end, students spent a lot of time frustrated and unable to move on their discussions because they were stuck trying to clarify too many comprehension problems at the same time.

Early in the semester, with the first lessons being face-to-face and into the first few online lessons, nothing stood out as particularly unusual. Some students struggled, using the new discussion skills they were learning, and some students struggled in communicating whether they understood their classmates, but the class did not seem to have any unique difficulties early on. In my experience, these challenges were not unusual in the EDC. Most classes will have some difficulty acquiring the new phrases they are taught, and many classes will have some difficulty conveying their comprehension or lack thereof. The early topics of discussion were concrete and relatable to the students' own experiences which certainly made the discussions approachable. When these students did possess the language ability to discuss a topic, they did fine.

However, in the seventh lesson, students were asked to discuss "The Globalization of Japanese Culture" and the discussions seemed to run into problems that I had not expected. In that lesson, two of the eight students present were marked for poor participation and six of the eight students were marked low in their use of communication skills, a measure of their attempts to communicate comprehension and solve communication problems. Initially, I just thought it was an off day or a difficult topic, but the class continued to have similar problems in the next two classes, including their second discussion test in the ninth lesson. This was when I noticed that the groups would get stuck trying to understand each other on a more challenging idea and would derail their discussion trying to solve that issue, failing to move the discussion forward and leaving the students to finish the activity frustrated, without really having gotten to discuss the topic. After the second discussion test lesson, I felt like I was starting to understand what was happening and began to keep a short journal after classes to better understand the students' behavior and to look for ways to help the students navigate their discussions more successfully.

Looking at past articles from other teachers teaching the EDC gave me a starting point for evaluating my notes, diagnosing the problem, and helping the students to improve. Webster (2018) wrote about working with shy or introverted students and noted that the students he observed were often hesitant to speak and would even pass on taking a turn rather than offering their opinion. This wouldn't explain the tendency of some students to speak excessively but may have been part of the reason that their classmates were unwilling to stop them to clarify and instead waiting until they stopped speaking on their own. Young (2014) suggested that students struggle with turn-taking and noticed that a failure to signify the end of one's turn and demonstrate that the floor was open led to students struggling to identify the appropriate time to start speaking. This could explain why students failed to speak up early and prevent the speaker from continuing when they were not being understood. It could also suggest that the speaker may be unsure of how to finish their turn and may keep talking waiting for some signal that another speaker is ready. Young (2015) also noted that students seemed to follow a limited number of strategies for passing turns, meaning that if individual students were not leaving a clear chance for one of these transitions, the group may not be able to change speakers effectively. Hennessy (2020) found that more advanced students sometimes chose to give the entirety of their thoughts on a topic at once, only fully yielding the floor when their ideas were completely explained. He also noted that students did not seem to naturally want to comment on the ideas of other students in a discussion and often struggled to interact with another student's

idea. This could be an explanation for the student who spoke excessively, that they intended to share all of their thoughts at once but lacked the language ability to do so clearly. Kambe (2015) added another useful observation, noting that students frequently found themselves limited by vocabulary and were frustrated by their inability to express their ideas. This seemed to be a certainty in this group, where they clearly had ideas that they wanted to share but were not able to do so clearly. Combining this research with my own previous observations of students taking this course did give me some insight into potential reasons for the students' struggles. As topics became more abstract and challenging, students were likely struggling with a lack of vocabulary and their struggles with turn-taking and potential hesitancy to interject may have created situations where they were unable to find an appropriate time to begin negotiating for meaning. In the end, they were forced to try to solve multiple communication breakdowns simultaneously. While this negotiation for meaning and solving of communication problems should be an opportunity for language acquisition (Mackey, 1999; Toth & Davin, 2016), the attempt to solve the problem usually came too late for the students to be able to fully fix their comprehension problems, inevitably leading to further frustration.

The question then became, how could this problem be addressed? Young (2015) suggested that students needed to be taught strategies for signaling the end of their turn. Hennessy (2020) suggested tailoring feedback to specifically focus on turn-taking. Hart (2019) noted the importance of group dynamics for successful discussions and focused on how influential students have the ability to improve or derail a discussion. Suzuki (2018) noted the value of feedback focused on how students' own behavior was impacting their classroom and their discussions. Kean (2018) found that students in the EDC seemed to respond best to positive feedback about their successes in a discussion. I also referred to Krashen (2009) and the Input Hypothesis, emphasizing that for students to progress and succeed in a target language, they needed comprehensible input that was close to their current level. If students continued to fail to understand their discussions, it would be unlikely that they would improve. It has also been found that despite the value in attempting to solve communication problems and get to this comprehensible input, non-native speakers do sometimes pretend to understand rather than entering the process of negotiation of meaning (Zwaard & Bannink, 2016). This would suggest that just asking them to work together when they fail to understand something would certainly be insufficient.

In order to successfully navigate a discussion and see an improvement in English skills, it would be necessary to help students have a discussion where they were able to successfully transition between speakers and produce content that was comprehensible to their classmates. This paper will review my teaching journal entries for the final six lessons and will explain how I attempted to help the students work together more effectively.

Discussion

Journal Entries

I began keeping a journal for this class after the second discussion test in the ninth lesson. In that first entry, I wrote that a few students seemed to be happy to volunteer to speak and share their opinions but that they would often attempt to explain something that they either lacked the language abilities to explain clearly or that was too much for their classmates to understand. This led to extended periods of negotiation for meaning and hurt the group's ability to move their discussion forward. One student in particular stood out as speaking excessively and I wrote a note for feedback

that they needed to relax and that just talking was more important than worrying about whether what they said was “correct.” For a different group, I wrote that students needed to take shorter turns and yield the floor more readily to help the entire group have more chances to speak.

In the following lesson students were asked to discuss using English at work and work-life balance. Their new target language was meant to help them discuss different viewpoints to allow for more perspectives in their discussion. I noted that students were hesitant to interrupt each other and that they rarely asked questions. They also did very little to show whether they understood their classmates. In a few cases, students did hold the floor for a longer period of time, and as an observer, it seemed to me that they were explaining more than they needed to. In this lesson, I tried to give this class advice that I had often given to classes that were quiet when listening in the past and encouraged them to do more to show their classmates if they understood or not. A few students did take this advice in their second discussion, but most still continued to be quiet listeners. The behavior of speakers did not change, and students continued to explain more than necessary.

The 11th lesson focused on social media and students discussed students and social media as well as society and social media. The new target language was related to balancing their opinions by discussing the advantages and disadvantages of the topic. Students made good use of the target language in the first discussion, and it helped to keep their discussion moving when compared to the previous two lessons. I wrote that they were not discussing each other’s ideas but that using the target language did help them share their ideas and seemed to help them pass the turn to another speaker. However, the second discussion again included long turns with excessive explanation that was difficult for the group to understand. Following the second discussion, I gave post-activity feedback that they should start simple and then volunteer to speak again later if they still had something to share for a given topic.

The 12th lesson was one of the most problematic of the semester. The students were expected to talk about punishments for petty and serious crimes and were given the discussion skill of asking for and giving sources for the information they used in their discussions. This topic and discussion skill have been difficult for many classes in the past and students often have difficulty coming up with an answer they are comfortable with. This class was no different. In the first discussion I wrote that, while some students did seem to remember to use the target language, they struggled with finding a good place to interject to ask their classmates about their ideas. Students also struggled to support their opinions. After the discussion I reminded students that they needed to support their opinions and gave them some examples of places in their discussions where it would have been beneficial to interject to ask their classmates for a source. In the second discussion students discussed the punishment for serious crimes and most of the students struggled to clearly explain their thoughts. It seemed like the listeners were often struggling to understand the speaker. I noticed multiple occasions where a student provided a great opportunity for their classmates to ask them about their ideas, but the listeners would rarely pick up on this chance. I also saw few attempts to clarify and solve communication issues. Students instead just let the turns pass without interacting with each other’s ideas at all. With the final discussion test coming in the next class, I wrote a note to myself that I needed to emphasize simplicity to the students in the preparation activities they would do before their test if they were to have a chance of having a successful discussion.

The final discussion test was administered in the 13th lesson. Students were given no new language to use, and their topics were ways to reduce poverty and possible solutions to the aging population problem in Japan. Based on my notes from the previous class, I decided that I would emphasize starting with short, simple answers from the beginning of the lesson. Students had two

practice discussions on the topics with classmates who would not be in their group for the test, and before each practice, I asked the students to start with simple, easy to understand answers and told them that they could speak a second time later if they felt they had something more to say. They seemed to take my advice, and while they rarely took the opportunity to speak again on a topic, they their speaking turns shorter and linguistically simpler, and they were able to understand each other and move the discussion forward. After the practice, the students changed groups and had an extended discussion. I observed the groups one at a time, and I reminded them once more before starting their discussions to start simple and speak more than once on a topic if they felt they had more to say. All three groups seemed to take this advice and I wrote in my journal that the class had their best discussions of the semester. Students did still struggle to ask questions about their classmates' ideas, but they did a better job of signaling comprehension, and they were able to build on what their classmates said instead of answering the question from the beginning every time they changed speaker. I wrote that one group quickly used many of the discussion skills they were expected to and for another group I wrote that they were doing more follow-up and taking more speaking turns compared to their usual behavior. I wrote that this lesson suggested to me that a key part of being able to work as a group is ensuring that each student produces output that is understandable for the entire group.

The last lesson of the semester was a review and after the success of the previous lesson, I thought it was unnecessary to emphasize simplicity and turn-taking again. I was quickly proven wrong as students reverted to their old habits. The topics for this lesson were how to have good discussions and how to gain skills and personal qualities while at university. In both discussions, a few students held the floor for an unnecessarily long period of time and talked themselves into a corner where they were unsure whether their ideas were understood. Their classmates did not interject to clarify and when the speaker yielded the floor the listeners didn't have an easy way to comment on what the previous speaker had said. Interestingly, their discussions on having a good discussion did shed some light on the problems they had. Students said that when they were quiet listeners the whole group was shy. They also stated that they thought asking questions was challenging for their group. A few students said if they had more knowledge on a topic they could talk more smoothly. This suggested to me that students were unsure of themselves with some of the discussion topics and that they needed more help identifying the appropriate times to join into a discussion to ask questions as well as when to yield the floor as a speaker.

Reflection

My first instinct when trying to help this class was to focus on how some students would try to speak beyond their current abilities. Looking back at my journal does make me think that while this was likely part of the issue, it was certainly not the entire problem. In addition to the comments about students struggling to understand each other when they did attempt to negotiate for meaning on these difficult ideas, many of my notes were about listeners not demonstrating whether they understood the speaker and speakers not yielding the floor until they had already said too much for their classmates to interact with. When thinking about my notes and considering the work of other teachers in the program it seems reasonable to suggest that difficulties with signaling the end of a speaking turn and a hesitation to interject while another student is speaking contributed to the students struggles with comprehension and interaction. This also means that there are more ways for me to address this issue if it arises in future classes and lets me avoid simply telling students to

limit themselves when speaking and not encouraging them to push their limits.

The success in the 13th lesson in emphasizing starting simple is something I need to remember for future classes. In addition to helping in this situation, where students sometimes spoke beyond their classmates' ability to understand, it seemed to have very positive effects on turn-taking, a problem that has been detailed quite a bit in the EDC (Hennessy, 2020; Young, 2014; Young, 2015). I wish that I had emphasized this earlier with this class and I will remember for future classes how effective it was when I repeated the advice multiple times in a single lesson. This may even be beneficial for classes that struggle with turn-taking without the comprehension issues present in this class.

This experience also really solidified the importance of focusing on how different classes are unique and the value of targeting the specific problems each class has with efficient feedback. It can be easy as a teacher to focus on using the new target language and telling students to work together more if they do not understand each other, but that is not enough if there is a different issue that is holding the class back. By looking more closely at a specific behavior that I had not seen before and by targeting the problems that were specific to this one class, I was able to help them make improvements for an important discussion test and have a better discussion than they had previously been able to. If I can improve at identifying problems like this and target them earlier and more frequently, I should be able to help more students succeed.

Conclusion

Students can struggle for a variety of reasons when trying to have discussions in their second language. One of the most important roles of the teacher is helping them identify their problems and giving them strategies for improvement. While the students in my class did struggle for most of the lessons for which I kept a journal, they were able to have an effective and communicative discussion in their discussion test lesson when given appropriate advice and feedback. This experience has left me better prepared for classes that have similar problems in the future.

Keeping a journal helped me to understand the problem better than I would have otherwise as well. The advice to start simple helped this class, but the problem was not simply that students were trying to speak beyond their abilities as I first thought. They were also struggling to signal comprehension and to effectively pass the turn. These struggles are something I have seen before, and I was simply distracted by a new nuance. I believe in the future, I will be able to understand why a class is struggling earlier in the semester.

This paper also provides more evidence to the necessity of appropriately targeted feedback and advice. The difference in performance in their final discussion test when they were strongly encouraged to start simple was very clear and it seems very likely that emphasizing this point early and repeating it really could have helped this class. The fact that the improvement didn't carry over to the next lesson does suggest that repetition will be important in making lasting changes, but also suggests that addressing problems with comprehension and turn-taking before beginning activities may be more effective than only giving feedback after the fact.

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