

Intercultural Issues in Teaching English Discussion to Taiwanese Students

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Abstract

This paper examines the difficulties facing the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher of English Language majors in Taiwanese universities. As EFL skills classes are often taught independently (i.e. listening, speaking etc.), rather than as integrated skills class teachers of high intermediate and advanced speaking classes are faced with the challenge of providing classroom practices and activities that will allow students to meaningfully engage and fulfill their educational goals.

Social practices, including education, are variable between cultures. Hence, cultural differences mean that some methodologies and activities advocated by EFL researchers and practitioners fail to resonate with Taiwanese students. Differences between pedagogic methodologies and practices in East Asia and those in Western countries mean that there are potential barriers to incorporating discussion and debate activities into the EFL classroom in Asia. The paper will then outline a program of student empowerment used in class.

Key words: Education; EFL speaking; Discussion; Cultural awareness; Learning strategies

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INTRODUCTION

In the education systems of the western world discussion as a pedagogic method has a long academic tradition. The

Socratic Method, which has been described as involving a dialogue between teacher and students (Reich, 2003), plays a fundamental role in what is perceived as education and the way the practice of education is conducted. In addition, this process is often seen as dialectic and, as such, none of the participants, including the teacher, has privileged access to the truth or final answer. Furthermore, pedagogic methodology has been heavily influenced by the theory of constructivist learning. In this theory it was claimed that intellectual growth required an active learner as there was a necessity for learners to make discoveries for themselves rather than being taught how to solve problems (Piaget, 1958).

In the classroom setting discussion has a variety of pedagogic purposes. One framework is to suggest three basic purposes for the use of discussion in the classroom: increasing familiarity with the academic field, developing critical thinking skills and developing problem solving abilities (McGonigal, 2005). However, in the EFL classroom where the goal is to produce familiarity and competence with the language some of the goals related to becoming familiar with the specialized language or knowledge of an academic field are often not relevant. Nevertheless, the fundamental goals of discussion are to promote critical thinking and develop problem solving skills are both applicable to the EFL classroom.

As discussion as a pedagogic method is deeply engrained in western education, children who have been educated in western countries are familiar with the conventions of discussion. Therefore, they have been inculcated with what is expected of them in these situations. In addition, the extensive use of discussion activities at all levels of education mean that such activities are seen as a natural and validated part of education. However, this is not always the case with Asian students. As these methods might not be familiar to them the use of discussion and debate in class has the potential to be an unsatisfactory process.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

As has been noted using discussion as a tool in teaching involves both teacher and students adapting to roles which move away from traditional ideas about power and responsibility in the class (Christensen, 1991). Thus, it is argued the master-apprentice relationship, inherent in lecturing situations, where the teacher holds the power and is often exclusively responsible for the material introduced, the order of presentation, the ways information is presented and with students acting as recipients of the proffered knowledge is not conducive to the teaching of discussion.

In the EFL classroom of Taiwanese universities the teacher who wishes to incorporate discussion into the curriculum is faced with certain problems. The use of the Socratic and dialectic methods which can be seen as being derived from the western philosophical tradition has not been such a core concept in pedagogic methodology in East Asia. However, the Confucian tradition of much of East Asia is based on a different conception of the way to attain knowledge and the relationship between a teacher and a student. Researchers have noted that in Confucian societies an emphasis is placed on social conformity and collectivism (Ho, Peng, & Chan, 2002a). The social structures found in such societies also impacts upon the nature of teaching which tends to be hierarchical and formal (Ibid., 2002b). In a study of how temperaments differed between American and Chinese children between the ages of nine and fifteen, the researchers found that the Chinese children preferred practical styles and commented that this, “may reflect qualities important to values prominent in either a collectivist or individualist society” (Oakland & Lu, 2006, p.192). Therefore, the differences in culture between classroom practices in how interpersonal relationships are managed, particularly between teacher and student, are at least to some extent culturally dependent. Furthermore, this cultural variability extends to the appropriateness, form, and whether implicit or explicit, of expressing disagreement or conflicting ideas.

These cultural differences exacerbate certain problems and create difficulties in facilitating successful and productive discussion in the classroom in Taiwan. The use of discussion can be seen as part of the communicative approach to language teaching. However, the use of the communicative approach might not fit in with the pedagogic methodology familiar to students in Taiwan and, therefore, could be ineffective. As Ellis noted “for the communicative approach to be made suitable for Asian conditions, it needs to be both culturally attuned and culturally accepted” (Ellis, 1996, p.213). Furthermore, cross-cultural communication can involve misunderstandings about the organization of discourse, conventions and cues (Gumperez, 1982). This can mean that even when speakers have a fluent command of the

language there can be mutual confusion and frustration as to what is expected of them in the discussion process.

However, research into classroom methodology in Taiwan (Holcomb, 2007) and other East Asian countries (Liu & Littlewood, 1997) has consistently found that the predominant teaching method is based on the teacher lecturing or transmitting of knowledge to students. This means that the students role can be seen as primarily passive. In a study of Asian students studying English in New Zealand, some Asian students were unaccustomed and sometimes uncomfortable with methodology that required them to be more active participants in the classroom (Li, 2003). Chinese EFL college learners were found to have high levels of anxiety when they had to speak in English classes (Wei, 2014).

Therefore, Asian students to unfamiliarity with the methodology can lead them to feelings of anxiety about how and what they can contribute leading them to be reticent in engaging in discussion in class. As reticence and anxiety in the EFL classroom are predictors for each other (Liu, Zhang, & Lu, 2011), this can act as a mutually reinforcing barrier to successful learning. The Affective Filter (Krashen & Terrell, 1983) means that language acquisition, even when the input is comprehensible, is impeded by the presence of negative emotions such as anxiety, lack of self-confidence and low motivation. If language learners are presented with discussion or debate activities they may feel unsure about:

- (a) What is expected of them,
- (b) Their ability to perform what is required, and
- (c) The educational benefit of the activities.

Thus, students who are unfamiliar with such activities are likely to feel stress which will not be conducive to the goal of language learning.

Social practices and structures can be seen both as a reflection of the thought processes of the members of a society, but also a major influence on the way people think (Nisbett, 2003). These differences in the way people think means they will focus on different things. As a consequence of this, individuals will have an understanding of the world that is informed by their cultural background. Therefore, an individual’s worldview can be seen as a product of the social practices and structures he or she is familiar with. This can be seen as a mutually reinforcing situation in that one’s worldview will then make social practices appear natural and correct. Furthermore, one’s worldview leads to differences in perception and reasoning. For example, the difference in cognition between looking at the world primarily in terms of similarities and relationships as opposed to rules and categories (Norenzayan et al., 2002) means that what is regarded as important or germane has the potential to vary between cultures.

Therefore, students who have spent many years in one particular educational environment are socialized into seeing the educational social practices they are familiar

with as natural and correct. If the methodology of a class or classroom activity deviates from these practices feelings of discomfort and alienation may be engendered. Therefore, the teacher when introducing discussion and debate needs to be aware of this in order to be able to provide classroom practices that allow students to function effectively and so be able to attain their educational goals. This means that it is necessary that the students are provided with the information needed for them to see the value and point of the activities they are asked to perform.

2. CLASSROOM PROCEDURES

This study examines the classroom experience from implementing a syllabus based on discussion into an English oral training class. The course was for senior students majoring in English at a private university in Taipei, Taiwan. There were two classes with a total of 41 students: 10 male students and 31 female students. The classes ran for 17 two-hour class sessions.

The class was designed to achieve certain goals:

- (a) Increase student's motivation toward discussion and debate,
- (b) Familiarize students with the form and conventions,
- (c) Provide incremental graduated training, and
- (d) Increase students' abilities and confidence.

In introducing extensive discussion activities into the classroom it is possible that certain problems could emerge. As the students may have had limited experience and familiarity with discussion as a classroom methodology it was possible they could fail to see the relevance of what they were being asked to do. This could be because of some students viewing discussion activities in class as being unfocused and not appearing to be a productive way to meet their language learning needs. In addition, some were uncomfortable with challenging and disagreeing with others as they could view such behavior in others as disagreeable and disruptive and, therefore, not desirable qualities worth emulating or acquiring.

In order to increase motivation in the early class sessions, particular attention was focused on highlighting the importance of such rhetoric as an integral component of spoken discourse between native speakers. This was done by a series of questions and surveys to try and establish learners' attitudes. Students were put into pairs and asked to look at the benefits and drawbacks of discussion, its relevance to the students learning and communication and its importance in the world outside the classroom. In addition, by pairing the students they were introduced to the discussion methodology of the class in situations of low pressure, with no requirement to perform publically. It had the further benefit of being in some ways an example of problem-solving in that students were given goals to reach. These activities were followed by feedback sessions in which the class were encouraged to participate.

In the next stage the goal of the class was about familiarizing students to the forms and conventions of holding discussions in English. This was primarily done through the use of guided and structured discussions. In such discussions techniques such as giving students roles to play and having pre-determined stages in the discussion activity or activities. They were also provided with a range of resources. As well as handouts providing background information on the topic under discussion, these included language prompts, such as vocabulary and wordings designed to allow the students to express themselves using language appropriate to question, challenging, contradicting, arguing and refuting.

Though structured discussions have benefits in terms of helping students with the linguistic forms associated with discussion they can also be criticized. A major criticism is that they can fail to motivate students. This is because students lack control over the selection of the topic and the discussion process and that their existing knowledge and insights can be seen as largely irrelevant. This can be problematic as meaningful discussions involve interpersonal and cognitive factors which may be attenuated in guided or structured discussions (Green, 1993). Nevertheless, this approach has two important rationales. First, such an approach, "provides some security for learners and may help prevent communicative breakdown" (Green et al., 1997, p.139). Second, it allows learners to become familiar with and practiced in the linguistic forms suitable for discussion and debate. Thus, their confidence with this is enhanced allowing them to handle more open discussion activities.

The next stage was to move away from structured discussions. Therefore, the teacher attempted to increase learner autonomy allowing the students greater control into selecting topics and over the discussion process. This was done incrementally by asking students to select from a list of topics presented in class. They would then be asked to work in pairs or small groups devising arguments in support and/ or opposition to different viewpoints. This was done in class and could also be the basis of homework assignments were students could research arguments about a topic that they had selected. Activities then focused on students using these self-generated arguments in discussions and debates with other students and with the teacher.

A further technique used in the discussions was the occasional use of random assignment of which side or viewpoint an individual or group would take in a discussion. The aim of this was to demonstrate that advocacy for a particular viewpoint could be divorced from the personal positions and political or social views of the participants. This was done both as pair work and as a group activity. In addition, it was sometimes done as a whole class activity with the students taking one side of an issue and the teacher the other. As the students were empowered with selecting which side they took and

crucially the side of the teacher. This was an important consideration as the students were then aware that in attempting to challenge and rebut the arguments of the teacher the teacher's arguments were not in fact his views, but were views assigned to him by the class. The aim of this was to mitigate the cultural aversion to directly challenging and arguing with an authority figure because it was impolite, bad mannered and culturally taboo.

The final stage was to ask students to select their own topics for classroom discussion. Because of time constraints this was done in small groups, comprising three students. Each group was asked to research a topic. The teacher then met with each group to offer feedback and suggestions. The groups then prepared some background material which could be offered to the other students in the class. Each group was then assigned 20 to 30 minutes of class time where their topic would be discussed. Students were informed that it should not be a presentation or a lecture and to restrict their presentation of material to under five minutes. In this particular discussion activity the teacher would merely act as an observer as the students would be responsible for the presentation of information, organization of the class and the format for the discussion. After each session a questionnaire (Table 1) was given to the students in order to ascertain whether they felt that they were able to discuss the topic satisfactorily and whether they found the session useful.

Table 1
Discussion Evaluation Questionnaire

	<i>SA</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>NA or D</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. I found the discussion interesting.					
2. I found the discussion useful.					
3. I was able to effectively practice discussion.					
4. I was able to effectively express my point of view.					
5. I was able to effectively support my arguments.					
6. I was able to effectively counter opposing arguments.					

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

At the start of the semester certain behaviors and attitudes were observed in the students. First, many students were often unwilling to express opinions in the class. This was observed even among students who were willing and able to provide work in other classwork activities such as brainstorming, role-playing and compiling information. The second point that when opinions were given the ability to support them with reasoning was also limited. This was evident that discussion activities often ground to a halt very rapidly as students ran out of things to say and would be waiting for the teacher to either conclude the

activity or provide further guidance and inputs as to what they were to do.

However, as the semester progressed certain changes were noted. In weeks nine and ten of the semester each student was asked to choose a topic and then meet with the teacher to discuss the topic. They were told to adopt a viewpoint or position on the topic. A list of 5 topics was given and the students were also given the option of choosing their own topic. This option was chosen by 8 students (20%) It was emphasized to the students that it was irrelevant whether it was their real personal opinion or not. They were then individually interviewed by the teacher. It was explained to them that the teacher was going to adopt a differing viewpoint and would act as a "devil's advocate." Each interview was scheduled to last for approximately 6 minutes. Of the 41 students interviewed all of them managed to express a point of view and support it with at least one logical reason example, fact, statistic or anecdote. Many students did much more than this and in fact the teacher had to terminate 24(59%) of the interviews after 7 minutes due to constraints on the time available. Finally 27(66%) were able to effectively counter opposing arguments put by the teacher and 10(24%) directly challenged the points, logic or arguments advanced by the teacher.

In the final group discussion activity all the groups successfully chose and researched a topic. In the ensuing class discussions 11 out of 13 groups ran discussion activities that lasted from 20 to 30 minutes. The two other groups discussions lasted 15 minutes and 18 minutes. In the post session questionnaires the majority of students (75%) agreed that the session was interesting, with 23% showing strong agreement. Furthermore, only 9% of responders disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that the discussion was interesting. In evaluating whether the session was useful 68% of responses agreed or strongly agreed, whereas 16% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Most of the students responses showed that they were able to effectively practice discussion (85%) with just 4% disagreeing. Furthermore, 68% of responses indicated agreement with the statement that they were able to express their points of view, whereas 16% disagreed. The majority of student responses showed agreement with the responders feeling able to effectively engage in debate by supporting their arguments (58% agreed: 18% disagreed), and being able to effectively counter opposing arguments where 53% of responses agreed and 22% showed disagreement.

The study indicates that discussion and debate can be successfully implemented in university classrooms in Taiwan. However, if standard discussion activities from EFL textbooks are used then the results may be disappointing with many students feeling uncomfortable, not able to perform effectively and unsure of how to engage.

However if pedagogic practices take account of the worldview and thought processes of Taiwanese students then greater success can be obtained. The method outline here was to promote a worldview in which discussion and debate form an integral part of the standard way in which native speakers interact in English and then giving them the tools to perform effectively. In addition, by empowering students they are able to take control of their learning and think in a way which supports the social practice of discussion.

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