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Introduction

Using group discussions in English language learning classes as a method for improving communication skills is supported by several language acquisition theories. In particular, sociocultural theorists believe that through social activities, individualized learning can be activated (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). There is support for the idea that it is through interaction with others that an increased understanding of language can be realized. These sociocultural theories match the methodology behind task-based activities in the language classroom. In task-based activities, the focus is on an exchange of meaning, not accuracy. Thus, students negotiate meaning with other students to complete an activity, and it is through this negotiation that language is acquired (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Beyond the linguistic benefits, through group tasks and discussions, students can form meaningful group bonds by learning to listen to others and respect differing opinions (Williams, Mercer & Ryan, 2015). Furthermore, working collaboratively can help maintain student motivation, which can be a struggle for students in a language learning classroom (Williams, Mercer & Ryan, 2015). For all these reasons, it is worth the effort on the instructor's part to incorporate group discussion activities in classes focusing on communicative interactions.

While the benefit of group discussion in an English language classroom is accepted by many instructors, the implementation of successful discussions can be difficult with groups of students who are unfamiliar with this type of communication. When students are unsure of the roles they are expected to play in a group, they can become stressed and the task can take additional time to be completed (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). Moreover, shy or introverted students may have difficulty joining group discussions, making participation uneven in the group (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). This paper will

describe ways in which an instructor can scaffold group discussions for low-level students without much experience in group discussions.

Roles in a Group Discussion

To have a productive group discussion, the people in the group need to have a balanced set of roles (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). The task the group discussion is intended to complete will determine what types of roles will be needed. However, a discussion will usually require people to make proposals, ask questions to deepen understanding, propose alternative solutions, summarize the proposed ideas to check comprehension, and lead the discussion forward to ensure completion of the task. Since students may not have a firm understanding of these roles, preparation before the discussion is necessary (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). The instructor can assign students specific roles in the discussion. Then, all participants will need to be familiar with the different roles in their group and have examples of duties or phrases that will be useful for each role (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003).

Assigned roles may deepen students' comprehension of the task and increase production in group discussions. Yet, for low-level English learners or learners with little to no previous experience with group discussions, this might not be enough to lead to successful participation in a group discussion. In these situations, additional scaffolding can be added. For the instructor, this classroom scaffolding should include the following aspects: choosing an appropriate discussion task, ensuring that students have enough background knowledge of the task, and providing clear instruction for participation in the discussion.

Preparing for a Discussion

Selecting an appropriate task for discussion should initially be done by the instructor. The discussion task must have a clear goal that can be reached through discussion. For low-level students, the more concrete this goal, the easier it will be to understand the purpose of the discussion. For example, if students need to create a trip plan through group discussion, at the end of the discussion they will have a trip plan. This concrete result will be more attainable than a discussion with the goal of weighing the merits

of different sides of a controversial topic. Therefore, in some instances, the understandability of the task outcome for the students may be more important than the topic of the task itself.

Once the instructor has chosen a task for discussion that matches the students' level and experience, it is necessary to build students' background knowledge of the topic. This can be done with a series of classroom activities that students complete first individually and later with others. The goal of these activities should be to provide students with exposure to the language, facts, and different opinions that will most likely appear during the discussion task. This step can be particularly important for the inclusion of introverted students in group discussions. Studies have shown that introverted people in particular are able to produce higher quality ideas if allowed time to think about an issue by themselves before being required to interact with others (Cain, 2013).

Next, the instructor needs to identify the different interactions that students are expected to perform in a discussion. For basic discussions, the following interactions can be identified: making a suggestion, asking a question about a suggestion, summarizing an opinion stated, agreeing with a statement and giving a reason, and disagreeing with a statement and giving a reason. Students will need to be familiarized with grammar and vocabulary necessary for each interaction. It may be helpful for students to brainstorm examples of each type of interaction. After this preparation, students should be ready for the discussion with background knowledge of the topic and expected interactions in the group discussion.

Interacting in a Discussion

To make participating in a discussion possible for students, clearly denoting the interactions students should make during the discussion is helpful. Turning the discussion into a card game is one method of doing this, resulting in a controlled form of a discussion. First, students are broken up into groups of four or five. Each student in the group is given a number of cards labeled with different types of interactions. For instance, each student in the group may have five cards: a suggestion card, a question card, a

summarizing card, an agreement card, and a disagreement card. During the discussion, when students make a statement or question, they lay down the card that corresponds with this type of interaction. Thus, when a student makes a suggestion in the discussion, he/she lays down his/her suggestion card. The objective of the game is for students to lay down all their cards before the end of the discussion. Ideally, the students would complete such a discussion on the same topic several times in this format with different students. By playing this highly controlled discussion game, students can become familiar with the format of a discussion and the different types of interactions that are expected of them.

Considerations

Before leaving this topic, it needs to be noted that this type of discussion practice should only be viewed as a beginning step in group discussions. Because of the highly controlled nature of the discussion game, the content of the discussion is not prioritized. Since students are required to show disagreement and agreement with suggestions, they may not be able to express their true opinions thoroughly in a discussion. Once students are familiarized with the format of a discussion and the types of interactions that are expected, the instructor should move on to less controlled forms of discussion. It is in these more meaning-focused discussions that students can start experiencing the benefits from negotiation of meaning through group discussions.

Conclusion

In summary, group discussions can be an educational activity for language learners. Unfortunately, groups of students that are unfamiliar with this activity may struggle to successfully participate, even with an explicit demarcation of roles in a discussion. To assist in scaffolding a group discussion, the language instructor can choose an appropriate task, ensure students have background knowlege of the task, and lead a highly controlled group discussion game. Students can then participate without much prior knowledge of group discussions. This type of discussion preparation meets several objectives that scaffold future, less controlled discussions. First,

the highly controlled discussion game depersonalizes the interactions in a discussion by explicitly designating the interactions of students. Some students may feel uncomfortable showing disagreement to another student's idea because of fear that the student or group may take offence to the dissent. However, if all students in the discussion are required to disagree with an idea and provide a reason, disagreement becomes a skill to be practiced rather than a personal statement. Second, this type of highly controlled discussion creates diversity in the interactions students have in a group discussion. In less controlled discussions, a few students in the group may dominated the suggestions posed or some students may never disagree with statements made. In a controlled discussion, it is required that all students to try different interactions in a discussion, Thus, students gain practice with participating in a variety of ways in a discussion. Finally, students can become familiarized to the format of a discussion. Unlike two-person dialogues, discussions involving three or more people can be difficult to model. By making the discussion a card game, students have a relatable format and objective for their participation in the discussion. Therefore, by depersonalizing interactions and familiarizing students with interactions and the format of discussion, this type of preparation and highly controlled discussion can be a first step for students in learning discussion skills.

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