

Discussion – does it work?

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- <georgina> Jeremy, do you want to start the ball rolling with what you feel are the main issues on this topic?
- <jeremy\_harmer> Sure, Georgina. As far as I see it we need to think about why some discussions fail, and how teachers can try to ensure student engagement in a discussion session - and thus success rather than failure.
- <Nick> Jeremy, how would you define a discussion which has 'worked'?
- <jeremy\_harmer> That's a very interesting question, Nick. I think my answer would be something like 'a successful discussion is one where the majority of students did their best to speak on a topic because they wanted to and that they were able to get over the points they wished to make within the limitations of their English.' Does that sound OK?
- <Wes> Is it possible to quantify a successful discussion?
- <jeremy\_harmer> Well, Wes, you can measure linguistic accuracy, of course but it's more difficult to assess the 'engagement' factor which as I've indicated seems a bit crucial to me.
- <jeremy\_harmer> One way is to get student to be discussion assessors themselves. Nick, I think that's a really important. Yes, of course 'listeners' are good discussion participants in one sense, but it's a question of balance isn't it?
- <georgina> Jeremy, how would you do that... doesn't it take a lot of planning? If you want students to assess themselves, how can they do it and what does the teacher need to do?
- <jeremy\_harmer> I think you can be more or less formal about this. Informally you can just ask students to say whether they enjoyed/got anything out of the session.
- <Nick> Is size, or rather number important? In the real world discussion only really works when there are fewer than 8 participants. Is 'speaking' the only way to participate in a discussion? Aren't the quiet 'listening' students also participating?
- <jeremy\_harmer> Nick, if you have 5 discussants (?) and only 2 talk then I'd be a bit unhappy about the value of the activity for the whole group, wouldn't you?
- <Nick> Yes
- <jeremy\_harmer> But more formally you can appoint discussion monitors, or use the 'good angel' 'bad angel' idea of Mario R's (see the Correction Development Pack) where some students listen and then give feedback. Or (since there's a lull) you can get students to keep a 'discussion diary' where they note what they and others said or even just note down who said how much of what.
- <bev> do you think that there has to be a threshold efl level to be able to participate in discussions?
- <georgina> Good question Bev. What does everyone think?
- <jeremy\_harmer> Hi, Bev. Well yes, sort of. I mean at very beginner levels it's a lot of one/two-word stuff and not too much more than 'I like/I don't like.'
- <Wes> Does what we're doing class as 'discussion'?
- <jeremy\_harmer> Ouch, Wes! That's quite a question. On the whole I'd say yes in the metaphorical sense, but maybe not in the sense of the channel we're using???
- <georgina> I think Jeremy's right. It is a discussion of sorts - and maybe we have to deal with this type of activity in the classroom but without voice it's not quite the same. :-)
- <Nick> Wes, I think we are involved in adult discussion because although we each enter with views and experience, we are willing to change, extend or refine our views because of what we hear.

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Discussion activities

- <bev> What would be the difference between information gap activities and discussions?
- <georgina> Are info gaps activities just a sort of controlled discussion?
- <jeremy_harmer> Bev, I think there is some significant similarity between info gaps and discussion in the sense that both ask students to talk 'freely' to communicate and achieve a purpose. However, a discussion really suggests students giving opinions, exchanging ideas, clarifying ideological positions (not necessarily in a big sense), and generally giving more 'of themselves' than in a standard info gap ex (of the find the similarities -type, for example).

Discussion – does it work?

Live moderated chat 25th November 2001

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- <bev> What about discussions and conversation?
- <jeremy_harmer> Help! This is getting very taxonomic!... But seriously, I think a discussion is an attempt to resolve something (a set of opinions, and ideological position, whereas conversation means just talking, talking about... but I'm sort of thinking aloud here.
- <Nick> In discussions, people often express opinions by telling stories of experiences. Is this something which students could 'prepare'?
- <jeremy_harmer> Well, Nick, I'm sure that preparation of some kind (however informal, however brief) is a key to successful discussion - as I suspect you do.
- <Nick> So, Jeremy, you think that discussion needs to reach a conclusion?
- <jeremy_harmer> I don't think discussion *has to* reach a conclusion, but I think it is a question of conversing for some reasons other than just chat.

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Building confidence

- <georgina> Jeremy, going on a different track, this question has been sent in through the site... What qualities do you think make a good communicator? Anita, France. I open that to everyone, what qualities are required?
- <jeremy_harmer> I hope Nick would agree (based on earlier comments) that a good communicator is a good listener.
- <Wes> I think it differs from students.
- <Nick> Within the current topic, a good communicator needs to be a good listener as much as a good orator.
- <bev> This is true in real life, but in the classroom, it's up to the teacher to make sure that all students are good communicators
- <Wes> How much does confidence play in this?
- <jeremy_harmer> Wes, that's quite important, isn't it? Being confident is one aspect of a good speaker ties in to Nick's comments about keeping topics light. In the following way it seems to me the job of the teacher (if we are talking about 'planned' rather than spontaneous (opportunistic) discussions, is to get students in a position where they can feel confident that they can participate both linguistically and also in terms of 'having something to say'. Does that make sense?
- <Nick> Good point Jeremy!
- <maggie> How can we help less confident students then?
- <jeremy_harmer> Helping students feel confident is a question of letting them prepare (maybe just in buzz groups or maybe more deeply) and of giving them (or letting them find) whatever information they need to really take part, be offered specific points to make, and they can be given particular opportunities during a discussion to say something.
- <bev> What do you mean by particular opportunities?
- <jeremy_harmer> At various points they can be asked 'what do you think?' in such a way that for a brief second people do actually listen to them
- <Nick> What do you feel by the semi-formalised preparation of pyramid discussion?
- <James> Can Nick explain the term pyramid discussion?
- <Nick> In pyramid discussion pairs discuss, take their views to groups of 4 or 6 for further discussion before the whole class becomes involved.
- <georgina> Nick, do you find this a good way to get discussions to work?
- <Nick> Yes, Georgina, because it gives students a chance to 'rehearse' their views and steal language from other students!
- <wes> Nick - pyramid works well, but I don't always have enough class time for this - any suggestions?
- <Nick> Wes, it could be spread over two lessons or be a homework activity?

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Mixed nationality groups

- <Wes> What about mixed nationality groups? I have problems with some nationalities that are just reluctant to speak.
- <jeremy_harmer> Wes, in a sense MNGs (look a new set of initials!) discuss all the time anyway. The real problem is the monolingual group (like the Florentines) who would much rather

Discussion – does it work?

Live moderated chat 25th November 2001

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- discuss in their own language if it's something they REALLY want to say. With MNGs they have to communicate in English.
- <Nick> Wes, which ones, the quiet ones or the noisy ones?
- <Wes> It's a problem with both.
- <Nick> Sometimes it is the emotionally involved sts who crush other by dominating the discussion with bile.
- <bev> What's your answer to teachers who don't like discussions because the sts (monolinguals) speak their NL all the time?
- <jeremy_harmer> Bev I think one ends up with the cliché (which is nevertheless true) that we need to discuss with students the issue of L1 use, get their agreement about when it is or is not a good thing, then encourage them to use English as far as possible in those situations where we have agreed they should try. That's how most teachers do it, I think, and just occasionally you come across a group that are not prepared to try and use English even though they said they would so for them discussion may not be appropriate.
- <wes> Sorry - lost connection! My more dominant sts often start using L1 as they get fed up waiting for the reluctant sts.
- <jeremy_harmer> Wes, glad you came back!
- <wes> Me too!
- <jeremy_harmer> It's precisely at the kind of moments you describe (dominant sts) that the underlying skill of the their views experienced teacher is necessary. That's what we should be good at, gently dissuading dominating students from doing it, and getting their co-operation to let others get a word in even if it is a slow word. Doesn't always work but it's what we do!

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### Lively discussions

- <annette> It is possible to make discussion interesting and lively for students. How about using games and quizzes?
- <jeremy\_harmer> Hi, Annette. Games & quizzes are great - although they're not really discussions. ...
- <wes> It could, but sometimes the students aren't that keen on the topic, but it's part of the syllabus
- <jeremy\_harmer> Well a lot of them aren't. I think the key to getting student involved in discussion is preparation (see above) but also letting the students have a big say in what they are going to discuss.
- <georgina> Could the games/quizzes be used as stimulus for a discussion? That way you can build up confidence with the game/quiz and lead on to a discussion on sth covered in the previous activity. Wes - that might help you as well.
- <Nick> Games like 'Cluedo' might appear to be a good stimulus for discussion but in reality if you want to win the game, you don't reveal your thinking.

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Introducing new language

- <James> Can discussion be used effectively to introduce new language?
- <georgina> James, is this something you do?
- <jeremy_harmer> Hi James. I think 'yes' is the answer - or rather, discussion can create the need for new language which can then be 'inserted' by a helpful teacher as the discussion is taking place or worked on later after it's over.
- <Bob> I have a question about the teachers role... how much should they play?
- <bev> while discussions are taking place in groups, the teacher is not in control - where does her input come in?
- <maggie> Humour is very important in discussion! I try not to get too involved during the discussion, I introduce the language in a session afterwards.
- <georgina> Do you think sts can learn new language better if it has been introduced through discussion and even language that they have produced (correctly or not)?
- <alex_P> I agree with Maggie about not getting too involved, I limit myself to making sure there's no mother tongue
- <Nick> I think Maggie's made a good point but don't you also need to lubricate the discussion with a little language?

Discussion – does it work?

Live moderated chat 25th November 2001

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- <jeremy_harmer> Actually I have a question. How do you introduce new language in a free discussion?
I mean what do some of you mean by that?
- <wes> Certain topics lend themselves to certain structures or perhaps the new language is lexically driven.
- <alex_P> I think we're really talking about recently acquired language
- <georgina> alex_p, what do you mean recently acquired - would this be from pre-teaching by you?
- <alex_P> yes, practicing previous input in a discussion session
- <georgina> alex_p, do you think that works?
- <alex_P> it seems to work if the guidelines are clear enough
- <jeremy_harmer> OK, so the new language thing is this: some new language becomes necessary during a discussion and the T might offer it. Some is provided before a discussion by the teacher and some is worked on after the discussion because it would have been good to have it. However, what I am doubtful about is whether spontaneous discussion will ever work as practice of recently learnt or acquired language. It takes time (and some repeated exposure) for such language to be readily available, doesn't it?

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### The teacher's role

- <georgina> Two similar questions from Bob and Bev. What is the teacher's role?
- <jeremy\_harmer> I'd like to say something about the T's role(s) but what about the rest of you, what do you think?
- <maggie> I ask sts about topics that are close to them, when they use language I then suggest possible alternative language to use
- <Bob> I think I get too involved or perhaps it's just my sts are reluctant and I feel I have to encourage at every step
- <alex\_P> I too am interested in the teacher's role during group work
- <jeremy\_harmer> The teacher's role(s) during discussion is to make the discussion work (well obviously!) so bob's absolutely right to get involved sometimes to provoke the students when they aren't saying anything and the T is also right to correct - or at least reformulate - if this will make the communication better, and it's the T's role to draw out quiet students, and to inject humour and ALL those things, and I think the skill of experienced teachers is to know how to deploy... all those roles/behaviours most appropriately with different groups at different discussion stages.
- <Nick> Does the teacher sometimes act as a chairperson summarising and sometimes rewording the opinions expressed by the SS?
- <jeremy\_harmer> Yes, Nick, I think so. Sometimes. It depends on the group, the topic etc, doesn't it sometimes students really LIKE the teacher to be the moderator, chair, but sometimes it isn't necessary.
- <bev> Altogether, I don't understand how the teacher can intervene at all during a discussion, if this takes place in groups - it seems to me that it's only at the beginning or the end
- <lisa> whether the comprehension is correct or not - it leads to discussion!
- <georgina> Bev, would there be anytime when you'd feel the need to intervene?
- <jeremy\_harmer> Bev, but if the discussion takes place in groups, can't the teacher go round prompting, suggesting just being available, reformulating language to use comprehension blocks etc?
- <bev> I like the idea of total student involvement, as in scenarios. but find that these only work for advanced students

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Good and bad angels

- <georgina> Someone mentioned low level sts before - can discussion work at that level? If so how?
- <alex_P> I think a good mixture of clear guidelines can help with lower level sts
- <Nick> Can you provoke discussion by 'planting' SS to contradict others?
- <georgina> Sort of like role playing Nick?

Discussion – does it work?

Live moderated chat 25th November 2001

www.ELTForum.com



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- <alex_P> I've done that before Nick and it does work
- <jeremy_harmer> Nick. Yes, yes, yes. Or engineer thins in such a way that different opinions are guaranteed.
- <lisa> That works Nick
- <Nick> Yes, students can be briefed to contradict others. It's a great challenge to be the devil's advocate.
- <georgina> You could also set it as a task for the other sts to try and figure out who is being the DA!
- <Nick> Nice game Georgina!
- <georgina> Thanks Nick - I think the thing is, discussions can and do work but as teachers we need to put the time into planning them - or making it more interesting if the sts aren't into the topic.
- <lisa> Interviews are good role plays - Mr nice and Mr Nasty!
- <jeremy_harmer> Yes, or have students prepare for and against points of view (very obvious this) so that someone will always have a counter argument.
- <jeremy_harmer> I like nice & nasty, Lisa. Back to good and bad angels.
- <bev> What are good and bad angels?
- <jeremy_harmer> Bev, sorry. In an article in our correction TD pack, Mario Rinvolucri suggests that when students are talking they should have a good and a bad angel. The good one only writes down the good things the student says, whereas the bad one notes down any mistakes or omissions then when the student stops talking the angels feed back.
- <alex_P> I think it's important to leave sufficient time for this during the lesson. There is a tendency to squeeze it into the last 5 mins.
- <Nick> Good point Alex, teachers need to value discussion and give it the time and preparation it requires.

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Closing discussions

- <James> I'm sorry but I have to go now as it's after 5pm. A very interesting chat - thank you Jeremy.
- <Nick> Goodness me the hour has rushed through!
- <georgina> It certainly has. Does anyone have any last questions as we start to finish up?
- <jeremy_harmer> My grandmother-in-law used to say, if someone was looking bored 'Is it the company or the hour?' (Imagine heavily Russian accented English). Well this has been the opposite. Great company, good hour!
- <bev> What do you mean by good "things"? Do you mean content or language?
- <georgina> Good things could be language used and it can be about discourse - you'd need to 'discuss' this with your sts and it also depends on the purpose of the discussion.
- <jeremy_harmer> Bev, both. The whole point is the student should get positive feedback - great point, good language as well as less positive feedback!
- <lisa> Does anyone have any good ideas for closing discussions!
- <alex_P> I'm sorry I only caught the last 10 minutes, but I'll note it in my diary for next time. The feedback is enormously important, the sts must feel it has been worth their effort
- <jeremy_harmer> Alex_p you are so right. sts want, need and have a right to expect good juicy feedback, and this feeds into their attitude to future discussions (if the feedback has been useful they'll want to do it again to get more good feedback!) Oh, but you're not going!
- <alex_P> No, might still catch something else!! ... :-)
- <georgina> Sorry, that was the slow moderator! Thanks Jeremy and everyone for all your contributions.

And with a few more goodbyes the session ended. If you're interested in joining the next live session, go to www.eltforum.com/forum.html