Post-class feedback and discussion sessions :
Student perceptions of language classroom activities

Kenneth Schmidt

Abstract : Over a two month period, the author hosted a weekly, post-class discussion group with six English majors in his fourth year English discussion course at Tohoku Gakuin University, Sendai, Japan. Focusing on language learning activities from the immediately preceding class and related topics on language learning and teaching, the engaging conversations yielded practical insight for teacher and students, alike. Discussion summaries and comments for six of the topics covered are included here : a) pair vs. group work, b) monitoring during pair or group work, c) wrap-up discussion following pair or group work, d) discussion activities : question types and background knowledge, e) vocabulary activity design, f) activity likes and dislikes, g) staying in English during communication activities and classroom language policy, h) questions, responses and social context in the classroom.

Student perceptions and insights informed the author's understanding of leaner experience in the classroom and contributed to changes in his design of learning activities and approach to student orientation. Likewise, student participants reported gaining a better understanding of instructor goals and purposes and the factors involved in designing and running a task-based, discussion-oriented course. They also appreciated hearing the varying views of other students and felt the experience would make them better classroom learners and inform their approach to future teaching.

The author believes this type of regular, post-class discussion session could be profitable for many teachers and students, particularly students considering careers in language instruction.

Keywords : post-class feedback and discussion, student perspectives on communictive language
teaching, discussion activities in the language classroom

Introduction

In the spring of 1999, I was particularly impressed with the students in my fourth year, elective English communication course for English majors at Tohoku Gakuin University, Sendai, Japan. I had known many of them for two to four years, and their high level of interest—in the topics we discussed, in the language involved, and in each other—made the group a real pleasure to work with. Many were taking courses in English education, second language acquisition, and learning styles and strategies, and several had mentioned how they enjoyed analyzing our class in light of what they were learning elsewhere.

This intrigued me, as I often wondered about students' perceptions of classroom language learning experiences : What purposes and learning opportunities did they see? What victories and frustra-

tions did they experiences?　　How did their perceptions of classroom activities compare to my intentions in designing them and my impressions of their success?　　Peacock (1998) points out that student and teacher perceptions of the purpose and value of activities can vary widely.

Seeing an opportunity for mutually beneficial discussion with a motivated group of students who were comfortable with me and interested in language learning and teaching, I asked if any students would like to meet for 30–40 minutes after class each week and talk about what had happened in class and about related topics on language learning and teaching.　　Six students—Naoki, Takako, Eriko, Chiaki, Satomi, and Ritsuko—met weekly with me over a two month period.　　Wide–ranging discussion resulted, with topics nominated by both the students and myself.　　I kept a detailed diary of our sessions, and here summarize and comment on some of the ideas and issues that arose—particularly focusing on perceptions of learning activities in the university EFL classroom.

Post–class questionnaires and student journals or diaries have frequently been used to assess student response to language learning activities (Davies, 2006；Garrett & Shortall, 2002；Matsumoto, 1996；Spratt, 1999；Spratt, 2001).　　Some studies have included one-to-one teacher-student interviews (Aubrey, 2010；Peacock, 1998；Rao, 2002) or focus group interviews/discussions (Dushku, 2000；Ho, 2006；Melles, 2004), but ongoing, post-class teacher-student discussion groups, in which both teacher and students gain insight into the others' views of learning activities are rarely mentioned.　　I hope the insights gleaned from this experience encourage others to consider this type of exploration with their students, particularly those likely to become teachers themselves.

From the range of topics we covered, I have chosen six to specifically address here :
・Pair vs. group work
・Monitoring during pair or group work
・Wrap–up discussion following pair or group work
・Discussion activities : question types and background knowledge
・Vocabulary activity design
・Activity likes and dislikes
・Staying in English during communication activities and classroom language policy
・Questions, responses and social context in the classroom

For each topic, I summarize the related discussion and offer comments (*in italics*) on the exchange and how it has influenced my thinking and/or teaching going forward.

Pair vs. group work

In planning many communication activities, instructors make a choice between students working in

pairs or groups.   Our discussion group examined this choice together—focusing on relative strengths and weaknesses, and how the two arrangements could complement each other.

In our class, students sat anywhere they wished, and typically did the first pair or group activity of the day with the neighbors they chose to sit by.   Through the course of a lesson, pairs or groups would change several times, often alternating between new partners and original neighbors.   My hope was that working frequently with neighbors would create a low stress situation and ease interaction (Klippel, 1984), but that students would also have the benefits of working with a variety of partners (Long, 1990 ; Yoneoka, 1999).

I asked students how they felt about this situation.   Takako understood the need to work with different partners, but mentioned that working with her good friend, Eriko, created an "island of safety," allowing her to risk a bit more, both personally and linguistically (they could laugh about mistakes together).   This applied during pair work and even when sharing their ideas later in whole class discussion.

On the other hand, Naoki (a powerfully social individual), didn't like spending too much time with one partner.   He wanted to switch partners more, and preferred not to work with the same person every class period.   This would allow him to get to know other class members better and yield a greater variety of chances for discussion, listening, and language use.

Naoki also strongly preferred pair work over group work, pointing out that turn-taking was almost a necessity in pair work, while in group work, one or two people often did little, if any, talking.   Pair work, overall, thus resulted in more extensive speaking practice.   It also helped him to more quickly build a deeper level of connection, and this connection endured to facilitate effective collaboration in future pair or group sessions, as well.   Chiaki agreed.   I replied that we did change partners fairly often, but Naoki strongly felt that you should do no more than one activity with the same person during a class.

Comment : While I understood Takako's feelings and continued to provide opportunity to work with chosen neighbors, Naoki's comments encouraged me to provide students with an even wider variety of partners, which I hoped would yield benefits in greater rapport as partners worked together multiple times over the course of the school year (Doyon, 2000).   I found this to be the case, and students in my current communication classes typically work with their original neighbors only once or twice over the course of a lesson.   On exit questionnaires, many students comment on the numerous positive relationships developed through this.

Takako then brought up the problems she faced when she and her partner were not well matched.

If their interests or approach to discussion were too dissimilar, or they just didn't "hit it off," discussion was often limited.　　They could complete the basic task in a halting, bare-boned way, but couldn't build on that to make a *real* conversation.　　She added that while she realized the benefits of working with various partners, that did not make it any easier when a mismatch occurred.

Comments : Each year I told students that in most walks of life they would interact and make conversation with strangers on a regular basis.　　I acknowledged that pair or group work with unfamiliar partners could be daunting (even in Japanese), but stressed that this was a valuable opportunity to develop their interpersonal skills, as well as language skills.　　This typically met with a mixed response, but here was Takako, an outgoing young woman committed to building her abilities, who after four years, still struggled with these situations.　　This gave me new appreciation for the difficulties that pair work could pose.

I usually assigned new partners or groups randomly using various numbering schemes.　　As Takako mentioned, this at times resulted in poor matches.　　However, on occasions when I told everyone to form ***new*** *pairs on their own, several embarrassed students were typically unable to find a partner.　　My Japanese students generally disliked the time-consuming, socially risky negotiation involved in finding new partners, and on one course evaluation, a student wrote : "Please don't do that to me!!"　　I found that overall, after an initial activity with immediate neighbors, random pairing with fairly frequent changes (2-4 times per 90 minute class, depending on activity type) seemed to work best for my students.*

Returning to the pair vs. group work issue, Ritsuko, in contrast to Naoki, was more positive about group activities, especially valuing the greater variety of ideas generated.　　She thought she would especially like to follow up a group activity with a pair activity structured to allow more in-depth discussion of ideas generated in groups.　　Without the initial group time, she could not have such a rich following discussion.

Comments : Following group work, I occasionally paired students with a new partner and asked them to briefly report on their groups' results or administer a quiz or questionnaire they had developed with their group.　　However, I had rarely designed activities in which students took results from a group task (e.g., brainstorming) and moved on to discuss the ideas or issues further in pairs.

Results from a questionnaire administered the previous year, about preferences for groups vs. pairs, echoed the thoughts of our group.　　Many students reported being able to speak more deeply —exploring the topic further and more intimately in pairs.　　If comfortable with their partner, they could risk more and reveal more of themselves and their feelings.　　However, others said they liked the variety of ideas they could get with a group and that there was less chance of having nothing to say, as there could be with an incom-

patible partner.

Monitoring during pair or group work

During pair or group work, rather than getting a partner and doing the activity like everyone else, I typically circulated around the room, monitoring progress.   I wondered how students perceived this and asked for their impressions.   Rather than venture guesses, they immediately asked me to spell out my reasons (listed here) :

· Class management : How is everyone doing?   Who is already done?   Who needs more time?   Etc.

· Serving as a resource : Answering questions, providing helpful vocabulary, helping to negotiate meaning, supplying helpful ideas, etc.

· Noticing common language difficulties : Occasionally offering immediate repair ; more often noting for later attention with the whole class.

· Gleaning good ideas and strategies to share later, with the whole class.

· Monitoring activity strengths and weaknesses for future modification and application.

· Monitoring student participation for evaluation (very minor).

Although initially not able or willing to guess at these purposes, students accepted them as reasonable and consistent with their experience.

I then asked why underclassmen (1st and 2nd year students), in particular, sometimes stopped talking or got quiet when I came near.

1.   Ritsuko recalled that she knew I was there to help, but that she was embarrassed by her inability to communicate well.

2.   Chiaki mentioned that accuracy had always been stressed in her junior and senior high school English classes.   Close enough did not count ; it needed to be perfect.   This made it very difficult, initially, for her to speak in her "broken English" when she knew the teacher was listening.

3.   Satomi admitted that she still had not become accustomed to this, and felt uncomfortable as she saw me approaching.

Comment : I was interested to learn that— for these students, at least—student inhibition had more to do with insecurity about language ability than a sense of invaded privacy.   While I was sure that issues of privacy and personal space also played a role, I was encouraged to think that some initial orientation about my monitoring and its purposes might help to alleviate consternation and help students use me more effec-

tively as a resource during activities.

Wrap-up discussion following pair or group work

In small, adult, evening English discussion classes I had previously had good success with whole-class discussion following pair or group work.　Pairs and groups sharing their ideas and results and responding to those of others also brought a helpful sense of significance and closure to the preceding activity (Duquette, 1995).　However, this success had not carried over to large classes (30–40) of college students, who participated actively in pair and small group work, but rarely appeared eager to share their results with the whole class.　Trying to provide some exchange of ideas without embarrassing anyone (Doyon, 2000), I typically monitored groups as they worked, then shared interesting ideas and language that come up with the whole class, or called on individuals that I knew were confident and ready with ideas (see Takako's comment, above).　I often invited free comments and responses, but honestly didn't expect many.　This seemed to go well enough, but I still suspected that I was unnecessarily dominating this feedback/wrap-up time, and wondered if—however slow and painful (to me)—students would prefer to participate in a freer time of whole class discussion.

I brought this up with our discussion group, and asked if hearing the ideas of other groups was important to them.　They replied strongly in the affirmative, but did not feel that students should necessarily drive such discussion.　They were generally comfortable with my approach of sharing interesting ideas I had gleaned from students.

I asked for other options.　Takako, with support of the others (and echoing Ritsuko's idea, above), suggested forming new groups so individuals could share results from the previous group discussion.　Naoki chimed in that he preferred more chances for personal interaction over extended whole class discussion or feedback.　A fairly short wrap-up period and on to more pair or group work was preferable to him, and the others agreed.

*Comments : Students were interested in hearing the ideas of other classmates and desired the sense of closure and validation this brought to classroom activities, but they wanted it to be done efficiently, with minimum personal risk, in a way that would prioritize the more valued, safer time spent in small group interaction.　This is consistent with Duquette's (1995) emphasis on brief closure activities and, I feel, confirmed my general approach.　But I was challenged to do more to facilitate sharing results and ideas from group work without putting people **unwillingly** on center stage—for example :*

・developing a greater repertoire of ways for students to share their results with new groups or partners

・creating report forms with supports allowing groups to confidently and efficiently report their results to

the whole class

· *appointing group secretaries to note and summarize group findings— to be displayed on a video monitor and read by me.*

Discussion activities : question types and background knowledge

Near the beginning of a unit on family structure and relationships, students listened to tapes of individuals from Uganda, New Zealand, the USA, India and Israel talking about family life.   I then handed out related questions to groups of three for discussion which would prepare us for later comparative analysis of family life in different cultures.

Questions :

Introduction : What's your general image of Japanese families today? How do you think they've changed over the years? Discuss the following questions with your group.   Choose a secretary to take notes and summarize your group's answers.   You're free to skip questions and come back to them later.

1.   In Japan, who typically has the role of head or boss of the family—the mother or the father?   What does "head or boss of the family" mean to you?   What power or responsibilities are involved?   Who's the boss in your family?   Why do you say so?   What other roles, responsibilities or powers do other members of a family have?

2.   Is descent in Japan patrilineal (i.e. all children take their father's surname) or matrilineal (all take the mother's name), or bilineal (take either or both names)?   Who is responsible for parents as they get older and need help?   When both parents die, who inherits their home, money, etc.?   Is it split evenly between children?   How is it decided?

3.   How do you think Japanese family life has changed over the last 50 years?

4.   What do you think are the biggest difficulties or problems with family life in Japan today?

5.   What's the best thing about Japanese family life today?

6.   What do you think are the biggest differences between family life in the USA and Japan?

I expected groups to take considerable time working through these questions.   After about 25 minutes, while no group had finished, discussion seemed to have bogged down, so I brought it to a close and went on to the next step.

Following class, I asked our group if I had let the discussion run too long.   Of the five present, two said "No," while three said "Yes," adding that the content had not been exhausted, but their groups' ability to discuss it in an engaged, constructive way had.   Three reasons were offered :

· The task was too involved, and they simply had trouble sustaining discussion that long.

・Question 4 was about "problems," which is explicitly negative and thus more risky to discuss than "changes" (Question 3).　Students were troubled by the thought, "What if a problem I mention is particularly true for one of my group members?"

・The students all said they didn't know enough to comment intelligently on differences between family life in Japan and the USA (Question 6).

In reply to the last point, I countered that I was not so interested in accurate knowledge as I was in their impressions or pre-conceptions/stereotypes.

Chiaki perceptively replied that that might be very well for an elementary school child, but they were now adults, expected to have some knowledge of the world.　To offer impressions that might turn out to be largely mistaken risked displaying ignorance—especially embarrassing with a native of the USA (me) present.　The risk here was too great, so everyone clammed up.

Comments : This struck me on two levels :

1. *Activities that don't recognize students' sense of self respect and fear of appearing ignorant (or even worse—ignorant **and opinionated**) are doomed.　Tasks and questions, such as Question 6, should be framed to lessen or remove the risk.*

2. *A question, like #6, that seems interesting to me as part of a cross-cultural exchange, may have little apparent relevance to a mono-cultural group living in their own country.　At the minimum, such questions should be framed in a way that makes the cross-cultural aspect more accessible.*

On both counts, a more productive question might have been this : "Imagine you are one of the speakers we heard earlier.　If you came to Japan on a homestay, what do you think might surprise you about family life in Japan?"　In regard to background knowledge, this makes students accountable only for what they heard earlier (and any inferences based on that), and in regard to cultural context, it puts them explicitly in the role of a foreigner seeing Japanese culture through new eyes.

Moving on to a general critique of the family unit, everyone felt a need for more background information, particularly on kibbutzim, polygamy, and other aspects of family life in some of the cultures we looked at.　They felt they lacked a good enough picture of the situations involved to form opinions or make adequate comparisons.　This hindered their ability to engage in *productive* discussion (Brilhart & Galanes, 1989).　I asked if they were interested enough in the topic to make the extra time and effort worth it, and they definitely were.　The unit had helped them think a great deal about their own family situations and goals, but the unit and discussion could have been much richer and more involving.　The thing they most wanted was visual input—photos and video to better visualize the situations we were considering.　Concluding, everyone felt that adequate knowledge of the topic was more im-

portant than linguistic fluency in pursuing discussion.

Comments : These thoughts were entirely consistent with Chiaki's earlier point about the need for enough information to form and express opinions in a productive, adult way.   For this reason, some English materials focus on personal experience as the basis for most interaction (Omaggio–Hadley, 1993). However, learners also crave topics that take them beyond themselves to learn about the world around them, and, having provided a new perspective, allow students to examine their own experiences and views in a new light (Prodromou, 1992).   This challenged me to do more to help my students prepare for discussion, not only linguistically, but by providing improved content (including audio- **visual** *materials) for background building and/or facilitating independent access to such content (e.g., Web pages, downloadable audio–visual materials, language lab materials).*

Vocabulary activity design

Over the course of our "family" unit, I gave the students three different vocabulary activities :

1. *Read, search and define*—Student pairs read a text related to our topic, then searched the text for words from a list and tried to define their meanings in each particular context.   I then went through the list, eliciting and explaining meanings as needed.

2. *Pre–reading definition match*—Before reading an important text, student pairs previewed the vocabulary in quiz–like fashion—taking turns reading definitions, while the other searched a list for the matching words.

3. *Pre–reading listen and match*—In preparation for another reading, I gave the students a word list, then explained the terms in random order while the class listened and told me which word they thought I was talking about.

I asked our group whether they preferred vocabulary activities before or after they read the associated text.   Chiaki preferred doing the activity before reading, as long as she had some familiarity with many of the words.   The activity thus wasn't too difficult and helped prime her to understand the text.   With unfamiliar words, however, she was afraid that the pre–reading activity would prove too difficult to be worth doing.   She might have a better chance with the task after reading the text by combining information from both definition and text.

Comments : This opened my eyes to a range of post–reading vocabulary activities in which students use the text in combination with additional information (e.g., definitions or examples in other contexts) to discover word meanings and build deeper word knowledge.

Of the three, Satomi preferred the first, "Read, search and define," activity because it gave her a greater sense of the word's actual usage.　My subsequent explanations of meaning in the context also provided valuable listening input.

However, Ritsuko warned that finding meanings in context can be frustrating when there is not enough support in the text (Dubin & Olshtain, 1993).　She liked the second, "Pre–reading definition match" activity for the game–like challenge aspect.　It was motivating and fun.　Conversely, she felt that in the third, "Pre–reading listen and match" activity, it was easy for her mind to wander and miss things.

Comments : The third, "Pre–reading listen and match" activity included listening practice, but did not require active involvement of all students and, for Ritsuko, wasn't as engaging as the others.　This is not a reason to drop this activity style, but I resolved to be careful about keeping down the number of items and not going too long with it.

There was no consensus on the "best" activity, but understanding student perceptions encouraged me to…
· think carefully about vocabulary level and task difficulty in activity design and sequencing.
· design tasks to help students integrate existing word knowledge with information from target text/audio, and with further supplemental information (definitions, examples).
· focus on learner engagement, even with activities that are "simply" preparation for the "main" task.

Activity likes and dislikes

Vocabulary activities came up again during a discussion of classroom activity likes and dislikes.　Chiaki and Takako mentioned a course in which they often listened to words in isolation and picked matching words from a list.　Chiaki felt unable to connect this to any meaningful use of language, and thus had great difficulty remembering anything done during that time.

Takako and Naoki agreed, with Naoki adding that his main concern was whether the activity was fun and interesting.　If it was, he thought the experience was rich, and he could build lots of connections between the words/language he was using and hearing, the content they were discussing and the experience they were sharing.

Comment : I replied that that was a focus of many things we did in our class—building opportunities for exposure to language enriched through engaging listening, reading, and interaction or discussion.　As

Naoki had expressed, I hoped this helped develop lots of connections to aid memory and facilitate use (Stevick, 1996).   The students strongly agreed and felt this was consistent with their experience in our class.

Staying in English during communication activities

I noticed that first year students typically had more difficulty staying in English through the course of communication activities than the students in this fourth year class, even when activities were clearly level-appropriate.   I asked our group to think back and offer some ideas on why this was the case.   In the course of our conversation, Takako and Eriko offered seven ideas :

1. Most first year students had had few opportunities to speak in English.   They knew many English words and constructions, but could not use them in real-time speaking.

2. It was easier to communicate in Japanese (path of least resistance), and freshmen had not yet developed discipline that could develop later.

3. If a comment or exclamation came out in Japanese, conversation tended to continue in Japanese.   It could be difficult to switch back because you had changed into a Japanese thinking stream.   Even if you wanted to go back to English, this could be difficult because discussion in Japanese moved quickly on while you were processing the English you wanted to use.

4. I asked if there were any social barriers to English use.   For example, if a group switched into Japanese, was it socially difficult to switch back into English?   "What a serious student!   What a brown-noser!"   They both said this wasn't a serious factor for them, though it might have been for some groups of freshmen.   In fact, they mentioned one student, who though somewhat lacking in social skills, was generally and sincerely respected for his resolve to use only English.

5. Another factor was motivational.   English conversation was required for freshmen at this school.   Although all students were English majors, not all saw improved ability to communicate in English as central to their goals.

6. For many students, this was the first time they had had a foreign teacher, and were being asked to deal with situations and behave in ways that were new to them.   This could create stress, and make it difficult for them to function.

7. Many students did not know how to use procedural/facilitative language like, "Who's next?" "It's your turn," "I'll start," and "What do you think?"   This made it difficult to continue an activity completely in English, and presented an opportunity for Japanese to enter and then dominate an activity.   Students needed to be made aware of these devices, but it also required considerable motivation to pick them up and use them.

Comments : Takako and Eriko's points added to my understanding of the factors involved in L1 vs. L2 use.   In particular, the last point reminded me that I also often slipped into Japanese for some procedural/facilitative language, e.g., "This homework is due next week" or "Please exchange papers."   There are times when the teacher may employ the L1 constructively (Nation, 1997 ; Schweers, 1999).   In my case, students readily understood the information or instructions in Japanese, and it helped us get going quickly. But given the number of times the same phrases were repeated over a term, I was encouraged to discipline myself to keep these, as far as practical, in English and to provide students, on an ongoing basis, with helpful procedural language for their own use.

*Looking back, I am sorry that I did not ask our group if or how the use of L1 could facilitate learning and interaction (Auerbach, 1993 ; Cook, 1999).   As my question framed L1 use as a "problem" (which **overuse** can be), students responded in that vein.*

I did, however, ask the group's opinion of language policies for the classroom.   I explained that I had been hesitant to enforce English-only rules because I believed that there were valid uses for L1 in the classroom (Schmidt, 1996) and that students could make reasonable decisions if they were aware of the issues and were committed to improving their ability to communicate.   They said that the motivational aspect was key.   I proposed several different policies, both teacher- and class-dictated, but they had no strong reaction—positive or negative—except that if an absolute "no L1" policy were enforced, they might be so intimidated that it could inhibit both Japanese and English communication.

Comments : The students strongly believed in the importance of using English as much as possible, but acknowledged occasional use of Japanese.   Interestingly, they did not seem to have done much deliberate thinking about when use of L1 might be helpful or how they would feel about limits on its use.   I resolved to put a bit more time into awareness-raising on this issue in hopes of students making more informed, prudent choices.

Questions, responses and social context in the classroom

On questionnaires and in our discussion group, university students frequently mentioned that it was typically easier to discuss personal subjects in pairs or trios, and especially difficult in whole-class situations.

This reminded me of my first adult English conversation class in Japan—a small, intermediate level group.   One day our eight members were talking about entertainment options.   I asked a very congenial, middle aged business man, "What's your favorite bar or drinking place in Sendai?"   No an-

swer. I repeated myself… Smile, but no answer. "Do you ever go for a drink after work?…" Smile, no answer. Finally, another classmate whispered, "I don't think he wants to say." "Oh, sorry! No problem…" It had not occurred to me that this would be private information, or, if it was, that he would not reply obliquely with something like, "Well, it's not *my* favorite, but many people like *such and such* a place."

Comment : *Clueless teacher begins cultural education.*

Thinking of this and other teacher–student exchanges in the classroom, I asked our group if they had ever felt forced to answer questions that were too personal in a large–group setting. They all said, "No." They agreed that many questions would be too personal, but didn't expect to be asked these and had not been asked in their classes.

As we discussed this, Chiaki's thoughts turned to more innocuous classroom questions : "What kinds of music do you listen to? Who's your favorite actor or singer? What movies do you recommend?" She sometimes wondered why a teacher so much older than her would care about what movies or music she liked—"Would they really think of taking my recommendations?"

Comments : *I thought Chiaki's experience and the situation with my unresponsive business man were both rooted in mismatched perceptions of the purpose of communication in particular contexts. Sakamoto brings this out in her book,* <u>Polite Fictions</u> *(Sakamoto & Naotsuka, 1982). Her husband, a Japanese, was sometimes offended by the rapid fire questions from visiting foreigners : "How tall is that building? Where are these made? Why is it done that way? …" "How should I know all those things?" But he wasn't required to know. They were merely making conversation. The information was not central ; talking—making relationship, finding areas of shared interest, etc.—was the goal. In my English communication classes, I often saw interaction with students in this, relationship building, way. Some students, like Chiaki, may occasionally have been a bit perplexed by such questions from a middle–aged man, but could get used to it over time. Other students, however, seemed to display an even greater mismatch. From their perspective, they were in a classroom being asked a direct question by a teacher. They might as well have been at court, giving testimony before a judge. I now try to raise awareness of this issue with my students, assuring them that in social conversation, it is completely OK to take replies in any direction one feels comfortable—giving a frank answer, sidestepping, generalizing, recalling a humorous episode, turning the question back on the questioner, etc.*

Chiaki then recalled another teacher's question : "What are you doing to improve your ability?"

She interpreted this as, "You're not making very good progress.　Are you really doing anything?" Eriko replied that this question, even if understood in a positive way—"You're doing great.　What's brought you such success?"—would also cause consternation in calling unwelcome attention to the student.

Comments : This further reinforced the point that there may be much more to a student's response, or lack of response, to a question or comment than linguistic competence and attitude.　Understanding of the context, of appropriate roles and responses in that context, and of surface and underlying meaning also come into play (Hwang, 2008).　This topic could, itself, form a fascinating unit for a discussion-oriented class like this one.

Discussion

Our post-class discussion group provided me with a valuable opportunity to elicit student perceptions of classroom learning activities and issues surrounding these.　Their responses and insights…

· informed my understanding of student classroom experiences.

· provided food for further reflection on important issues.

· resulted in real changes in my teaching, particularly in regard to design, organization and sequencing of pair or group activities, and to orientation—helping students to better understand the philosophy behind the class and the goals and purposes of the learning activities we undertook.

Our student members assured me that they had gained a better understanding of my goals and purposes, and the considerations that go into designing and running a task-based, communication- and discussion-oriented course.　Other benefits were the opportunities to formulate and express their own preferences and beliefs, and to hear the views of other students, which might differ substantially from their own.　They felt this experience would help them to make better use of classroom activities as learners and inform their thinking if/when they became language teachers, themselves.

Key elements of our group were its small size, its voluntary, ongoing nature and its immediate post-class timing :

· Being a small group, students felt relatively at ease and had ample opportunity to exchange ideas at some depth.

· As volunteers, students had an investment in making our times together worthwhile, and each committed to participate in at least six of our eight sessions.

· Meeting weekly over two months allowed us to ...

　· develop a greater level of comfort with each other

・visit topics multiple times as classroom experience shed new light or posed new problems

・give our thoughts time to gestate and find an appropriate time to share them.

・Meeting immediately after class ensured that, for the most part, we were discussing shared experiences, and that the situations and emotions involved were still clearly in mind.

While the small size and self-selected nature of the group, and the freely ranging nature of our discussion ruled out statistical generalization of any findings, these characteristics facilitated our central goal of exchanging ideas for everyone's benefit.   However, it is possible that groups of this type could be used in combination with quantitative instruments to yield constructive results (Ho, 2006 ; Johnson & Christensen, 2004).

Conclusion

A weekly, post-class discussion group focused on classroom language learning activities and related issues yielded engaging discussion and practical insight for teacher and students, alike.   I would recommend this type of experience to other language instructors and their students, especially students considering careers in language instruction.

References

Aubrey, S. (2010).   Influences on Japanese students' willingness to communicate across three different sized EFL classes.   MA Thesis.   The University of Auckland.   www.asian-efl-journal.com/The sis/Thesis-Aubrey.pdf (accessed 2013/11/18).

Auerbach, E.R. (1993).   Reexamining English Only in the ESL classroom.   *TESOL Quarterly, 27*(1), 9-32.

Brilhart, J.K., & Galanes, G.J. (1989).   *Effective group discussions* (sixth ed.).   Dubuque, IA : Wm. C. Brown.

Cook, V. (1999).   Going beyond the native speaker in language teaching.   *TESOL Quarterly, 33*(2), 185-209.

Davies, A. (2006).   What do learners really want from their EFL course?   *ELT Journal, 60*(1), 3-12.

Doyon, P. (2000).   Shyness in the Japanese EFL class : Why it is a problem, what it is,what causes it, and what to do about it.   *The Language Teacher, 24*(1), 11-16, 37.

Dubin, F., & Olshtain, E. (1993).   Predicting word meanings from contextual clues : Evidence from L1 readers.   In T. Huckin, M. Haynes & J. Coady (Eds.), *Second language reading and vocabulary learning* (pp. 181-202).   Norwood, NJ : Ablex.

Duquette, G. (1995).   *Second language practice : Classroom strategies for developing communicative competence*.   Bristol, UK : Multilingual Matters.

Dushku, S. (2000).   Conducting individual and focus group interviews in research in Albania.   *TESOL Quarterly, 34*(4), 763-768.

Garrett, P., & Shortall, T. (2002).   Learners' evaluations of teacher-fronted and student-centred classroom activities.   *Language Teaching Research, 6*(1), 25-57.

By Stacia Levy 66,796 views. There are many benefits to the student-centered class discussion although it's sometimes a challenge to develop. There are a number of potential pitfalls, including students talking off-topic, not talking at all, or one or two students dominating the discussion. However, when it can be developed, benefits of class discussion include increased engagement with the course content, classmates, increased use of critical thinking skills, and practice in students' second language. A few methods have been found helpful for increasing student participation in class. Address Debate and discussion activities can be the most interesting, engaging and beneficial of all classroom teaching exercises. Great topics might include global issues, methods of education, technology and automation, and choosing the best career paths. 15 Classroom and Online Debate and Discussion Language and Critical Thinking Activities. July 10th, 2020. Introducing a topic in the classroom can be one of the trickiest tasks for a teacher. Sometimes, it can take a a lot of experience and a lot of practice to get the icebreaker, or warm-up, or introduction to a topic just right. But success and failure is a fantastic stand-alone topic for a class. It's great for brainstorming, discussions and much more. Success or failure (PDF). Related Resources This research provides insight into Japanese students' perceptions and attitudes of par-ticipating in activities through Facebook for language learning. In addition, the authors discuss the overall implications of and potential uses for Facebook in the field of second language learning and teaching. Ninety-seven students from three private universities in Japan participated in this study. Specifically, the majority of students re-ported that instant interaction and feedback increased motivation, while informal interactions such as when fellow students liked comments helped improve their con-fidence. Findings from the studies above indicate that Facebook's integration into education has had positive effects on student motivation. Apart from teaching regular classes, we also conduct language clubs from time to time in order to boost the confidence of the learners to use the target language in more real life, ad-hoc situations.| Skyteach. Some activities that I normally use during language clubs are as follows; 1. Debate and/or Discussion. People love talking about their experiences and opinions. This is a great way to get them speak using the target foreign language. In the classroom, teachers provided only verbal feedback to the students and. in the observation it was found that teachers gave feedback on few occasions. Teachers recommended that. Major findings and discussion. Classroom assessment and feedback are both a. teaching-learning approach and a set of techniques. (Cohen, 1994). the present picture of English class activities is. described below in detail. Teaching methods and materials Used in the English.