Successful discussions: Getting the students there

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This paper examines the problems associated with getting Japanese students to participate in discussions in English classes and proposes a solution in the form of a generic worksheet. The make-up of the worksheet is explained, and the results of a survey of students' attitudes to the worksheet are analyzed. The students' answers indicate that the worksheet provides effective support for discussions and that it also contributes to improvements in vocabulary and reading skills.

本稿は、日本の学生が英語クラスで討論に参加するに際して起こる問題を考察し、汎用性のあるワークシートを用いて解決を図ることを提案するものである。先ず、ワークシートの構成を説明し、その後ワークシートに対する学生の態度を調査した結果を分析する。学生の回答を見ると、ワークシートが討論に対して効果的なサポートを与えており、語彙及び読解のスキルの向上に貢献していることが分かる。

The importance placed on discussions in language learning is attested to by the frequency of their appearance as tasks in textbooks. First of all, discussions can activate the learners' passive knowledge of language. Moreover, during a discussion, learners must cope with unscripted spontaneous speech as opposed to the predetermined language they often rely on in class. Discussions among learners also provide the interactive opportunities necessary for peer-learning to take place.

For all these supposed benefits, however, discussions have not been the most popular of activities in Japanese classrooms. A successful discussion presumes the willingness to speak, to give one's own opinions, and to respond to others' opinions. In Japan, this willingness cannot be taken for granted. In fact, many teachers are faced with students who are reluctant to talk and refuse to volunteer their own opinions. As a result, teachers

often give up in frustration and develop a teaching plan that avoids discussions entirely.

It is easy to blame the educational environment and the culture for this situation. From the writers' experience, it is true that "Japanese students come from a cultural background that prizes indirectness and modest, self-effacing statements. The culture favors those who are quiet, wait their turns, and do not stick out, especially in a formal or public situation" (Mayer, 1999, p.45). Students are a product of the Japanese education system which discourages the questioning of authority and regards the teacher as "…the embodiment of knowledge and authority…" (Nakamura, 1997, p.62). Unfortunately, the blame game doesn't change the situation, nor does it help the learners. Teachers need to find ways to make discussions work even in the seemingly hostile environment of the Japanese classroom.

In this paper we propose a possible solution to this problem as we answer the following questions: 1) How can Japanese students make the jump from teacher-centered lessons to student-centered discussions? 2) Do students feel that student-led discussions are a valuable tool for their second language learning?

Japanese students and the classroom environment

Many teachers who recognize the pedagogical value of discussion in the classroom still end up avoiding it in Japan with the rationalization that: My students don't have any opinions anyway, so why bother with discussions? Everyone thinks the same way. Once one student says something, everyone else just agrees with her/him. The students want the teacher to decide everything. They are a nation of followers.

There has been research that questions the validity of the above stereotypes. Littlewood (2000) investigated Asian student dispositions towards education and found that Asian students (Japanese included) were not so different from other students elsewhere in the world. According to his survey of 2307 students from eleven countries,

> The overall message is that Asian students do not, in fact, wish to be spoonfed with facts from an all-knowing 'fount of knowledge'. They want to explore knowledge themselves and find their own answers. Most of all, they want to do this together with their fellow students in an atmosphere which is friendly and supportive. (p.34)

Littlewood also says,

> The results suggest that, if Asian students do indeed adopt the passive classroom attitudes that are often claimed, this is more likely to be a consequence of the educational contexts that have been or are provided for them, than of any inherent dispositions of the students themselves. (p.33)

In other words, if we change the educational context, it is highly probable that students will follow. This has also been the experience of the writers.

The majority of Japanese university students may share similar life experiences from their earlier years of education, but there are also a wide variety of differences as well. These differences can be the basis of fruitful discussions, so the task of the teacher becomes: how do we get learners to

transform them into opinions in a non-threatening way?

Peer-learning as part of a solution

To find justification for promoting peer learning in the language classroom in Japan, we need only to look at Japanese culture. Japanese are well known for group work over that of the individual. Johnson and Johnson (1992; cited in Meloth and Deering, 1999) discuss the merits of peer learning and group work. The authors "emphasized the importance of interdependence, a condition under which group members recognize that they cannot succeed unless all of their group members are successful." (p.236)

Dividing the class into groups is the first step. How, then, can a discussion task meet these expectations? From the students' point of view, they need to see a purpose for a discussion in the L2 between speakers who share a common L1. The topics need to be appealing, and the students need to see benefits from their participation in the discussion. From the teacher's point of view, students need to stop following each other for the sake of harmony. There needs to be a clear sense of direction or a goal in the discussion task to motivate them to invest themselves in the learning process.

The worksheet

The worksheet (See Appendices 1-3 for actual copies) lays out three basic components needed to start, continue and learn from a discussion. The first part, labeled "1" on the worksheet, focuses on the basic understanding of the topic. This is achieved by the students reading about or researching a given topic before class and then summarizing it. They create their own bank of new words or phrases from the readings or choose lexis they will need for the upcoming discussion. In the newer version of the worksheet, there is more focus on the pros and cons of a central issue in the readings.

The second section, labeled "2" on the worksheet, helps the students to internalize the issues. Students have to write down their views and give supporting statements for their stance. In cases where the issue seems totally divorced from their own realities, the teacher may need to refocus the issue to something more familiar or tangible. An actual example in one textbook was a story of someone who acted heroically and saved many lives. Such heroism is unlikely to have any connection to the students' realities, so the writers focused on the more general issue of helping people. Students were then able to discuss how they helped others in their everyday lives. Simply having an opinion on an issue, however, is not enough to keep a discussion going. Students need to interact by asking each other questions that will help them and their partners further the discussion. The teacher's job as a facilitator is to help students shape their questions so that they do lead to further discussion.

The final section, labeled "3" on the back of the new worksheet (Appendix 2), is a forum for noticing, building, and reinforcing newly acquired language and knowledge. This was added to promote a peer-learning environment after each discussion. There are three discussions per class, with a change in group members each time so that students never discuss with the same students twice. The teacher stops the students and asks them to reflect on what they have noticed in terms of new words and phrases, original ideas, questions,

or anything else they feel would help them in the next round of discussions with new partners. What they gain from each discussion enables them to further develop their ideas in the following discussions.

The first two sections of the worksheet are always done as homework. The worksheet, and thus the students' homework, is collected at the end of class, graded, and returned in the next class. This pattern is repeated weekly with a break in the pattern at mid-term and at the end of term for testing. Establishing a pattern allows the students to concentrate on each week's work rather than on continually changing class formats.

Survey

To answer the second question, "Do students feel that student-led discussions are a valuable tool for their second language learning?" a survey was carried out by four teachers who used a combination of old and new worksheets in 10 different classes in three different departments of two Japanese universities. All students were enrolled in a weekly English course and completed the questionnaire at the end of the year. A total of 237 questionnaires were collected and the percentages for each category were totaled and are presented in the form of bar graphs for easy visual interpretation.

The results of the survey should not be interpreted as definitive descriptions of student learning behavior but rather as indications of trends that the writers have noticed in their classes.

Data analysis

Figure 1 shows the students' responses in regards to the time invested in completing the worksheet. Figure 2 shows students' comments on the helpfulness of the worksheet.

The students are required to prepare and bring an original element to each class in the form of the worksheet. Because all of the teachers gave a weekly grade, the students saw the necessity for doing their homework and doing it well. Most of the students said they spent 30 minutes or more per week preparing for their discussions.

Approximately 90% of the students thought that the worksheet was either "helpful" or "very helpful" towards their second language learning. Even if the categories of "not very helpful", "not helpful" and "no response" are interpreted as negative responses, only 8 or 9% of the students felt negative.

The two graphs are strikingly similar in appearance. While the two questions were asked independently of each other, students appear to have equated the amount of preparation time with the degree of helpfulness in class. Admittedly, the idea that homework is helpful is not a novel concept, but the results indicate that the students clearly understood the connection between the quality of their homework and their ability to carry on discussions in the class.

Usefulness versus difficulty

In order to get more detailed data on student perceptions of the worksheet, we asked them to choose the most difficult and the most useful parts.

Figure 1 Preparation time chart

Of 237 students, 196 spent more than 30 minutes preparing for class, or 83%.

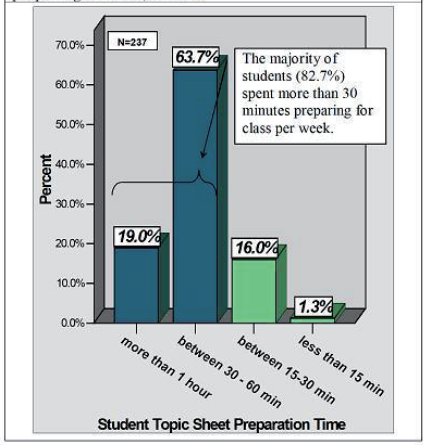
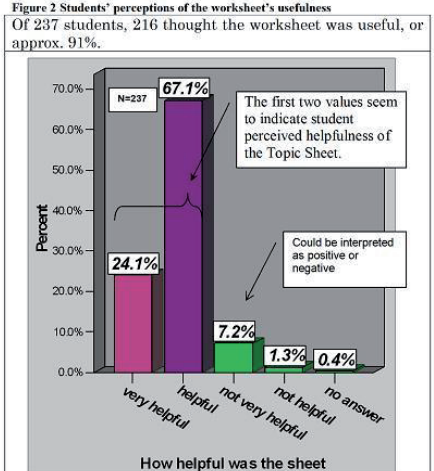


Figure 2 Students' perceptions of the worksheet's usefulness

Of 237 students, 216 thought the worksheet was useful, or approx. 91%.



The results in Figure 3 show that more than a third of the students found it most difficult to express an opinion. An interesting similarity can be seen with Figure 4. Roughly the same number of students found the opinion section the most difficult *and* the most useful. Similarly, the "question" section of the worksheet was also thought to be difficult, but many felt that it was very useful for their class second language speaking activities. The students seem to realize that the difficulties involved in preparing for a discussion lead to useful benefits.

While the worksheet's vocabulary section was not considered extremely difficult, it was considered one of the more useful parts of the worksheet, indicating that students felt it provided them with some of the necessary tools for their discussions.

The only major discrepancy between degrees of difficulty and usefulness were found in reactions to the summary function of the worksheet. 27% of the students found it to be the most difficult part to do, second only to opinion giving, while only 13.9% regarded it as the most useful. The summaries allowed students and the teachers to check their overall comprehension of the topic, but as they were only the springboard from which students launched themselves into discussions, the summaries lost their usefulness as the discussions progressed. The perception of difficulty can most likely be explained by a difference in teaching styles. Two of the four teachers involved in the survey spent considerable time and energy on teaching students how to write a good summary.

The back of the worksheet was not included in the survey questions because one teacher was still using the

Figure 3: Difficulty of the different functions that the worksheet provides
A representation of the students' opinions of which section of the worksheet was most difficult for them.

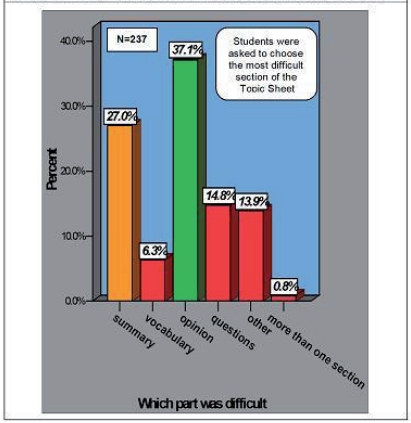
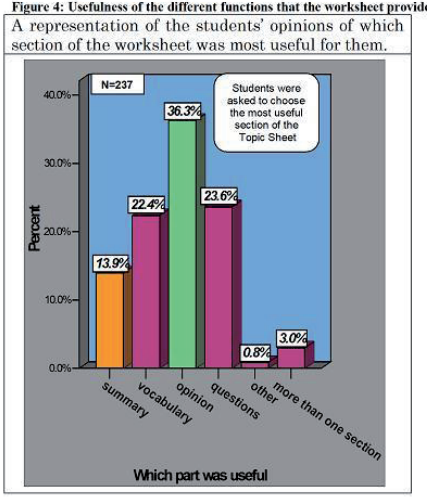


Figure 4: Usefulness of the different functions that the worksheet provides
A representation of the students' opinions of which section of the worksheet was most useful for them.



older version of the worksheet (Appendix 3) which gave less weight (in terms of points) to in-class participation. Nonetheless, all the teachers involved in this project emphasized during class the interactive nature of discussions and the need to write down what they had learned from their fellow students. Students build up their vocabulary by noticing a particular use of language during the discussions, by going to their dictionaries and questioning each other during the note-taking time, and by asking the teacher how to express what they don't know how to say. Vocabulary is built up by the students themselves while searching for the words they need or want to use. This setup allows for considerable peer learning opportunities and shifts the responsibility of learning to the students.

Opinions

Figures 5 and 6 show a very close resemblance to each other. The questions are similar, but the meanings are certainly different. Students were asked how their English had changed with regard to their: 1) ability to give an opinion, and 2) their ability to understand and respond to others' opinions.

These results seem to indicate that, not only did the students feel as if their ability to give their own opinions had improved, but also that there was more to this than just one-way communication. From the results of the survey, the students felt that their abilities to understand their peers' (and teacher's) opinions and their ability to respond to or comment on those opinions had also improved significantly. Figure 5, shows the students' impressions of their improvement in giving opinions, while Figure 6 shows their

Figure 5 Students' impressions on ability to give opinions after the course

Of 237 students, clearly most (94.5%) felt they had improved in their abilities to give opinions.

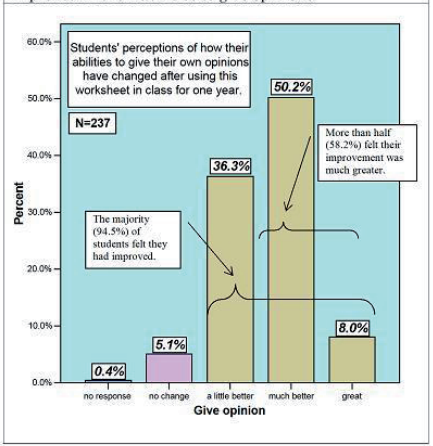
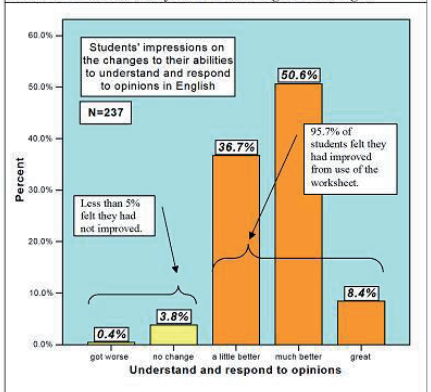


Figure 6 Students' impressions on ability to understand and respond to other students' opinions after the course

Of 237 students, 95.7% felt their abilities to understand and respond to an opinion had improved, while less than 5% of students felt they had zero to negative change.



impressions of their improvement in understanding and their ability to respond to others' opinions.

Input and output

The next two charts are also somewhat related in that they look at the input and output that preceded each discussion. Figure 7 displays the responses regarding the writing of summaries. Figure 8, describes the students' perceptions of their improvement in understanding reading passages.

Part of the worksheet and one of the requirements of the course work was that students read and summarise information. Students should, through practice, learn to distinguish between important information and unimportant details. In the class, students share their understanding of what was important [the summary] with the other students, and they comment, critique and help each other in group discussions as the class proceeds. More than half of the students felt they had improved fairly significantly. Approximately 37% felt that they had gotten a little better, and 6% felt there was no change compared to before. While "got worse" was an option on the questionnaire, it was not selected by a single student. Students felt that their understanding did not improve as much as their ability to write summaries, but according to these charts, 90-94% felt generally positive about their improvement in this area.

Grammar and vocabulary

Figures 9 and 10 show the students' perceptions of their improvements in vocabulary and grammar.

Figure 7 Students' perceptions on improvement to write summaries

Of 237 students, 94% of students felt their ability to write summaries based on reading passages was improved, while only 5.9% felt they had not changed.

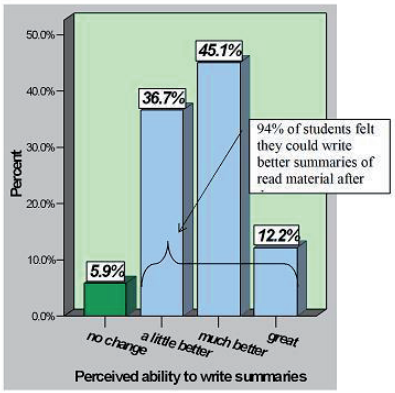


Figure 8 Students' perceptions of improvements in understanding reading passages

Of 237 students 35% (83 students) felt their ability to understand reading passages was much better or great, while 54% (128) felt they had only improved a little.

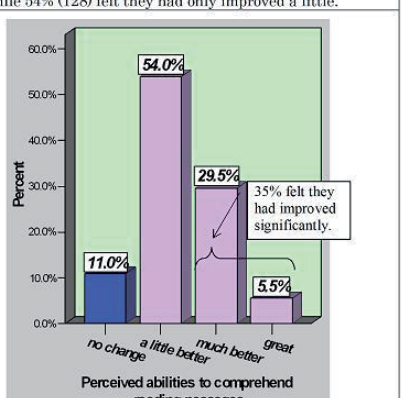


Figure 9 Students' impressions on improvement to use new vocabulary

Of 237 students 37% (87 students) felt their ability to understand and use new vocabulary was much better or great, while 47% (112) felt they had only improved a little.

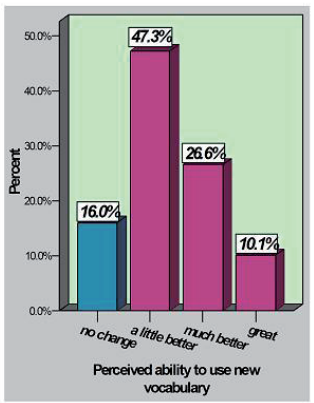
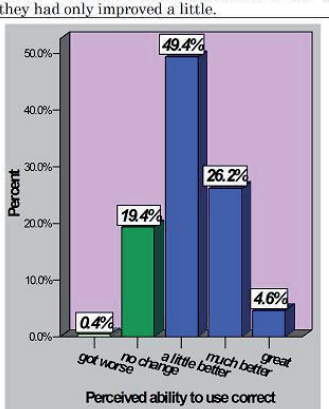


Figure 10 Students' impressions on improvement to use grammar

Of 237 students 31% (73 students) felt their ability to understand and use grammar and/or new grammar structures was much better or great, while 49% (117) felt they had only improved a little.



There were, however, no overt attempts to teach these aspects of language in this discussion-style class, where the primary focus was always on discussion and its facilitation. When grammar or vocabulary questions arose, the teachers would deal with them, usually on an individual basis or as a group. Although there was some variation among teachers, none did extensive teaching in these areas nor did they hand out supplementary materials, and yet 85% of those responding reported improvement. Again similar attributes are seen in the grammar survey in Figure 10. 80% of the students felt there was some sort of improvement. The worksheet can be seen as a facilitator not only of discussion but also of discrete language learning as well.

Conclusion

Most of the students felt they had improved in giving, understanding and responding to opinions. When the evidence from Figures 9 and 10 is factored in, we believe this demonstrates that peer learning and the environment that the teachers created for the students are also working for the benefit of the students' linguistic improvement.

Beyond the production of a "question" or a "summary" are the negotiation of meaning and the inquiry into the students' personal views and the refinement of their expression through cooperative dialogue. Palingsar and Herrenkohl (1999) describe something that all the teachers involved in these classes saw every week.

> Over the course of time, the discussions are increasingly focused on the meaning of the text; that is the strategies are used flexibly, the dialogue becomes less routinized, and the conversation becomes freer ranging. (p.159)

The responses from the questionnaire and the resulting data appear overwhelmingly positive. This indicates that Japanese students, given the right educational context, can engage in successful discussions where they speak, give their own opinions, and respond to points raised by others. The worksheets seem to be providing the students with the necessary scaffolding, and the students are willing to put out the necessary efforts to prepare because they can see benefits from this style of class.

Finally, it should be pointed out that there are still many opportunities for further research to be done. This study has yet to examine the views and experiences of the teachers involved. While the data gathered in the study did use student input, that input was gained from brief written surveys; a smaller sample of students could be interviewed to obtain more in-depth views on the effects of the worksheet. Comparing samples of student discourse from different intervals during the course of a year long program could provide a more objective measure of the beneficial effects of the worksheet claimed by students. In the larger scheme of action research, this study should be viewed as a first step.

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Appendix 1

New worksheet, page 1

Topic Sheet /20

Class: Tuesday 1 2

Name:_____

Student No.:_____

1 ***Understanding the topic*** /5

Vocabulary Notes:	**Summary:**

Break it down

Today's topic is:_____

Reasons:

Pro's	***Con's***

2 ***Personalize*** /5

Your situation:_____

Explain your thinking: (opinion)

Discuss and Exchange ☼ ***Action:*** ***Prepare questions for your partners before you discuss.***

Questions for your partner(s):
1.
2.
3.
4.

Appendix 2

New worksheet, page 2

3 ☼ ***Interaction:*** *Discuss with, and listen to your partners and take notes.* */10*

Partner(s): *Notes –questions, words, phrases, ideas, jokes, examples, etc…*

Appendix 3

Old worksheet

Topic Sheet **/12 pts**

Name: _____ Date:____/____/____

Student #: _____ Period: _____

Today's title: _____

Summary (original - **do not** copy straight from the book): 0 1 2 3

Vocabulary you didn't know and/or need to discuss this article: 0 1 2

1. 4.
2. 5.
3. 6.

Your opinion: 0 1 2 3

Questions for your partner(s) : 0 1 2

1.

2.

3.

4.

Something new you learned today (i.e. vocabulary, information, etc.): 0 1 2