Considerations for discussion activities for beginner EFL learners

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Abstract

Circumstances regarding the emerging language abilities of beginner learners of English as a foreign language mean that special considerations need to be taken with respect to curriculum development and materials writing. EFL classes with learners of limited capability need to emphasize language acquisition over the exploration of complex or controversial topics simply for the sake of fostering deep and thoughtful discussion. This paper explores the prospect of discussion that is both relevant to learners and also uncontroversial, such that it avoids unnecessary learner anxiety in the EFL classroom. A framework centered around this concept will be proposed for educators to reflect on their teaching of discussion to beginner EFL learners.

1. Introduction

Consensus opinion holds that Japanese learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) are risk-averse in classroom activities focusing on oral communication. Mitigating affect, therefore, would help to motivate learners into producing the target language in communicative classes. This paper asserts that EFL oral communication classes with discussion components for beginning language learners must be (1) easy to understand, (2) interesting in essence, and (3) uncontroversial in nature.

The discussion genre in EFL education, however, does not easily lend itself to the selection of topic knowledge with minimal affect. To answer this concern, this paper will propose a framework for the selection of thematic content in materials.
development for discussion activities in the EFL classroom. Theoretical context and rationale will be provided for this approach, and pedagogical implications for educators will be explored to invite further discussion in this area.

2. The discussion genre in EFL education

For guidance, oral communication can be conceptualized into three genres. Conversation can be defined as a spoken interaction between two people, and presentation be defined as an interaction in which one or a group of people address a larger audience. The discussion genre is conceptualized in this paper as any interaction that involves three or more language users given a certain topic or question with a certain objective in mind. Discussion is arguably more transactional or more focused in nature than conversation, as conversation can tend to be more open-ended (i.e. asking about hobbies or daily schedules).

The term discussion also carries serious connotations, evoking images of discussions on larger or controversial issues. A cursory look at Impact Issues and Lecture Ready, textbooks recommended for use in Discussion in English classes in Nanzan Junior College for the 2014–2015 academic year, indicates that possible discussion topics include global warming, beauty contests, and homeopathy. These topics, arguably, are not easily accessible and require a fair amount of scaffolding before learners can engage in oral communication relevant to the given topics.

3. Topic knowledge and demotivation

Bachman and Palmer (1996) discussed the importance of topic knowledge in language use. In their definition of a conceptual framework on language use, language output is informed not only by language knowledge (e.g. vocabulary, grammar, and, in this case, mechanics of the discussion genre) and topic knowledge (i.e. thematic content that informs learners of what to say). Built on this premise, they posited that it is difficult, if not impossible, for language users to comprehend and produce language related to topical areas with which they are unfamiliar, even if they possess the language knowledge necessary to form the necessary language output.

Both language and topic knowledge are filtered by affect, which is any number
of emotional and physiological factors that the language learner experiences. Sakai and Kikuchi (2009) reflect on demotivators that contribute negatively to affect; relevant to this discussion, they defined “Learning Contents and Materials” as potentially demotivating. Their paper focused on demotivation derived from the presented language knowledge being considered by learners as too difficult; this researcher believes that this phenomenon can be extrapolated to topic knowledge when learners find topic knowledge to be difficult to access.

Demotivation from topic knowledge can result when thematic content is (1) unfamiliar to learners, (2) likely to cause discomfort among learners, or (3) neither interesting nor relevant to the learner. The first factor is simple enough to comprehend; absent sufficient scaffolding, topics with which students are unfamiliar will not likely be received well. Second, owing to the fact that Japanese EFL learners are risk-averse among their peers, thematic content that may cause discomfort due to controversy can potentially demotivate learners from producing the target language. Finally and most relevant to this paper, familiar content must also be interesting if it is to engage and motivate learners. Krashen and Terrell (1998) speak to this factor in recommending that teachers choose reading materials that can hold learners’ interest.

4. Topic knowledge and learner interest

One area that deserves greater focus in the relevant literature is the impact of learner interests in the EFL classroom, particularly with respect to how learner interests can motivate or demotivate learners responding to topic knowledge presented in materials. While there is a strong top-down element to curriculum development in which educators decide what content should be relevant to their learners, this paper asserts that curriculum and materials development not informed by a full accounting of learner interests and preferences will likely encounter difficulties in the classroom.

A number of studies provide some illumination on the interests of Japanese EFL learners. Benson (1991) reported on a survey study of Japanese EFL learners who expressed a greater interest in studying English for personal purposes (e.g. enjoyment of English-media entertainment) than for external purposes (e.g. learning about other cultures or foreign perspectives about Japan). This is
reflected in another study of Japanese junior high school students who expressed low interest in learning of other cultures and of world affairs (Rapley, 2010). A pair of studies (Sybing, 2013; Sybing, 2014) corroborate these findings, appearing to indicate that the goals of Japanese EFL learners in acquiring English fluency involved making friends in English and enjoying English-media entertainment. Based on this research, this paper holds the position that thematic content that reflects these interests will be more favorably received by language learners in oral communication activities. Selection of such thematic content can resolve issues and considerations of scaffolding by bypassing them entirely.

5. Discussion without scaffolding

Mineshima (2015), in studying EFL textbooks for Japanese high school learners, provides useful guidance for crafting discussion questions for oral communication activities. Discussion questions can be categorized into a number of categories, some of which are listed in Table 1 with guiding examples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discussion type</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>opinion</td>
<td>• What do you think about school uniforms?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What do you think about English?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>preference</td>
<td>• Which do you prefer, Nagoya or Osaka?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Which type of music do you like best?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>comparison and contrast</td>
<td>• What do Japan and the United States have in common?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What are the differences between comics and animation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cause and effect</td>
<td>• What are the causes of overeating?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What are the effects of studying English?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>problem and solution</td>
<td>• What should people do when they are sick?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What is the best way to study for TOEIC?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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These examples can be identified by their discussion type, which serves as the language knowledge in the use of language in discussion activities. Language knowledge to discuss cause and effect in English, for example, includes use of grammar structures that include “because” and “so.” Relevant to this paper, discussion questions can also be identified by their topic knowledge, narrowing the vocabulary required to discuss the topic and complete the task of the given discussion activity.

As a result, it is possible to perceive a material difference between discussion questions of varying topics with disparate levels of accessibility to language learners. The sort of learner that Benson (1991) identifies, for example, which arguably have an easier time responding to a question about comics and animation than they would to a question about a heavier topic such as global warming or homeopathy. Most importantly, in identifying this material difference, it is possible to realize that discussion activities that are accessible and uncontroversial are possible to create for the benefit of focusing solely on emphasizing language knowledge over topic knowledge.

6. Proposed framework

Language educators should take the following questions into consideration during curriculum development and materials writing:

- To what degree is the chosen topical content accessible to language learners?
- To what degree is the language taught beneficial to language learners in situations outside of the classroom?
- To what degree is the chosen topical content interesting to language learners?

In the abstract, educators would do well to value the accessibility of topic knowledge as much as they do of language knowledge. Ensuring that students find the topic knowledge presented to them is interesting and relevant to them, not in a thought-provoking manner but in a manner that is seen as directly serving their interests, would be likely to contribute to language acquisition in beginner EFL classes.
7. Discussion

Certain narratives in the academic literature regarding EFL education run counter to the concept of avoiding controversy and focusing strictly on what is of immediate interest to learners. The perception of English as the global, de facto lingua franca has created an overlap between EFL education and global education, the latter of which is aimed at the development of a greater awareness among learners of the world outside their immediate context. There is little doubt that at least some language educators view the two realms of education as inextricably linked to each other. Indeed, Cates (1990) builds a direct case for implementing elements of global education in the language classroom, based on the urgency of serious concerns that face the world. Given this urgency, educators may feel compelled to focus on content that is potentially global in scope and likely controversial in nature.

In her treatise on English as an international language (EIL), Matsuda (2003) would also challenge the idea that language education be uncontroversial. Even in identifying learners who bring to their classroom their own preconceptions and, thus, their own goals for pursuing English fluency, Matsuda forcefully asserts that language educators have a responsibility for raising awareness among learners of the international nature of English, despite those learner goals.

Language educators, indeed, have to weigh the two considerations on the continuum balancing learner interests with top-down educational imperatives. However, if the ultimate goal of language education is to foster fluency among learners, both language knowledge and topic knowledge must be readily accessible to those learners. In beginner EFL classes, therefore, educators must consider the prospect that content which is immediately of interest to learners may be the only content that can help to foster that fluency.

8. Conclusion

This researcher has aimed to make a case for separating the controversial aspects of education in English as a foreign language from oral communication activities for beginner language learners. Selection of topic knowledge that is easy for learners to understand and mitigates any learner anxiety that may interfere
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With language use should be considered just as carefully and conscientiously as the selection of language knowledge. Language educators would do well to reflect on their own curriculum development and materials writing, and determine whether the content that is presented to the learners is chosen to best respond to their interests and ultimately facilitate language acquisition.

References


