Discussions that Work

Task-centred fluency practice

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Preface

This book deals with one particular aspect of the teaching of English as a foreign language: fluency practice. It suggests some ways in which students may be induced to *talk* in the classroom, using the language creatively, purposefully and individually. The vehicle of such use is defined as the *discussion,* in a very broad sense of the word. In Part 1, I have tried to isolate and generalize about a number of elements that are essential for a good discussion; some of these are well-known and have been extensively written about (interesting topics, group-work, role-play), while others have been relatively neglected (the task as focus, organization of process). Part 2 consists of practical examples of discussion activities. These are directly or indirectly based on exercises I have actually tried and found effective.

Many of the ideas are more relevant to the teaching of students who are reasonably proficient in English, i.e. intermediate and more advanced classes in language institutes and universities and the upper classes of secondary schools. Some of them however can be used successfully with elementary and lower-intermediate classes and I have indicated this where relevant.

At the end of the book can be found a *Bibliography* and an *Index.* The *Bibliography* is selective; its purpose is to suggest further reading that may assist the teacher in the planning, preparation and execution of classroom discussions; books and articles are presented under subject-headings rather than alphabetically, with brief comments on their content and use. The *Index* is simply an alphabetical list of all the activities described in this book.

One further note: I have referred to the teacher throughout in the feminine. This is not because I have anything against men teachers, but because I, and the vast majority of English teachers of my acquaintance, are women.

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Part 1: General principles

What is a discussion?

Communication practice

Much of our time as language teachers is taken up teaching
particular features of phonology, lexis or structure: presenting
them, getting students to practise them, testing them and so on.
But when our students have (we hope) learnt them, we have
the problem of getting them to use their knowledge for actual
purposeful verbal communication. This side of language teaching
has come into greater prominence in recent years; instead of the
idea, associated with the audio-lingual school, that students
should use language in more or less controlled exercises until they
have mastered its structures to a high degree, and only then
begin to talk freely, it is now accepted that some sort of dynamic,
individual and meaningful oral practice should be included in
English lessons right from the beginning. And if this is seen as
important at the early stages – how much more so at the
advanced! Most courses now emphasize the importance of
fostering learners' ability to *communicate* in the foreign language
rather than their skill in constructing correct sentences, and there
is a corresponding increase in the time and energy allotted to
communication exercises in the classroom.

It is, however, worth noting here that if communication
practice is one of the most important components of the language
learning/teaching process, it is also one of the most problematical.
It is much more difficult to get learners to express themselves
freely than it is to extract right answers in a controlled exercise.

The discussion

The most natural and effective way for learners to practise talking
freely in English is by thinking out some problem or situation
together through verbal interchange of ideas; or in simpler terms,
to *discuss*. I am using the word 'discussion' here rather broadly
to include anything from the simplest question–answer guessing
process, through exploration of situations by role-play, to the
most complex political and philosophical debates; I include

not only the talking but also any reading and writing that may be entailed.

The aims

The main aim of a discussion in a foreign language course may be *efficient fluency practice,* but it is by no means the only one; indeed, it cannot be, by definition. It is today commonplace to say that language is never used (except in the classroom) for its own sake, but always for the sake of achieving an objective, or to perform a function: to persuade, inform, inquire, threaten, etc. Language, in short, is always a means to an end; and we cannot expect proper use of the means if we do not supply a reasonable end. Hence *achieving an objective* in itself must form one of our aims in holding discussions. As language teachers, we may see this as more or less secondary, but never negligible; and for our students at least it should be the central thought focus during talking. The purpose of the discussion, whether it is solving a problem, exploring the implications of an idea, constructing proposals or whatever, is to be taken very seriously and the results respected by teacher and students alike.

Learning from content may be a third aim; in many discussions there is much to be learnt from what is said: information may be acquired, for example, or new points of view considered.

Finally, we may wish to foster another kind of learning: learning how to participate constructively and cooperatively in a discussion. This involves *clear, logical thought* on the one hand and *debating skills* on the other. By clear, logical thought I mean things like the ability to generalize from examples, or the converse, to draw analogies, judge priorities, infer causes and so on. Debating skills include listening to what someone else has to say, not interrupting, speaking relevantly and clearly.

A discussion that works

For our purposes, a discussion that works is primarily one in which as many students as possible say as much as possible. I am not denying that aural comprehension is as important as speaking – or more so – but listening can be done by all the class simultaneously, whereas only a limited number of students can talk at one time; and talking, therefore, is liable to be practised less.

A further characteristic of a successful discussion is the apparent motivation of the participants: if I look around and see

that all those not actually speaking are concentrating their attention on the speaker(s), and that their expressions are alive, that they are reacting to the humour, seriousness or difficulty of the ideas being expressed – then that is another sign that things are going well.

If, finally, I can discern both these symptoms – full participation and high motivation – in a series of discussion exercises where language is used in a variety of ways in terms of subject-matter and communicative functions, then I have reason to be pleased with my class and with myself.

Some factors in a good discussion: topic, group-work, role-play

The topic

Its necessity

The problem of getting students to express themselves freely in the foreign language has come into prominence in recent years as a result of the growing emphasis on communicative abilities. But the basic idea of encouraging fluency through conversation is as old as language teaching itself. One conventional way of doing this is the 'conversation class', where a group of students sit down with a teacher – a native speaker if they are lucky – and are required to talk with her. This often degenerates into a more or less biographical question-and-answer session of the where-do-you-live-what-are-your-hobbies variety, monopolized by the minority of fluent speakers. The reason for this is in the first place the lack of a defined and interesting *topic*.

So the first thing to do is to bring interesting subjects of conversation to the classroom. Teachers increasingly hold topic-centred discussions or debates as a framework for fluency practice, and many books for use in the classroom have been published to help them think of suitable subjects (see *Bibliography*). Such exercises are often successful; at any rate, they are a vast improvement on the unstructured conversation class.

Topic is still seen by most teachers as the central focus of classroom discussions. To my mind, it is certainly important, but not central: the crux is not *what* to talk about, but *why* you need to talk about it; of this, more later.

Limitations

Now a discussion which has no aim but to discuss the topic may, and often does, succeed, if the students are the type that enjoys arguing and are able to think in abstractions. But often, in my experience, the participation gradually subsides until you hear the familiar cry: 'I can't think of anything to say!' What the students who say this actually mean is that they *have no reason* to say anything. To tell students to talk about abortion, or the latest political scandal, or whatever, is almost as bad as telling

them simply to talk English. Why should they? They would never, outside the classroom, dream of inventing sentences about a subject merely for the sake of speaking. Such speech only imitates real conversation, it is in truth as artificial as most other classroom exercises, for it lacks the *purpose* of genuine discourse; and from this lack of purpose springs the lack of interest and motivation that too often leads to the 'petering out' phenomenon. In short, students need a *reason* to speak more than they need something to speak *about;* once they have such a reason, however, the fact that the topic is stimulating will make the whole discussion more interesting.

The topics themselves, moreover, are often rather limited. Most teachers and materials-writers mistakenly treat the concept 'interesting' as somehow synonymous with 'controversial', and 'discussion' as the same as 'argument'. Most of our normal talking is concerned with subjects that are more or less interesting to us, but few of them are actually controversial, and very little of our talking is arguing. If we want our discussions to give the students practice in a varied sample of language functions, then we must considerably widen our conception of what makes an interesting subject. The best illustration of what I mean will be supplied by a quick glance through some of the examples given in Part 2.

Further reservations I have about solely topic-centred discussions concern the usual manner of their organization. Firstly, in proposing a subject for debate, teachers (or their books) often misguidedly make their students a present of all the main arguments and items of information they are likely to need, thus robbing them of the initiative. Half the fun of debating is thinking up cogent points, bringing fresh evidence, or suggesting original examples. If all this has been done for them, then all the students can do (unless they are very original) is paraphrase ready-made ideas. These are unlikely to interest either speaker or listener, and we are back to the problem of lack of purpose.

Secondly, such discussions are nearly always carried out in the full class forum, a group of anything from fifteen to forty students. Now as I said before, we want all our students to speak, and for as much time as possible; the simplest arithmetic will make it clear that in a forty-minute period, even if every member of the class speaks, he will do so for only a minute or two; not one's idea of optimum active learner participation. Of course, in reality even this is not achieved. The discussion is usually dominated by a few fluent speakers, and the rest either listen, or, bored by being passive bystanders, lose interest completely and turn to some other occupation, which may or may not have a disrupting influence on the proceedings!

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Group-work

Organization

The obvious answer to the problem raised at the end of the last
section is to divide the class into discussion groups of between
two and eight participants. In fact, this is so obvious that it is
surprising how little it is done. It took me some time to reach this
conclusion myself, partly because I simply never thought of it
(so naturally does one teach by the methods by which one
was taught!), and partly because, having thought of it, I was a
little apprehensive of trying it, afraid of the lack of discipline that
would result from the sheer physical reorganization of the
classroom and from the decentralization of the teaching process.
However, these problems turned out to be far from insuperable.
The physical reorganization can be done very simply by getting
some students to turn to face those behind them if they are
normally in rows. This may need a little modification to ensure
that groups are heterogeneous – or homogeneous, if that is more
suitable to the exercise – and that there are no serious personality
clashes; but once the students are settled into fixed groups, they
will assume them quickly and with little fuss each time. Chopping
and changing groups each session may sometimes produce
restlessness and indiscipline, at least in younger classes; in such
cases, it is best to make the groups semi-permanent.

Advantages

The first advantage of group-work is of course the increased
participation. If you have five or six groups then there will be five
or six times the amount of talking. Class discussions, as has been
pointed out, are very wasteful in terms of the ratio of teacher-
or student-effort and time to actual language practice taking place;
group discussions are relatively efficient. Moreover, this
heightened participation is not limited to those who are usually
articulate anyway; students who are shy of saying something
in front of the whole class, or to the teacher, often find it much
easier to express themselves in front of a small group of their
peers.

The motivation of participants also improves when they work
in small groups. This is partly a function of the release from
inhibition described above, but other factors also play a part. The
physical focus of the discussion is close and directed towards the
individual student; that is to say, whoever is speaking is only a
small distance away, clearly audible, facing the others and

addressing them personally. Any visual or other materials are likewise close by: the whole activity is immediate and 'involving'. More important, group-work lends itself to game-like activities; almost any task-centred exercise can be transformed into a game by adding an element of tension. Where this is not supplied by the task itself, the simple institution of an arbitrary time-limit or inter-group competition can easily do so.

Another advantage of group-work is that it frees the teacher from her usual role of instructor–corrector–controller, and allows her to wander freely round the class, giving help where needed, assessing the performance of individual students, noting language mistakes for future remedial work, devoting a little more time to slower learners. She also has an important role to play in leading and encouraging discussions (see *Organization*).

Finally, there is scope here for peer-teaching. In the course of group discussions, students will learn from each other, whether consciously or unconsciously. They may correct each other's mistakes, help out with a needed word; and of course they will teach each other some non-linguistic material as well, through the content of the discussion.

Problems

There are various problems associated with group-work. Don't students get out of control? Don't they tend to lapse into their native language when not under the teacher's eye? Isn't the organization into groups time-consuming, noisy and disruptive? What do you do with students who won't take part? Or with a group that finishes too early? How do you draw the session to a close? And so on. These questions have to do partly with that nebulous quality called 'discipline', partly with practical organization. As regards discipline: this basically depends on the personality of the teacher, her class, and the relationship between them, not on the type of activity. On the whole it is safe to say that a class which is controlled in frontal work will be controlled also in groups. Thoughtful and efficient organization can, however, contribute a good deal to solving the problems enumerated above. The subject of the physical division of the class has been dealt with at the beginning of this section; others will be gone into more fully in the section on *Organization*.

Role-play

What it is

Giving students a suitable *topic* provides interest and subject-matter for discussion, dividing them into *groups* improves the amount and quality of the verbal interaction. *Role-play,* though perhaps a little less important, can add a significant dimension to the 'standard' discussion, and is today more and more widely used.

For role-play, the class is usually divided into small groups – often pairs – which are given situations and roles to act out and explore. This acting is done for the sake of the language and imaginative activity, not for exhibition; though students may occasionally enjoy seeing or showing off some particularly successful scene. The various groups, therefore, are activated simultaneously. They may be standing or sitting, static or moving. Mime may also be involved.

Advantages

The use of role-play has added a tremendous number of possibilities for communication practice. Students are no longer limited to the kind of language used by learners in a classroom: they can be shopkeepers or spies, grandparents or children, authority figures or subordinates; they can be bold or frightened, irritated or amused, disapproving or affectionate; they can be in Buckingham Palace or on a ship or on the moon; they can be threatening, advising, apologizing, condoling. The language can correspondingly vary along several parameters: according to the profession, status, personality, attitudes or mood of the character being role-played, according to the physical setting imagined, according to the communicative functions or purpose required. At one stroke, the limits of language use are enormously widened.

Moreover, role-play exercises are usually based on real-life situations: hence the speech they require is close to genuine discourse, and provides useful practice in the kinds of language the learners may eventually need to use in similar situations outside the classroom.

Many students find this type of practice easier and more attractive than ordinary discussion. There are various reasons for this. Firstly, the fact that the kind of speech involved is concrete and personal, the issues relevant to actual life, make it relatively easy to think of things to say. Secondly, the criteria of what are 'good things to say' are no longer so intellectual; the student

does not have to say anything clever or original; any utterances that are true to the situation are acceptable, he can express himself in exclamations or half-sentences, he can repeat himself – anything goes (almost)! Hence it is much easier for the student to be successful, and his confidence and self-esteem are boosted. Thirdly, many students find it easier to express themselves from behind the mask of being someone else; others find it simply more stimulating and exciting.

Limitations

Role-play exercises, with a teacher who likes them and believes in their potential, and with a reasonably uninhibited class, can show excellent results. But even the most apparently attractive activities often do not work. Sometimes this is because there is too much mime involved and little efficient language practice. But even when the exercise is all speech-oriented, students may find it difficult to get going, and when they do, the talking often 'peters out' after a few exchanges, and we are back to: 'I've got nothing to say!'

There are two major problems here, one concerned with the nature of role-play itself, and one with a dimension missing from many such exercises. The first is the problem of student inhibition. Many students, unused to this type of exercise, particularly more mature ones with a non-Western-cultural background, find it difficult to pretend to be someone else. The result is often embarrassment and an unwillingness to participate, expressed in scorn ('Let's stop these childish games and have a real lesson!'), giggling, or slow, forced conversations which grind to a halt fairly quickly. This problem can be overcome by unremitting efforts on the part of a dedicated teacher, coupled with explanations of what she is trying to do; but in some situations it may not be worth the effort.

The second problem brings me yet again to the question of *purpose*. In most role-play exercises, students are given a stimulus-situation and/or roles, but they are given no final objective to aim for. The situation is left open to them to interpret and develop as they see fit. Now in a successful exercise of this kind, this is what will in fact happen. All sorts of interesting conflicts and ramifications will come up, which the students will react to spontaneously, getting more and more involved and interested, acting more and more convincingly – for of course the original function of such activities was to develop acting ability, not language. But put into a foreign language learning context, this lack of specific direction and purpose sometimes results rather in

confusion and uncertainty what to do next; partly because our students are not all relaxed and imaginative enough, partly because they are relatively limited in their technical ability to express themselves.

Role-play is a step up from 'talk about x'; it is now 'talk about x in role-situation y'; but we need one final step: 'talk about x in role-situation y *in order to achieve z'*.

Giving the discussion a purpose: the task

When a group is given a *task* to perform through verbal
interaction, all speech becomes purposeful, and therefore more
interesting. I should like to illustrate this by describing a
short series of lessons I once gave in an 'oral English' course. The
class was composed of future English-teachers who were not
native speakers. I asked one of the students to organize a
discussion on the kind of subject she thought might be relevant to
adolescent pupils. She suggested parent–child relationships.
Asked to be more specific, she invited the class to express their
opinions on over-possessive mothers. One or two students
volunteered isolated generalized opinions, but the discussion did
not 'flow'. I suggested that the student organizer go away and
come back next week with some more concrete focus for debate.
She returned with a dialogue between three children, complaining
about their parents, which she read out. This was better: the
students related to the three situations and commented on them.
But the discussion still lacked direction and did not last long. I
then took her dialogue home with me, selected one of the three
situations she had invented, and composed letters to a women's
magazine 'help and advice' column: one from a daughter
complaining about her mother, the other from the mother. I
divided the fourteen-strong class into two groups, gave one of the
letters to each, and set them to compose answers, in the capacity
of the editors of the column. This time the discussion was
enthusiastic and I had to stop it before it finished as we ran out of
time. The necessity to actually formulate reasonable, tactful and
helpful answers (the task) forced the participants to delve
deeply and carefully into the problems involved; and, through the
particular case, they found themselves discussing general values
and sources of conflict. It was then, I suppose, that I realized
the vital difference that the 'task' element makes to a discussion.

In Part 2 of this book are many examples of actual tasks (the
texts of the letters used in the exercise described above can be
found, slightly adapted, in *Composing letters,* p. 98); here I shall
only set out some of the theoretical factors to be considered when
devising them.