
Structure for fostering discussion skills in the EFL classroom

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Abstract

The discussion genre is seen as a major aspect of EFL education's focus on oral communication, particularly with respect to fostering critical thinking skills in a target language. However, there is a lack of consensus in the academic literature and in the established pedagogy on how to teach discussion skills, particularly to learners of English that encounter significant obstacles borne from learner anxiety brought by group participation. This paper explores a structure and set of guidelines for task preparation and execution of group discussion activities to provide educators with guidance on how best to encourage free expression of ideas among all students. In doing so, this paper also aims to provide ideological guidance on the need for more prescriptive structures for activities designed for learners with little exposure to open-ended oral communication activities.

1. Introduction

The discussion genre in English as a foreign language (EFL) education is arguably the least defined of the three most common types of interaction (the others being conversation, typically an exchange between two people, and speech, where one speaker presents to an audience), and it is not surprising that this lack of definition creates difficulties in teaching discussion in the language classroom. Discussion entails an interaction between multiple speakers, usually revolving around a particular topic of contention or question on which the speakers must come to a consensus. Contrast with conversation and speech, which are dependent on particular utterances that are relatively easy to recite from memory,

discussion requires language users to make use of their critical thinking skills to not only express their opinions, but also evaluate the opinions of others in an open-ended, unrehearsed interaction.

In addition to negotiating the demands of creating intelligible output and quickly understanding spoken, sometimes unanticipated input, language learners, particularly in the Japanese EFL context, deal with significant learner anxiety issues that are potentially demotivating and can ultimately discourage learners from producing spoken output. Needless to say, the obstacles to student-centered and student-led discussion that meets these goals make designing a discussion-oriented group activity that encourages free-flowing interaction difficult at best.

This paper, in turn, aims to explore previous attempts in EFL education to codify the discussion format, and propose structures for EFL group discussion that can best facilitate use of the target language among small groups of students. In doing so, this paper will set ideological guidance regarding task design of open-ended, fluency-based activities, particularly in classrooms where learner anxiety in oral communication activities is a significant concern.

2. The discussion genre

While variations exist within language education, the term “discussion” in this paper is defined as a spoken interaction between three or (ideally) four speakers, who are then given a particular topic or question to explore in the target language. Students then are given a specified time to discuss the topic or question, so that, in some cases, one student in each group can summarize the contents of the discussion afterward.

For language educators seeking to foster critical thinking skills, the discussion genre, as defined in this paper, provides learners with opportunities to express a number of dispositions defined by Ennis (1996), who asserts that critical thinkers should

1. Care that their beliefs be true, and that their decisions be justified; that is, care to “get it right” to the extent possible, or at least care to do the best they can. This includes the interrelated dispositions to do the following:
 - A. Seek alternatives (hypotheses, explanations, conclusions, plans, sources), and be open to them;

- B. Endorse a position to the extent that, but only to the extent that, it is justified by the information that is available;
- C. Be well-informed; and
- D. Seriously consider points of view other than their own. (p. 171)

3. Challenges in classroom discussion tasks

There are a number of significant obstacles to a successful discussion in the Japanese EFL context. Because this is a group activity, students are likely to view the assessment of the activity as dependent on the results of the group, rather than on each individual's contribution. In such cases, students who perceive themselves as less proficient in the target language than others in their group tend to opt out of the activity for fear of affecting the group's overall performance. Whereas a one-to-one conversation cannot be sustained if one person opts out, students in groups of three or more speakers are likely to withdraw if other group members are able to sustain the interaction. Moreover, unlike conversation, discussions involving multiple language users are arguably far more open-ended and unpredictable, as there is no determined order of speakers. Spoken utterances in such situations are less likely to be rehearsed or prepared for ahead of time.

Han (2007) emphasizes that a sufficient knowledge base established prior to discussion tasks is also essential to learner participation. Han writes that, "When L2 students gain confidence in their knowledge, then they are more motivated to participate freely in the oral discussion" (p. 20).

4. Previous approaches to discussion

EFL textbooks have presented multiple approaches in which students practice the discussion genre. *NorthStar: Listening and Speaking Level 2* (Mills & Frazier, 2008), for example, gives each member in a discussion group distinct roles (e. g. discussion leader, discussion timekeeper) for them to fulfill. While this ensures that everyone in a discussion group has a part to play, differing roles have the potential of producing unequal amounts of spoken output. The timekeeper primarily has only one responsibility; that is, to cut off discussion after a certain amount of time. Contribution to a discussion is, therefore, implied and not

prescribed.

Other textbooks such as *Impact Issues 2* (Day, Shaules, & Yamanaka, 2009) have focused more on teaching discrete expressions commonly used in discussion, such as *I think ...* or *I agree with ...*, in order to provide learners with the necessary target language. While this approach treats all members in a discussion group equally, it provides only the most basic structure in which discussion takes place. Without more guidance with respect to each student's responsibilities within a discussion, the possibility of learners opting out of the activity remains.

The textbook series *Q: Skills for Success - Listening and Speaking* (Brooks, 2010) does not prescribe at length a particular process for conducting a discussion, but provides only prompts in the form of discussion questions. There are note-taking activities that build a knowledge base on which a discussion can take place, but how to perform the discussion is not clearly defined.

The absence of prescribed elements of discussion, whether they are target structures or target roles, is a significant obstacle to discussion task compliance, particularly in Japanese EFL education. Sato (2010) remarked on the familiarity Japanese learners of English have with the prescription of target language in the classroom, which, in turn, can interfere with task compliance if such tasks are more open-ended and less structured. Littlewood (2007) presented similar sentiments in the academic consensus, in that more descriptive approaches to EFL education such as task-based language teaching and communicative language teaching, left unadapted for Asian EFL contexts, encounter difficulties among language learners more accustomed to explicit scaffolding of language tasks.

This paper posits that the tension between structured tasks and open, genuine expression of opinion can be negotiated to meet the need to teach discussion skills in the classroom. The goals defined for fostering critical thinking skills among learners in a small group discussion format can be met in crafting a discussion task that provides learners with abundant structure and language while allowing for an open-ended interaction that elicits opinions and ideas from those learners.

5. Goals for activity design

In creating discussion activities for the language classroom, educators should keep the following questions in mind:

- Does the activity ensure that all members in a discussion participate actively and equally?
- Does the activity provide sufficient structure to provide guidance to learners?
- Does the activity allow learners to express their own opinions with little or no guidance from the teacher?

Equality of responsibility, when possible, is important to task design. This prevents a student from placing a value on choosing the easiest role or completing the task with the least difficulty while the other members of the group adopt more challenging responsibilities.

In setting the guidelines for discussion activities, teachers should provide abundant structure and scaffolding as guidance to students while still designing an activity that allows free and open expression. Put another way, students in a group discussion should follow certain rules and complete certain responsibilities that govern how a discussion is conducted. Within those constraints of language and skill, however, they are free to use the target language in any manner they prefer.

6. Proposed elements of discussion

In a discussion, each member in a group of 3–5 members should be able to demonstrate, among other language skills, the following (with some suggested phrases):

- *give an opinion*: I think ..., I believe ...
- *support an opinion*: ... because ...
- *agree or disagree*: I think so, too!, I disagree with her ...
- *ask a question*: What do you think about ...?

While there are other microskills demonstrated in a group discussion, the aforementioned skills, if properly scaffolded, should provide sufficient structure to allow a group of three or four students to engage in a discussion without teacher guidance for five or six minutes.

Any particular classroom group discussion is governed by a topic, which, in textbooks mentioned above, is typically presented in the form of a discussion question. This is an open-ended question that should elicit opinions without prompting students to arrive at a singular, objective answer, as a comprehension question for a reading or listening activity would. In examining high school

EFL textbooks in Japan, Mineshima (2015) classifies various possible types of discussion questions, which include questions that elicit opinions, preferences, comparison and contrast, cause and effect, and solutions to problems.

7. Scaffolding of discussion skills

An earlier paper (Sybing, 2015b) distinguished two types of language tasks conducted within the classroom. Discussion, in this framework, is a fluency-based activity that encourages open expression of ideas and opinions in the target language. Such tasks do not prescribe that any particular language is used, so long as students are compliant within the guidelines of the provided task.

Prior to discussion tasks, discussion skills can be explicitly taught in accuracy-based activities, which are more guided in terms of prescribing useful language and providing practice for learners to internalize such language. Some of the aforementioned textbooks tend to present language that allows students to demonstrate discussion skills. It is the responsibility of the teacher, then, to explicitly teach such skills and foster proficiency and confidence in the language among students before discussion tasks are conducted.

8. Assessment of discussion

Brown (2004) advises educators on the nature of washback in assessments, in that the nature of the assessment itself has an effect on “students’ motivation, subsequent performance in a course...and attitude toward school work” (p. 26). This is in reference to high-stakes testing, but it naturally follows that any assessment will cause engaged learners to reflect on how best to conduct themselves in a task in order to achieve a desired result in that assessment.

Given that students may feel encouraged to withdraw from participation in a discussion if other group members are able to carry on the interaction without them, discussion tasks should, therefore, be assessed on how much each group member contributes to a discussion, rather than on the outcome as a whole. This is to ensure that learners recognize they are individually accountable based on the amount of spoken output they produce. Holistically, students in groups should be asked to reflect on the conduct and outcome of the discussion. Teachers can

only benefit from making their students aware of what criteria is being used to determine both individual and group success in a discussion task. Students may explore the following questions in their native or target language:

- Did everyone in the group express their opinions?
- Did each member in the group ask questions to every other member in the group?
- Was the discussion exclusively in the target language?
- Did the discussion continue without pauses in the allotted time?

Absent from these reflection questions is any emphasis on language accuracy. While teachers are welcome to place a value on accurate use of the target language, one main purpose of fluency-based activities such as discussion is to encourage a more open use of the target language and relevant language skills.

9. Discussion in the language classroom

The task itself should only be a terminal goal within a larger sequence of activities in a lesson or unit of language learning. To reiterate Han's (2007) assertion, a sufficient base of knowledge has to be established within the classroom before an open discussion can take place. The aforementioned textbooks are consistent examples in that they tend to present learners with schemata-building activities and source texts to build a common knowledge base within the classroom. Units in all of these textbooks are, therefore, divided along thematic lines with the aim of building among learners familiarity and confidence with a particular content area.

However, there are other factors of learner anxiety and learner engagement that could interfere with or foster the free expression of ideas. Another earlier paper on discussion activities in the EFL classroom (Sybing, 2015a) asserted that topics of discussion that are more relevant and more familiar to learners will more easily ensure task compliance among language learners than will more serious or controversial topics that educators may wish to teach. Learners, when they are familiar with and interested in topics of discussion presented to them, they are more likely to engage in the exercise of discussion skills and language.

Sybing (2015b) prescribes a series of fluency-building activities for both oral communication and literacy classes through which teachers can explore what

content areas interest their learners, and recommends that such exploration of content guide what topics of discussion can be explored in the classroom. Through other fluency-building activities in which students express their interests in the target language, teachers can craft materials for accuracy-based activities to build the necessary knowledge bases in content and language to prepare students for discussion tasks. Regardless of the approach to fostering a knowledge base among learners, educators would do well to place a greater emphasis on building accuracy in the target language, providing structure in both task preparation and task execution which would keep in line with the expectations of Japanese learners of English.

10. Conclusion

Language building should be more teacher-centered and focused on fostering accuracy, but only in preparation for learner-centered fluency-based activities such as discussion tasks. Learners given to issues of anxiety within the classroom should be given abundant opportunity to build a knowledge base in language and content sufficient to conduct an open-ended exchange in a small group. Finally, this exchange should be assessed based on the contributions of each individual member in the group so as to ensure accountability during the task.

Murphey (2010) gave a passionate argument for creating a classroom environment conducive to “*linguaging agencing*,” through which learners are empowered through the excitement of using a foreign language in a creative manner to further explore their own language acquisition. This is a noble goal to achieve, but without sufficient structure and scaffolding in the EFL discussion genre, EFL educators in Japan run the risk of equating the desire of learners to express their own opinions with the ability to overcome obstacles of anxiety and unfamiliarity with descriptive language learning. In turn, this can only prevent learners from expressing those opinions freely in a successful interaction in the target language.

Given the nature of education in Japan, EFL teachers will likely encounter difficulties when setting students on a task that is less structured than they anticipate. This behavior will not likely change just because the task in its authentic form is open-ended and difficult to define. In fact, it is because of that

very nature that requires educators to provide concrete guidance and structure so that learners can have a clear path to task compliance. The discussion task is a prime example of an open-ended activity that requires firm rules and guidelines so that Japanese learners of English can freely express ideas. It is the position of this paper that the variety of approaches thus far in teaching discussion to Japanese EFL learners has been largely descriptive to a fault and, therefore, insufficient in producing the desired gains in oral communication. This paper encourages educators to discuss and challenge the proposed task model so that the genre can be further developed.

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