Discussion Classes at OJC — Bridging the Gap

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OJC のディスカションクラス ― ギャップを埋めること

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Abstract

This paper discusses the problem that some students who pass discussion classes in their first year, seem unable to discuss topics in their second year Topic Studies classes. It examines the idea that for successful discussion to take place, there needs to be a "discussion process." Such a process would use a particular methodology to formalize some discussion activities and teach students how to work productively in groups to achieve a successful outcome to their academic discussion. In addition it would provide teachers with a sound basis for assessment of discussion.

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この論文では、一年次にデイスカッションクラスで単位を取得しながら二年次のトピックスタデイーズのクラスで十分にデイスカッションができない学生がいることに注目して、デイスカッションが上首尾に行われるためには「デイスカッションのプロセス」が必要であることを論じる。このプロセスでは、デイスカッションをする上で必要な事柄を決定するためにある特定の方法が用いられている事、またアカデミックな内容のデイスカッションを十分に行うためにデイスカッショングループの中でどのように振る舞う事がよい結果につながるのかを学生に教えるためにも、同じ方法が用いられているのである。この方法は、またデイスカッションを評価する教員にとっても、根拠のある基準を提供してくれるものである。

Introduction

Recent feedback sessions for discussion teachers have indicated a problem. That is, some students in second year Topic Studies I and Topic Studies III classes are unable to discuss the topics they are studying. While this problem may be accounted for by lack of general knowledge, lack of preparation, insufficient command of vocabulary and grammar, and lack of time to spend on the topic, it may also be due in part to lack of suitable discussion skills, lack of communication skills and lack of confidence, which may be a result of all the above.

In order for first year students to cross the bridge from first year discussion classes to second year Topic Studies discussion classes, they need to be much more aware of how to participate in a discussion. In terms of writing, most students in Topic Studies classes are able to turn in a five-page research paper using the knowledge and skills they have mastered in first year writing classes. This is because writing classes teach them a set of skills they need to communicate in an academic context in written English.

However OJC's discussion materials are not the type of materials often seen at schools that follow a 'conversation school' type syllabus. They lack a structured approach due to their content-based and communicative nature. Unlike the functional-structural or situational approaches found in many college English textbooks, they do not have the sole goal of practicing language expressions such as 'requesting', 'offering' or 'giving directions'. Rather, they are aimed at having students discuss aspects of the content of the unit they are studying. In other words the goal is an academic command of English sufficient to communicate ideas in academic situations. When students come to OJC, with some exceptions, if they have had any experience of oral English at all, it has been the practice, probably by repetition and reading, of conversation school type language functions. It is therefore important to start from the beginning by emphasizing the *form* and *process* of academic discussion and by setting goals which are recognizable to the student as a form of assessment, and by which they can see that they are achieving a goal. This paper will look at approaches which may help to clarify what exactly is involved in discussion for students and how students may learn discussion and communication skills which they will be able to carry over to their second year classes.

First year discussion classes at OJC

First year discussion classes at Osaka Jogakuin College have long been part of an integrated content based curriculum along with reading and writing. In discussion classes activities revolve around the central theme of each unit. In unit one, students' discussion centers around peace studies and the pursuit of peace. In unit two, issues connected with

science and religion are explored. In unit three, students talk about human rights. Finally, in unit four, various social and environmental crises are discussed. Discussion activities range from simple information gap exercises to discussion of issues relevant to the respective topics. Discussion language is also introduced and practiced. In addition to dialogue, monologue is also practiced in various ways: students make news reports to the class and to their peers and make group presentations on themes included in the units. Finally, listening skills are brought into play when students have to listen to lectures and answer comprehension questions on the themes of the units.

The use of English for oral communication is the main goal of the discussion course. Oral communication can be taken to mean various things. For some courses, oral communication might involve the repetition of situational dialogues or the learning and practice of 'functional' language such as requesting, offering or giving directions. It may even be a structural course disguised as a functional course, with 'functional headings' such as "Talk about last weekend" which is actually just a practice of the simple past tense, or "talk about your childhood memories" which might be a practice of the 'used to' structure. Unlike these structure-based activities, in OJC discussion classes, many of the activities are designed to let students make free use of the language resources in order to achieve a desired outcome, for example, the expression of an opinion on a topic. In addition, it is possible that they may stimulate internal processes of language acquisition. To make 'free use' of language resources means to use whatever language they have in order to achieve the outcome of expressing themselves and communicating with others in the target language. This is an important point because this type of communication goal de-emphasizes grammatical accuracy in favor of communication. This causes two problems:

The first problem is quite at odds with most of the students' language learning experience. As this language learning experience shapes students' expectations, it can be a difficult barrier to overcome for both teachers and students alike. In a previous survey of college students, (Bramley, 1995), it was discovered that, while students consider communication skills important in speaking English, the majority still consider that the mechanical activities of repetition and practice are useful learning skills. However useful repetition and practice may be in improving pronunciation, it is doubtful that these alone will help a learner to communicate in the target language. Isolating and practicing items one at a time goes against what is known about how learners acquire language, a view supported by Rutherford, (1987), and Long and Crookes (1992).

The second problem is how to gauge achievement. This is a problem with all communicative language courses. It is not only a problem for assessors but also a problem for students. If we compare discussion with writing, there is a great difference. In writing, both students and teachers can see very objectively what they have and have not

achieved. For example, the task of writing a paragraph with a topic sentence, three supporting examples and a concluding sentence can quite easily be conceptualized by a student and its outcome judged by a teacher. In discussion, however, there is no record of achievement. Teachers can only circulate around the class listening in on groups and individuals attempting to get an impression of how well students are performing the task of communication. Because of time constraints there is only a short time to listen to each student. Because the classes are truly communicative, meaning that students are not expected to communicate using any specific form of language, teachers have to gauge whether communication is happening in whatever form the student tries to communicate. In addition, as the syllabus is content based, teachers also have to gauge the extent to which students are successfully dealing with the content. Finally, all of this must be done in real time. Unlike the assessment of writing classes, the assessment of communication in discussion classes is largely subjective. If asked, various teachers might give various definitions of what they would consider to be a successful attempt at communication in the context of a content based oral communication class. Some teachers may be very strict, others more flexible in their assessment.

These problems together suggest a possible reason why there can be a lack of comprehension among students in discussion classes about what the goals of communication classes are and how they might 'score points' in order to get a good grade. Regardless of whether teachers tell them they get points for speaking, students still have their previous language learning expectations, for example, they may be reluctant to speak for fear of making a grammatically incorrect utterance. In addition, their attempts to communicate new and complicated concepts might be hampered by a lack of specialized vocabulary. Unlike the objectives of the more formal activities of reading and writing, which can be assessed objectively, and which may be more familiar and accessible to many students through their high school experience, the assessment of oral communication is often a subjective matter and something which few of them have practiced before.

Methodology — Formalizing the discussion process

In order for a discussion to have a purpose which is apparent to students taking part in it, a discussion activity needs to have an outcome. The outcome can take various forms. For example, it could be the summing up of the main points by the teacher acting as coordinator for the whole class, or to be more student-centered, it could be a set of summaries, or 'reports' presented by each discussion group, or it could be given in written form, as a follow up activity coordinated with writing classes.

One type of student centered methodology which might accomplish this goal is known

as T/P/R, (Task, Planning and Report). Although this was developed for a different type of syllabus, there are parts of it which are very usable in OJC's content based syllabus. T/P/R methodology was developed by Dave Willis (1990) in connection with his development of a task-based lexical syllabus. The methodology focuses both on real communication and accuracy of form. The real communication takes place during a communicative 'task,' which focuses on outcome of language rather than display of language form. This is followed by a planning stage in which learners prepare to present the findings of their task to the class. At this stage, there is inevitably more of a focus on accuracy of form, as the act of writing something down is likely to formalize it. During this stage, it is the job of the teacher to help groups produce a more accurate form. For example, the teacher may help by modeling the forms they need to use. In the final, 'Report,' stage, groups present their findings to the rest of the class. (Willis, 1990. 62 & 72). Thus, in the course of a task, students have been involved in a set of activities which have enabled real communication, which have focused students on accuracy of form, and which have culminated in an oral report.

These activities are directly relevant to discussion classes at OJC. For example, in the Integrated Units materials there are various information gathering activities and discussion activities which require the students to work together in groups. The work of the group would certainly become more focused if the students know they are working towards accomplishing a task. In addition activities managed this way accomplish the dual goals not only of using English for communication, but also focusing on accuracy of language form. During the 'task' session of the activity students are encouraged to communicate with whatever target language they have at their disposal. The point is using what they know to communicate as well as they can. At this stage the teacher can grade whether the students appear to be making an effort to communicate, and perhaps in terms of the immediate outcome of communicative discourse to judge the degree of success the students are having. However, the 'planning' and 'report' require a different approach. This stage involves the preparation of a report to be given by the whole group to show the outcome of the task. Because this stage involves writing, which can be a more formal means of expression, students naturally begin to focus more on the accuracy of production. They will realize that they have need of certain structures to express themselves as they wish. When students have a need to know something, they are more likely to learn that thing when it is given to them than if it had been presented out of context as an isolated item. This focus on both communicative ability and form mirrors what happens in discussion classes at OJC. The difference is that is more closely integrated. The combined work of the group in discussing the task and producing the final report can provide a sound and objective basis for assessment by the teacher. Furthermore, students may see more easily a

definite goal to achieve and therefore be able to understand more the point of discussing something.

Practical Application

In general terms, T/P/R can be used in any discussion activity. One problem which may cause teachers not to use it however is the limitation of time. It cannot be denied that students often require a lot of time to begin an activity. This time is partly spent on student discussion of the teacher's instructions and deciding what it is they have to do. Students may also take time to talk because they have few, or no, ideas as the result of poor preparation. Another reason for reticence in participation could be that students really do not have sufficient grammar to communicate their ideas in English.

It is therefore important for each group to have a facilitator, whose job it is to gather ideas from the group members. In addition, a 'secretary' is needed to write down the ideas or the information gathered. Other group roles which are useful are 'helpers'. Their role is to help other group members communicate. They do this by helping with vocabulary, grammar or other expressions which may, or may not, be in the materials. When students work together this way, time efficiency can be maximized. In addition, each member of the group will be in constant communicative action in their separate roles. These roles combined will produce a report on the group's activity which will incorporate communicative 'natural' discourse with learning and a focus on more formal, grammatical aspects of communication.

Another time saving device which might be employed would be not to have all members of the class discuss exactly the same questions. For example, in the following activity, each group might discuss different questions and then report back to the class:

Women and Work Discussion Questions

Directions: Work with your partners. Discuss your answers to the following questions.

1. Do you intend to work after graduating? Why/Why not?
2. Do you want to continue work after getting married? Why/Why not?
3. What kind of job do you want? Do you think that your job will allow you to work and have time to raise a family?
4. If you have children, do you want to work or not? Why?
5. Who should take care of the children in a family? Why?
6. Who does the housework and cooking in your family? Wouold you marry a man who does not know how to cook or clean? Why/Why not?
7. What are some of the problems women face when trying to combine work and a family?
   What are some of the problems men face doing this? What are the differences?

(OJC Integrated Units Unit 3 Discussion)

In this way, many of the questions are being covered, and the group report session at the end of the activity will inform the groups who did not discuss the other questions. If time is very short, the report could be prepared outside class time and reports presented at

the beginning of the next session. Alternatively, with the 'back to back' 50 minute classes that have now been introduced, this cycle of activities becomes even more possible to accomplish on the same day.

Finally, T/P/R is better suited to some activities than others. It is obviously best for activities which require some kind of result which it is possible to make a report on, such as discussing the results of a survey, for example the following activity:

Neighborhood Survey

Ask five people of various ages and occupations in your neighborhood the following survey questions. Keep a record of their answers. You may ask the questions in Japanese, but you must write and report the questions in English.

Age/gender	1	2	3	4	5
Place of residence					
1. Do you separate your garbage? Why/ Why not?					
2. Do you take your own shopping bags to the store?					
3. Do you try to buy environmentally friendly products? Why/Why not?					
4. What do you recycle?					
5. What do you think should be done to encourage less packaging?					

(OJC Integrated Units Unit 4 Discussion)

Also for any kind of discussion activity which requires an opinion to be given at its culmination. Such a report need not be long. At it shortest it could be four sentences summarizing the opinions of each member in a group of four.

Group Formation and Group Dynamics

The outcome of a group activity may be heavily influence by the make-up of the group. This is important to consider because when the teacher gives a grade for a group activity, the grade should reflect as much as possible the positive contribution of all of the members of the group. Hadfield (1992) suggests a number of characteristics which a successful group may have:

- The group is cohesive and members have a definite sense of themselves as a group.
- There is a positive supportive atmosphere: members have a positive self-image which is reinforced by the group so that they feel secure enough to express their individuality.
- The members of the group... have a sense of direction as a group...
- Group members... interact happily with all members of the group
- Members of the group listen to each other, and take turns

- Group members are interested in each other and feel that they have something in common.

- The group is... able to overcome problems and difficulties without recourse to the teacher.

- The group is tolerant of all its members...

- Members of the group cooperate... and... work productively together.

- The members of the group trust each other.

- Individuals... do not seek individual attention at the expense of others.

- Group members... understand each other's points of view even if they do not share them.

- Group members are open-minded, flexible and receptive to new ideas.

- The group has a sense of fun.

- Group members have a positive attitude to themselves as learners, to the language and culture being studied, and to the learning experience.

(Hadfield, 1992)

Bearing this in mind, while it cannot be said that only the formation of the group has an ultimate effect on the output of the group, it becomes increasingly clear that teachers may need to pay close attention to group formation and to monitor groups in the early stages of the term to know whether they are successful or whether they have problems. In my experience, successful groups have been formed in various ways. In the second term, I have had great success in groups formed according to their first term grades. When students are of a similar ability level, it can be stimulating for them to work together. They are able to discuss things at greater depth than if they were in a randomly formed group. In addition, students with lower first term grades often find comfort and security with other students of a similar level. This gives them confidence to express themselves without feeling overshadowed by students of obviously higher ability. On the other hand, forming groups with a mixture of levels can also be successful in some classes because students with lower grades often look to those with higher grades for help and guidance. If those with higher grades are the types of students who enjoys helping others along or teaching them, this type of group formation can also be successful. A third way of forming groups is to let students form their own groups and sit with who they will. This has obvious advantages in that a group of friends may work together well and be more cohesive as a group. On the other hand, such group formation also often results in groups being too cliquey, speaking Japanese to each other because they are over familiar and sometimes not taking activities seriously enough or being too casual. Achieving a good balance between being a cohesive group and being noisy and hysterical is often difficult in this type of group.

Forming groups and maintaining a good productive atmosphere is always a challenge, especially at the beginning of the term. However, even if a group contains some, but not all of the characteristics mentioned by Hadfield, their rate of progress is likely to be significantly more noticeable than that of a "bad" group.

Assessment

Assessing a discussion class is a difficult matter. What exactly is being judged? Is it the degree to which students are able to employ discussion skills? Is it a matter of grammatical accuracy? Do we judge students on the basis of the content of what they say? Are we judging the students in their skill of using language for social interaction? Or is it a matter of judging all of these things equally? In other words, is it a matter of judging the degree of a student's communicative competence? In Bachman's (1990) revision of Canale and Swain's (1980) model of communicative competence, all of these aspects of oral interaction are mentioned.

However, given that a true judgment of a student's ability to discuss will include aspects of all of these areas, how is a single teacher then to judge the degree to which any one student in a class of 28 has communicated during a 50 minute class session? It is inevitable, given the situation where a teacher can spend less than two minutes listening to each student that much of the teacher's judgment will be subjective. To make an objective assessment of what happens in real time in any one activity, teachers would have to record the discourse of each group and analyze it. This is clearly impossible given the restraints of time.

Given then that a teacher can only realistically grade what appears to be communication, or discussion of the topic taking place in the short time he or she has to listen to each student, how then can students be assessed? Assessing class presentations is reasonably easy. News summaries and presentations given during discussion classes are graded according a set of criteria. The teacher is able to concentrate on the performance of each student. For example in the Dialogue presentation in Unit 1 of the Discussion materials students are judged according to the following criteria:

Easy to hear and English was understandable	2	4	6	8	10
Memorized the dialogue	2	4	6	8	10
Was interesting to listen to and watch	2	4	6	8	10
Content related to The Pursuit of Peace	2	4	6	8	10
Made eye contact with partners and audience	2	4	6	8	10

(OJC Integrated Units. Unit 1 Discussion 1998–2004)

A similar style of assessment is used in News Reports and in Unit 2 and Unit 3 presentations.

When students are involved in a group discussion however, it becomes a much more difficult matter to judge whether an individual student is making a meaningful contribution to the group. In natural discourse, it is unlikely that each student will speak for an equal length of time every time she speaks, or that she will make utterances which cover all of the criteria of communicative competence in every discussion. In addition the conversation is taking place in real time where nobody has a record of what has been said or the quality of each utterance made. It seems that, given time limitations, the quality of communication in such situations can only be judged subjectively on the basis of what *appears* to be happening.

If this is the case, then it seems that using, when possible, a methodology such as T/P/R, as mentioned earlier will enable a teacher to make a more balanced assessment of what is really going on in a class. Students participating in the communicative phase of the activity can be judged in real time, as to whether they prepared sufficiently, whether they participated in the discussion, whether they spoke enough, whether they spoke in English and whether they appeared to be communicating successfully, while the grade given to the report made by the group as a result of their discussion would provide the basis for an objective assessment in terms of accuracy and content.

Conclusion

There is a reported "gap" between first and second year discussion classes OJC. Second year students often seem to find it hard to employ whatever they have learned of discussion in their first year classes to their second year Topic Studies classes. One reason for this may be that they need to understand more deeply the framework for successful discussion. Whereas writing is a very structured course which follows a process, allowing students to apply a set of learned skills learned in their first year to writing research papers in their second year, discussion, due to its communicative and real-time nature, has less formal and less clearly defined ways of expression. If students were to be introduced to T/P/R or to other, similar methodologies as a kind of "process of discussion," it seems more likely that they would be able to apply this academic skill in their second year and thus be able to discuss more successfully in their Topic Studies classes. It is also recognized that group dynamics and the formation of groups is an important factor in promoting successful oral interaction between students. Finally, in addition to formalizing the discussion process, T/P/R could also provide teachers with the opportunity to make a more accurate and complete assessment of their students' performance in discussion classes.

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