An Approach to Teaching Small Group Discussion

J. W. Luckett

1. Introduction

Open the teacher's guide for a commonly used English conversation textbook, and somewhere in the guide you are likely to find instructions something like, "Have a discussion about sports in your country." Having a topic-centered discussion seems to be a sound objective for oral English practice, but where do we go from here? Most "discussions" of this sort will most likely turn into question-and-answer sessions in which the teacher asks students display questions about various aspects of sports in their countries.   If, as in the case of Japan, the class is a monocultural one, it is doubtful whether this type of discussion will generate much interest.

Theoretical and classroom research supports the use of discussion and other types of group work in second language acquisition (see Long & Porter, 1985, for a review of the literature). Group work, including small group and class discussions, has become one of the many communicative activities to be regularly included in oral English classes all over the world.   In fact, when the new Mombusho guidelines for teaching English in public senior high schools come into effect in April, 1994, the guidelines for the new Oral Communication C course will include discussion and debating skills (Goold, Madeley, & Carter, 1993, p. 3).

Group work has been shown to have several advantages for developing oral communication skills.   In short, small group discus-

sions give students more chances to speak than a teacher-fronted class, improve communication and negotiation skills, and are motivating as they allow students to individualize their language acquisition process by giving them control over the content of the interaction (Long & Porter, 1985 ; Hirose & Kobayashi, 1991).

But what is involved in a successful discussion, and how can we get students to do it ? In order for a discussion to proceed, it is necessary for the group members to participate actively and confidently. However, it often seems that students in the foreign language class are reluctant to do so. Helgesen (1993, p. 37) uses the analogy of the Great Wall of China to describe what he calls "a wall of silence". In noting differences in response styles of Japanese and American college students, Horler and Yamazaki (1986) found that "undecided" responses for Japanese students were greater (31.9% to 16.7%) while "strongly agree + strongly disagree" responses were fewer (19.3% to 21.4%), possibly indicating that Japanese students are less apt to express strong personal opinions (pp. 86-7). In discussions among themselves, Japanese students also tend to be more reluctant to express a dissenting point of view, and when such an opinion is expressed, other members of the discussion are equally reluctant to challenge it. Given the group communication style of Japanese students, along with the natural hesitancy to make mistakes in the classroom environment, it is no wonder that discussions often fizzle out or degenerate into question-and-answer sessions.

We must also consider the types of discussions students are being asked to take part in, as well as the lack of preparation they may be receiving for taking part in a discussion which is played by different cultural rules of group communication. Let's look again at the example discussion topic given above, "Have a discussion about sports in your country." This type of discussion would most likely generate little discussion among native speakers, much less a monocultural class of non-native speakers.

In this paper we will examine aspects of a small group discussion which can provide a framework in which second language learners can develop confidence and proficiency in participating in small group discussions. In order to help foreign language learners overcome their hesitancy to speak in a group discussion, it is beneficial not only to point out the differences in expectations for participation in group discussions, but also to outline the essential elements of a successful discussion as it is conducted in English.

2. Approaches to Discussion

In this section we will look at several features of a successful small group discussion and examine how they can be of help to students in understanding how to participate in English discussions. For the purposes of this paper, a small group refers to a meeting of not more than five people communicating face to face "in order to fulfill a common purpose and achieve a common goal" (Bormann & Bormann, 1981, p. 115). In groups of five members, all individuals have ample opportunities for participation. In groups of more than five, participation tends to be limited to only the assertive few.

2.1 Goals & Purposes of Discussion

In order for a discussion to proceed with focus and continuity, it is necessary to have a clear and specific goal or purpose (Hirose & Kobayashi, 1991, pp. 62-63). Even a discussion involving native speakers will lose its direction if the goal is unclear, so it is especially important that discussions involving student non-native speakers have a goal or purpose that is expressly stated at the beginning of the discussion. One way to determine whether a discussion has a clear goal is to simply ask the question, "How will the group members know when the discussion has reached its conclusion?"

Examples of some common discussion purposes :

Making a decision
Exchanging information & opinions
Reaching a consensus
Judgement
Conflict Resolution

2.2 The Topic Statement

In order to provide all members of the discussion with a clear and specific goal, it is useful to begin the discussion with a topic statement.　A topic statement is a statement of the case under discussion and should be phrased in terms of a question (Monroe & Ehninger, 1975, p. 311), a controversy, or a problem to be solved.　The topic statement should be as specific as possible to maintain focus.　It should also include the goal of the discussion in some form so that *when the question has been answered, the controversy fully aired,* or the problem solved, the discussion comes to an end with a feeling of closure.

For an illustration of the usefulness of the topic statement, consider the following examples.

2.2.1 The topic today is "Learning a foreign language."

2.2.2 "When learning a foreign language, is it more useful for you to have small group discussions with other students, or is it more useful to listen to the teacher's lecture ?"

The above topic statements were given to two separate small groups in an intermediate discussion class.　Both groups were given twenty minutes to conduct their discussions.　The first group spent their time defining and focusing the topic.　The second group addressed the topic in a systematic manner and, at the end of the twenty minutes, had reached a consensus.

From this example we can see that a clearly defined topic statement can lead a discussion forward and promote constructive interaction between group members.　At the same time, a poorly

constructed topic statement, such as "Have a discussion about sports in your country," will actually hinder communicative interaction.

2.3 Position Statement

A position statement is a short statement in which each group member formulates his or her opinion or position on the discussion topic.   The position statement should be clear and direct but with the understanding that the group member's position can change as the discussion progresses.   The purpose of the position statement is to encourage members of the discussion group to formulate an opinion and be prepared to express that opinion to the group.

An example of a position statement that would address the topic in example 2.2.2 follows in example 2.3.1.

    2.3.1 "I think it is more useful to participate in small group discussions with other students when I am learning a foreign language."

2.4 Supporting Arguments

As in a composition class, students should be encouraged to prepare supporting arguments for their position statements.   Just as a topic sentence or thesis statement in writing requires supporting sentences, so does a position statement require supporting arguments.

Not only should speakers be encouraged to provide good supporting arguments for their own positions, but the other members of the group should listen and evaluate the reliability of given supporting arguments.   Questioning of position statements and the supporting arguments which underlie them constitute the core of a stimulating discussion.   In evaluating a speaker's supporting arguments, members of a small group discussion should consider the following questions (Monroe & Ehninger, 1975, p. 323):

1.   Are the arguments based on training?
2.   Are the arguments based on personal experience?

3. Are the arguments based on firsthand knowledge?

4. Are the arguments based on reliable sources of information?

5. Are the arguments objective and free from prejudice?

6. Are the arguments presented in a complete and frank manner?

7. Are the arguments based on fact rather than emotion?

During any point in a discussion, a member of the small group is more likely to be a listener than a speaker. These and similar questions help the discussion members evaluate a speaker's contributions and formulate their own responses along the lines of active participation (see section 3). At the same time, by asking these questions of themselves, group members will be able to more effectively anticipate the response of the group to their own contributions while they are preparing for the discussion.

3. Active Participation

In the previous section, we looked at some ways in which the discussion can be outlined and presented to help the group members focus on the central issues involved in any particular discussion as well as anticipate their own preparation needs for participation in that discussion. In this section, we will look at ways in which group members can actively participate in the discussion.

There are two main components of active participation in small group discussions : cooperative social interaction and verbal interaction. While the elements of both would seem to be fairly obvious to a native speaker engaged in a cooperative discussion in his or her own language, keep in mind that the learner in the foreign language classroom, for better or worse, may have his or her own agenda and concerns (e.g. grades and evaluation, peer pressure, fear of making mistakes), so that the language learner may not find the elements of effective participation so obvious or may need to have them pointed out explicitly and be periodically reminded of their importance. The

purpose of this section, then, is to enumerate a number of important skills that will help group members focus more on participating actively in the discussion.

3.1 Cooperative Social Interaction

Any small group discussion will include social interaction between participants as well as verbal interaction. For a discussion to proceed towards its goal in a dynamic and productive manner, cooperative social interaction is required of the members of the group. Following are a number of characteristics of a group member's cooperative social interaction (adapted from Bormann & Bormann, 1981, p. 122).

An active participant :

1. is enthusiastic.
2. is open-minded and respectful of others' viewpoints.
3. talks enough but not too much and keeps to the point.
4. speaks clearly, listens carefully, and tries to understand others' opinions.

As was mentioned earlier in the introduction, many discussions in second language classes have a tendency to encounter a "wall of silence," so a great deal of attention needs to be given to helping students find ways to contribute to the discussion by formulating position statements and supporting arguments. However, rather than taking turns making short speeches, active discussion members are required to be active listeners as well as speakers, and in fact, long-winded speeches are counterproductive in a cooperative discussion.

While participating as a speaker is indeed necessary, interacting with the group social dynamics is equally necessary for successful and cooperative participation. It is, therefore, helpful to periodically remind students of their duties regarding cooperative social interaction as well as verbal interaction. Later, when we examine the

duties of the discussion leader, we can see that one of his or her tasks is to moderate social interaction and human relations in the small group discussion.

3.2 Verbal Interaction

The actual words and phrases employed by discussion members *will vary greatly depending on the language ability of the group* members. However, there are a number of functions and roles available for students to choose from when entering discussions at all levels. While some of these will be most commonly used by discussion leaders, they can all (with the exception of actually starting the discussion) be used by any participant.

Following is a list of some functions often found in small group discussions (adapted from Levine, Baxter & McNulty, 1987, pp. 96-8). The actual words and expressions used will depend greatly on the level and experience of the students. Most oral communication and discussion textbooks provide students with a variety of expressions appropriate for their level. For examples of useful expressions and example sentences at the upper-intermediate and advanced level, see Levine, Baxter & McNulty (1987).

1. Initiate the discussion with an introductory statement or topic statement and provide transitions to new issues and topics.
2. Ask group members for opinions, supporting arguments, and clarification.
3. Offer opinions, supporting arguments, explanations, and background information.
4. Repeat and summarize what has been said for confirmation and to help the discussion move forward.
5. Encourage everyone to participate by asking for and then accepting different points of view.
6. Express agreement and disagreement in a cooperative and

non-belligerent manner.

Obviously the functions mentioned here represent only a partial listing of all verbal interaction to be found in small group discussions. However, they can serve as a guide to help students increase the diversity of their contributions to the discussion. This is especially important in creating a dynamic discussion, since many second language learners have a tendency to limit their participation to simple expressions of opinion and the reasons for those opinions, thus constraining the give-and-take nature of most active discussions.

A useful exercise to help students become more aware of their own verbal behavior is to assign an observer's role to one member of each small group (Hirose & Kobayashi, 1991, p. 64). The observer can be either a speaking or nonspeaking member of the group, although in the beginning it is probably most productive to have the observer listen only and concentrate on how the discussion progresses and on the participation of the other group members. Each observer should be given a worksheet with the verbal functions listed down the left column and the group members' names listed across the top. When any group member speaks in the discussion, the observer must decide what function category the comment falls in and place a check in the appropriate row under that speaker's name (see appendix A for an example of the observer's worksheet).

At the end of the allotted discussion time period, the observer shows' the other members the worksheet so they can get an idea of their strong and weak areas. In the next discussion, they should make efforts to make use of the functions they made little or no use of in the previous discussion. By conducting this exercise periodically, the group members will become more aware of their own verbal behavior and their roles in the discussion.

4. The Discussion Leader

Having students prepare and act as leaders for their own discus-

sions is probably one of the most effective methods for developing students' awareness of and appreciation for the features of discussion and the social and verbal interaction skills involved in a successful discussion (i.e. one that moves towards completion of the established goal with active participation from all group members). It is also one of the most difficult activities for students to complete successfully. However, after developing the topic statement, planning, and then moderating a successful discussion, acting as a discussion leader is also one of the most rewarding accomplishments for students in a discussion class.

The duties of the discussion leader fall into three general categories: planning, moderating the task, and moderating human relations (Bormann & Bormann, 1981, p. 120). In this section, we will examine each of these categories in detail.

4.1 Planning the Discussion

A discussion leader planning a small group discussion, after deciding the general topic, must determine a clear and specific purpose or goal for the discussion as suggested in section 2.1, as well as a topic statement to focus the discussion. The easiest way to determine whether the goal is specific enough is to ask, "How will the group know when the conclusion of the discussion has been reached?" After determining the goal of the discussion, the leader should also specify the outcome or product of the discussion, such as a decision as to a matter of policy, the resolution of a conflict, the generation of a list of alternative solutions to a problem, or a judgement in a judicial case.

After determining the goals and outcomes of the discussion, the leader should prepare a short introductory statement that includes a topic statement and a description of the outcome or product. The leader is also responsible for assembling necessary background information and materials such as vocabulary sheets and reading mate-

rials related to the topic and purpose of the discussion. When necessary, these materials can be distributed to the group members in advance to give them time to prepare for the discussion. Besides the actual assembly of materials, the leader is also required to be aware of basic issues that need to be covered and be prepared to explain issues and details that may be unfamiliar to group members (Monroe & Ehninger, 1975, p. 312).

4.2 Moderating the Task

In moderating the discussion task, the discussion leader should help the discussion progress towards its objective rather than imposing a pre-determined outcome on the group. This point needs to be made rather clear, since students who are new to leading discussions may have a tendency to do exactly this due more to a lack of confidence and experience than to any obvious intention.

After initiating the discussion with the introductory statement, the discussion leader's primary purpose is to sense the direction of the discussion and keep it on course (Monroe & Ehninger, 1975, p. 312). In order to keep the discussion moving, especially in cases where a particularly complex or controversial topic is under discussion, it may be necessary for the discussion leader to help group members stay focused on the central issues by clarifying which issues are relevant to the discussion plan and which are not.

Since there is always the possibility that a discussion may begin to die out, the leader should be prepared to keep it stimulated by providing transitions between stages of the discussion when the need arises (Bormann & Bormann, 1981, p. 120). These transitions, as well as the issues and progressive stages of the discussion, will have been anticipated during the planning stage if the leader has prepared a thorough and complete discussion plan.

4.3 Moderating Human Relations

When moderating human relations in the small group, the discussion leader will basically be encouraging the participants to follow the guidelines for cooperative social interaction as outlined in section 3.1. One way to accomplish this is for the leader to act as a model for cooperative small group interaction. There may be times, however, when the leader may have to act more assertively to encourage an active cooperative discussion.

It seems that one of the primary duties of the group leader will be to activate the group members' interest and encourage everyone to speak freely. As was noted in the previous section, the leader should avoid imposing his or her predetermined outcome on the group. The leader can do this by adopting a fairly "permissive" and "impartial" attitude (Monroe & Ehninger, 1975, p. 312) and by accepting diverse opinions from the group as long as they are relevant to the points under discussion. In short, the discussion leader should probably be one of, if not the most, open-minded members of the group.

Nevertheless, there are times when some members of the group will not feel like speaking up regardless of the atmosphere of the group. The leader will most likely have to ask these participants directly for their input as the discussion progresses.

One final problem the discussion leader may have to deal with, although less likely, is the overtalkative group member. For various reasons, a member or members of the group may begin to monopolize the discussion. Some students may do this as a form of overcompensation for the normal hesitancy of Japanese students to speak up in such circumstances. Others may have a level of competency in English that allows them to participate so easily that quiet members of the group get left behind. And others may dominate the discussion simply because they feel very strongly about the issue being discussed.

There are numerous ways in which a discussion leader can approach this type of situation. One way is to simply move the

discussion on to the next topic or issue that needs to be discussed. Another way the leader can deal with the situation is to more actively elicit input from other group members ; for example, asking them by name for their opinions on what the dominating member has said. Finally, the group leader could try to slow down the overtalkative speaker by asking for support, details, and examples to back up his or her statements.

While dealing with an overbearing group member may be an unpleasant task, especially for those who are new to leading discussions, it should be kept in mind that ultimately it is the responsibility of the discussion leader to provide an atmosphere in which all members feel comfortable to speak freely and without hesitation or fear of unfair judgement (Monroe & Ehninger, 1975, p. 327).

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we have looked at one approach to teaching small group discussion skills to Japanese learners of English. The primary assumption behind this approach is that small group discussions in English are characterized by a number of distinct features and that by developing students' awareness of these features, we can facilitate their acquisition of discussion skills. Furthermore, by acting as discussion leaders for their own small group discussions, students will further increase their awareness of the elements of discussion and will then become more active participants.

Informal classroom observation and student comments lend support to the last point. Namely, after preparing their own discussions and then acting as discussion leaders, students develop confidence and become more comfortable participating in subsequent discussions. Appendix B cites a number of comments from students in an intermediate discussion class regarding the discussion leader activity. These comments were made on a self-evaluation form

after completion of their discussion leader activities.

While informal observation and student-feedback are valuable and informative, more empirical research is needed to determine the extent to which active participation actually increases after the discussion leader activity.

References

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Appendix   A

OBSERVER'S WORKSHEET

Discussion Leader : _____

Topic Statement : _____

_____

Observer : _____

Group Members												
Begin discussion												
Provide transition												
Ask for : opinions												
support												
clarification												
Offer : opinions												
support												
explanation												
Repeat/summarize												
Encourage												
Express : agreement												
disagreement												
Participation total												

Appendix B

Student comments from self-evaluation forms
regarding discussion leader activity

Student # 1

"I feel that I can get in discussion easier than before I was a discussion leader." "I think being discussion leader was the efficient experience for me to get more in problems, gain vocabulary, speaking in front of people."

Student # 2

(What have we done this semester that you liked ?)

"What I should do as a leader and as a participant on discussion."

Student # 3

"I liked the content that we became discussion leader and led the discussion. It was difficult for me to lead the discussion. But I'd like to challenge this work again."

Student # 4

"The point which I realized for making a discussion better is making statement clear."

Student # 5

". . . it was hard for me, especially preparing something about discussion leader. But, it is interesting because we can choose our topics ourselves, so we can choose our interest topic."

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Pair work and group work are now common methods for developing communicative skills in foreign and second languages. However, because of cultural and linguistic differences between Japanese and English small group communication styles, efforts to encourage Japanese learners of English to engage in active and productive English discussions often prove ineffective. This paper describes an approach to teaching English discussion skills in such a way that students become aware of the differences in communication styles and are encouraged to develop skills enabling them to participate actively in small group discussions. It is assumed that there are distinctive features of English discussions and that these features can be taught. Furthermore, it is believed that students can be made more aware of the characteristics of English discussion by having them plan and lead their own discussions.

北星学園大学文学部　北星論集第31号　正誤表

頁・行目	誤	正
31頁23行目	Pp.91-107。 _____	放送大学教育振興会
95頁5行目	Abbatt	Abbott
101頁4行目	you mother	you-your mother
101頁11行目	Lilia's _____	Lilia's chaperone
109頁17行目	lift	life
143頁12行目	コミA	コミ研A
145頁グラフ2 カテゴリー6	関連__	関連性
149頁グラフ3 カテゴリー7	関連__	関連性
167頁1行目	non-belligerent	nonbelligerent
210頁6行目	on	of
210頁12行目	historlcal	historical