# Leadership in English Discussion

Joseph W. LUCKETT

Contents

## 1. Introduction

In Luckett (1994), this author outlined an approach to teaching English discussion to Japanese university students.　This teaching method has proven to be successful and popular among both students and teachers who have adopted it.　Now that a significant amount of time has passed, I would like to revisit this approach and offer some refinements. Specifically, the training of discussion leaders has turned out to be the most beneficial and effective aspect of this approach.　After reviewing some of the key elements of a good discussion, I will look in more detail at the training and development of successful discussion leaders.

## 2. Elements of Discussion

In this section I 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).　In fact, we can say that the purpose of having a discussion itself is the achievement of a goal (Ur, 1981).　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 plan

Making a decision

Making a judgment

Reaching a consensus

Resolving a conflict

## 2.2 Supporting Arguments

As in a composition class, students should be encouraged to prepare supporting arguments for their positions.　Just as a topic sentence or thesis statement in writing requires supporting reasons and evidence, so too does a position in a discussion require supporting arguments.

Not only should speakers be encouraged to provide good supporting arguments for their own positions, but all members of the group should listen and evaluate the reliability of given supporting arguments.　Questioning of position statements and the supporting arguments that underlie them constitute the core of a stimulating discussion.　In evaluating a speaker's arguments, members of a small-group discussion should consider the following questions (Browne and Keeley, 2004):

1. What are the reasons?

2. What are the assumptions?

3. Are there any biases?

4. How good is the evidence?

5. Are there any fallacies in the reasoning?

6. Are the statistics reliable?

7. Are there other possible conclusions?

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.

## 2.3 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 cooperative social interaction (adapted from Bormann & Bormann, 1981).

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.

## 3. The Discussion Leader

Having students prepare and act as leaders for their own discussions 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 toward 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 discussion task, 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). In this section, we will examine each of these categories in detail.

### 3.1 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 discussed in section 2.1, 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 discussion is finished?" After determining the goal of the discussion, the leader should also specify the outcome or product of the discussion. For example, students might choose the best applicant for a job, decide the punishment for a crime, find a solution to a problem, resolve a conflict between neighbors, or make travel plans.

After determining the goal and outcome of the discussion, the leader should prepare a short introductory statement that clearly specifies the objective of the discussion. The leader is also responsible for assembling necessary background information and materials such as vocabulary sheets and reading materials 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). However, the best topics are those that students can discuss based on common knowledge rather than those requiring technical or specialized knowledge.

### 3.1.1 The Discussion Task

In order to provide all members of the discussion with a clear and specific goal, it is useful to begin the discussion with a concrete discussion task. A discussion task can be phrased in terms of a question or instructions (Monroe & Ehninger, 1975). The discussion task should be as specific as possible to maintain focus. Discussion leaders should be instructed to avoid vague wording such as "What do you think about X" or "What should we do about X?" The discussion task should also imply the goal of the discussion in some form so that when it is reached the discussion comes to an end with a feeling of closure.

For example, a student might begin her discussion with the question: What should we do to be good parents? Obviously this is too vague and has no clear terminating goal. An improved discussion task would be to compile a list of do's and don'ts for new parents.

For an illustration of the importance of the discussion task, consider the following examples.

1. What do you think about learning foreign languages?
2. Should foreign language teachers be native speakers of the target language?

The above discussion tasks were given to two separate small groups in an intermediate discussion class. Both groups were given fifteen 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 fifteen minutes had reached a consensus. However, an even better discussion task would be a role play, where students are assigned specific roles, or a simulation, where they are given the situation but speak as themselves, such as the following example.

3. Choose the best applicant for a foreign language teaching assignment.

From these examples we can see that a clearly defined discussion task can lead a discussion forward and promote constructive interaction between group members. At the

same time, a poorly constructed discussion task, such as "Have a discussion about sports in your country" will not.

## 3.2 Moderating the Task

In moderating the discussion task, the discussion leader should help the discussion progress toward 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 steer the discussion to a pre-conceived conclusion. Likewise, group members may be inclined to support the leader because of the perceived authority usually given to leaders. It might be helpful to liken the discussion leader to the referee of a soccer game who keeps the play going without, hopefully, interfering with the outcome. In fact, discussion leaders should avoid giving their own opinions at the beginning of the discussion as this might make the group members feel that that is the "correct" opinion.

After initiating the discussion with an introductory statement, the discussion leader's primary purpose is to sense the direction of the discussion and keep it moving on course while maintaining focus on the objective (Monroe & Ehninger, 1975). 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 identifying priorities and establishing criteria for decision making (Lubetsky & Harrington, 2006). Time limits are helpful for maintaining focus on the objective and avoiding topic drift, where the discussion wanders off topic. Twenty to thirty minutes is generally sufficient for student discussions.

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). 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.

## 3.3 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 2.3. 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.

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 pre-determined outcome on the group. The leader can do this by adopting a permissive and impartial attitude and by accepting diverse opinions from the group as long as they are relevant to the points under discussion (Monroe & Ehninger, 1975). In short, the discussion leader should 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, although going around the group and calling on individual members to speak should be avoided if possible. Instead, the leader should instruct group members to freely express agreement, disagreement or ask a question of another group member. The discussion leader should encourage group members to interact with each other rather than being the center of the discussion.

One final problem the discussion leader may have to deal with, although less likely, is the over-talkative 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. 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 or, in other words, change the subject. Another way the leader can deal with the situation is to more actively elicit input from other group members, asking them, by name, for their opinions on what the dominating member has said. Finally, the group leader could try to slow down the over-talkative 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 judgment (Monroe & Ehninger, 1975).

## 4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have looked at one approach to teaching small group discussion skills to Japanese learners of English that focuses on developing students as discussion leaders. 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.

［References］

Bormann, E. G., & Bormann, N. C. (1981). *Speech communication: A basic approach* (4th ed.). New York: Harper &Row.

Browne, M. N. & Keeley, S. M. (2004). *Asking the right questions: A guide to critical thinking* (7th ed.). New Jersey: Pearson Education.

Hirose, K., & Kobayashi, H. (1991). Cooperative Small Group Discussion. *JALT Journal*, 13, 57-72.

Lubetsky, C. & Harrington, D. (2006). *Discussion: Process and principles*. Eugene: Language Solutions.

Luckett, J. W. (1994). An approach to teaching small group discussion. *Hokusei Review*, 31, 159-174.

Monroe, A. H., & Ehninger, D. (1975). *Principles of speech communication* (7th ed.). Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman & Co.

Ur, P. (1981). *Discussions that work*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[Abstract]

# Leadership in English Discussion

Joseph W. LUCKETT

Luckett (1994) outlined an approach to teaching English Discussion to Japanese university students.   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, teachers can facilitate their acquisition of discussion skills. This teaching method has proven to be successful and popular among both students and teachers who have adopted it.   Now that a significant amount of time has passed, I would like to revisit this approach and offer some refinements.   Specifically, the training of discussion leaders has turned out to be the most beneficial and effective aspect of this approach.   After reviewing some of the key elements of a good discussion, I look in more detail at the training and development of successful discussion leaders.   It has been observed that by acting as discussion leaders for their own small-group discussions, students further increase their awareness of the elements of discussion and become more active participants.