

An Examination of Student Preferences for Pre-Discussion Planning

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Learners with low L2 proficiency can often find speaking in L2 classroom discussions challenging. Learner issues with forming and supporting opinions, responding to other viewpoints, structuring speech across time, and L2 grammar use can often result in quiet or silent group discussions. One approach to reducing such a heavy cognitive load for students is pre-discussion planning. Important design factors for discussion planning include group size and mode (spoken versus written) as well as planning focus. After having experience using differing combinations across 7 weeks of classes, 82 non-English major Japanese university students responded to a survey about combinations of planning group size and the mode they preferred to use. If given 10 minutes of planning time, the students generally preferred to plan in groups using a mixture of oral rehearsal and written planning. The reasons for preferences and the implications of the findings for teachers are discussed.

語学学習者にとって、第二言語授業内のディスカッションで発言するのは困難なことが多い。意見をまとめる、他者に対応する、スピーチ全体の構成を整える、第二言語の文法利用などに関連する様々な問題は、不活発なディスカッションや沈黙を招くことがある。このような学習者の認知的負荷を軽減させ方法の一つが事前のプランニングである。ディスカッションプランニングをデザインする際に考慮すべき要因には、プランニングの内容に加えグループサイズやプランニングの種類も含まれる。英語を専攻しない日本の大学生82名を対象に、7週間の体験後グループサイズと種類のどの組み合わせが好まれたか調査した。10分間のプランニングにおいて、大半の学生が口頭リハーサルと筆記の組み合わせをグループで行う方法を好んだと報告した。このような傾向が見られた原因および、下位英語学習者にディスカッションスキルを教えるうえで実験結果が意味することを論じる。

TAKING PART in discussions has many obvious benefits for language learners, and ensuring that they become engaged in the discussions is of high importance for teachers. For the learning of a second language, the relevance of practicing language orally in such a way can be explained by Swain's (1995) *output hypothesis*, which holds that students must be actively speaking in a language to learn it well. Ellis (2003) also stated that learning a language should involve students speaking as much as possible—that students who are “actually producing” language will have a much higher chance of mastering it (p. 178).

By exchanging opinions on topics in discussions with other learners, through the medium of their L2, students can practice and improve skills that make up essential oral communicative competences. These skills include *sociolinguistic competence* (such as politeness and appropriateness), *strategic competence* (using strategies for things such as turn taking), and *discourse competence* (demonstrating

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cohesion and coherence across discourse by connecting sentences and ideas together) (Canale & Swain, 1980). These skills go beyond just formulating the grammatically correct spoken language used in oral monologue tasks such as narratives. Practicing responding to other viewpoints during a discussion is an important way to practice interaction with others and raise one's ability to process input and respond with appropriate output in real time.

Cognitive demands placed upon students in an L2 discussion include understanding the topic, considering opinions, supporting reasons for that topic, and understanding the viewpoints of others, as well as formulating and delivering pre-prepared speech. The “cognitive load” (Skehan, 1998, p. 99) that these factors place on students with low L2 proficiency levels can be overwhelming and some students may remain quiet or silent in discussions. Research into reducing cognitive load and boosting student participation in oral tasks through the use of appropriate topics or visuals to improve student motivation, for example, have shown great promise (Keller, 1987, 1992; Stroud, 2013). Selection of discussion topics that students are very familiar with, know a lot about, or have interest in are examples of factors that can reduce some of the cognitive load experienced during a discussion and increase how much students speak. However, students with low L2 proficiency may require more than just high levels of motivation to actively participate. Expecting them to listen to the opinions of others and then immediately respond to such opinions may be unrealistic. Such students will most likely require more time to understand what has been said, consider their own viewpoint, prepare their responses, and then actually deliver them. Allowing some kind of pre-discussion preparation of opinions and language to use may help reduce this cognitive load for students and perhaps enable them to verbalize their opinions with more confidence afterwards.

Pre-Discussion Planning

One possible approach for increasing how much students speak in discussions is pre-discussion planning. Stroud (2014) reported from student survey findings that non-English major university students in Japan have higher levels of confidence and willingness to speak in a group discussion when they are given the chance to practice orally beforehand. Students running through the process of using their internal language system to do what Levelt's (1989) Speech Model describes as *conceptualizing* (linking ideas to words), *formulating* (preparing the grammar of speech), and *articulating* (actually saying it out loud if the planning involves this) before a discussion will make it easier to do the discussion afterwards. Additionally, if the planning stage allows students to listen to other students verbalizing their thoughts in the same way, this allows them the opportunity to consider how to respond to others, rather than taking time to do so for the first time during the discussion. Students who put a high focus on improving the accuracy and complexity of their spoken grammar before a discussion, for example, may not be able to yet deliver it fluently in speech, due to the limits of their working memory (Skehan, 2009). If this is true, then allowing students to plan before a discussion may allow them extra time to prepare to perform better.

Another potential benefit of planning may be related to the skill of connecting sentences and ideas across time with “discourse competence” (Canale & Swain, 1980). This can be very challenging for L2 learners, particularly if they are not accustomed to speaking for long periods. Pre-discussion planning, perhaps through writing down notes, may help students overcome the difficulty of giving several reasons and connecting ideas in single speaking turns and across a discussion. Considering the significant benefits of discussion planning mentioned thus far, a well-designed planning stage could increase oral participation during classroom discussions by students with low L2 proficiency.

There are several task design issues to consider for a planning stage for group discussions. One is whether the planning will be *guided* (structured by the teacher in terms of focus) or *unguided* (structured by the students). The amount that students choose or are guided by a teacher to focus in planning on *meaning* (planning to convey the content of their message) and *form* (preparing the language required to deliver their message) can affect task performance later on (Pang & Skehan, 2014). Sangarun (2005) found that a meaning-form focused balance for written planning was most suitable to boost oral task performance. This was adopted for the written planning used in this study (see Appendix B). The length of planning time given to students is also important. Mehnert (1998) showed that some aspects of task performance, such as the complexity and fluency of spoken language, can be improved with additional planning time. The length of planning was, however, not a focus of this study and was kept constant at 10 minutes. The two task design factors for pre-discussion planning task design that were examined are *planning mode* and *group size*.

Planning Mode

Discussion planning can be done using different language skills (reading, writing, speaking, or listening) or a combination. Kawauchi (2005) compared the accuracy, complexity, and fluency of spoken language of students who planned for oral narrative tasks through reading, writing, or speaking. It was found that the mode had no significant effect on any of these task performances, but different modes created different focuses in planning and the resultant task content. Kawauchi concluded that a productive mode of planning (speaking or writing) created more of a focus amongst students on embellishing their stories with evaluative comments and their own interpretations than did a receptive mode of planning (reading or listening). Students who planned by speaking or writing focused more on developing their own message with more speech to explain their ideas.

Lynch & Maclean (2000) found that students who practiced for oral presentations became more fluent at doing so when they orally rehearsed beforehand. Having students use rehearsal to plan for discussions may have similar effects for discussions, but no clear research findings exist as to the different influences of speaking versus writing in planning upon group discussion oral participation. It is important for teachers who have quiet discussion groups to investigate whether planning for a discussion through writing or orally rehearsing (or using a combination of the two) is seen as more appropriate by their students for improving how much they will speak in discussions afterwards.

Planning Group Size

The number of students who plan together for a discussion may also alter their performances. Foster and Skehan (1999) showed that students who planned alone for an oral debate were able to participate more with longer speaking turns, as well as to use more complex and fluent language. However, students who planned for their debates in groups were reported to be less fluent in the debates. Thus, students may perform differently in discussions depending on how many students they plan with beforehand. Whether students plan for tasks alone or with others can affect their discussion participation and needs to be considered as an important task design element (Batstone, 2005).

If students plan alone for group discussion tasks, they may have more time to consider and plan their language use in their own preferred way, but will not have the chance to practice interacting with other students on the topic before the discussion. Students planning alone may arguably be able to plan more ideas and structure them in the time allowed, but will not be able to practice listening to or responding to the opinions of others. Allowing students to therefore plan in pairs or groups would give them the opportunity to practice interacting with others on the topic before the actual discussion, but would come with additional problems. If multiple students

plan together, factors such as differing planning mode preferences, group dynamics issues, and the need for all group members to share the speaking time available between may become limitations on the amount and content of planning students can do. Although research into the effects of planning group size on task participation has not been undertaken in any great detail for group discussions, it is important for teachers to discover whether a particular group size is generally more appropriate or not for improving participation in discussions afterwards for learners with low L2 proficiency levels.

The Experiment

Research Questions

The study in this paper addressed the following two research questions:

1. What combination of planning group size and mode (written, oral rehearsal, or a mixture of both) are preferred by non-English major Japanese university students to help them speak as much as they can in classroom group discussions?
2. How do the students explain these preferences?

Participants

Eighty-two 1st-year non-English major students (from three different classes) attending weekly 90-minute English communication classes took part in the study. The students undertook two 8-minute group discussions each week in groups of four. As the university department required a discussion test involving four students at the end of the semester, these groups were kept the same each week to allow students to get comfortable with this set-up and with the other group members. I evaluated the students to have a low level of L2 speaking proficiency. Their most recent TOEIC scores fell between basic (under 250) and elementary plus (under 600), with an average score of 424 (standard deviation of 112).

Method

The study took place across seven weekly 90-minute communication classes. Students completed an ethical consent form before the start of the study and were allowed to choose their own group members in the first week. They were given the chance to change groups if they wished to do so before the discussions started each week, but never did. Students were reminded at the start of each class that speaking as much as possible was considered good task performance and would be considered better performance than staying quiet. With this in mind, students undertook group discussions each week on varying topics that I considered to have similar task difficulty for the students in terms of knowledge and the English required to discuss them (see Appendix A). The order of topics and combinations of planning done were varied for the three classes to avoid issues with topic and planning style combinations. Students were allowed to plan for a total of 10 minutes using guided written planning (see Appendix B), unguided oral rehearsal (in which students could practice the discussion with others as they wished), or a mixture of the two. In addition, multiple combinations of group size for planning were used (students planning alone, or in pairs or groups of four with students other than those they were to do the discussion with afterwards), so as to let them experience each in combination with one of the two planning modes (written or oral rehearsal). In the final 2 weeks, students were reminded of the importance of planning to participate as much as possible in discussions and then given two opportunities to plan however they wanted to (in terms of planning mode and group size). Following this, the students were surveyed in Japanese about their preferences for planning group size and mode to help them speak as much as possible in their discussion test the next week (see Appendix C). Open-ended questions were also used to gather reasons for preferences.

Results and Discussion

The vast majority of students (95%) preferred to prepare with other students, rather than alone (see Table 1). To help explain why this may have been, responses from the open-ended questions were examined. In any classroom, students differ in their preferences for planning for a discussion. Therefore, incorporating choices for students might be an important part of planning stages for discussions if students are to prepare with the group size that best suits their needs to speak as much as possible in discussions afterwards.

Table 1. Student Discussion Planning Group Size Preferences (N = 82)

Preferred group size	Percentage of students	Main reasons given
Group of four	78%	Sharing many opinions, getting feedback from a lot of students, practicing agreeing and disagreeing, and reflecting the discussion task set-up
Pair	17%	Sharing opinions, getting feedback from a partner, practicing agreeing and disagreeing and having more time to speak than in a group
Alone	5%	Practicing in own style and at own pace

The few students who wished to plan alone mostly stated that this was due to wanting to practice in their own style and at their own pace. Although the students who expressed the desire to plan alone only made up 5% of the students, it is important for teachers to consider the different needs of individual students and those who might prefer to plan in this way.

The main reasons given by the students who did not wish to plan alone were the opportunity to share opinions, get feedback, and practice agreeing and disagreeing with others before a discussion. Students saw value in planning to speak in a discussion in such a way, suggesting the high amount of importance they placed on some kind of oral interaction before a discussion. That they wanted to verbally interact with others to prepare is perhaps an easy-to-understand preference for learners with low L2 proficiency levels, as it gives them the chance to listen to the viewpoints of others, consider their own viewpoint, think about how to respond to others, and actually practice verbalizing their responses. Once such practice has been undertaken, having a discussion on the same topic with a group afterwards would most likely be less challenging for the students as it will not be the first time they have done it.

A comment made several times by students who preferred practicing in a pair, as opposed to a group, was that pair planning allowed more time for each student to speak. With only two speakers in the 10 minutes of planning time, students could practice verbalizing their contributions more than when there were four students in a planning group.

However, the majority of students (78%) preferred to plan in a group of four and a main reason for this was that group planning reflected the task better than individual or pair planning. Several students stated that being able to practice beforehand the same group set-up as the discussion (perhaps in terms of turn-taking, group dynamics, and group interactions—no greater detail was given) was most beneficial for preparing to speak as much as they could in a discussion afterwards. Allowing students with a low L2 proficiency levels to plan as part of a group should thus be considered as a good way to help them prepare to speak in discussions.

Table 2 shows that all except just 2% of the students reported wanting to undertake some kind of planning to prepare to speak in classroom discussions. In terms of planning mode, 92% of the students preferred planning that involved some kind of oral rehearsal.

From the reasons students gave for such a preference, it appeared that oral rehearsal was the preferred approach to planning as it helped them remember what to say afterwards.

Table 2. Student Discussion Planning Mode Preferences (N = 82)

Preferred planning mode	Percentage of students	Main reasons given
Oral rehearsal and written together	71%	The best way to practice and plan how to say things, just writing things down is not enough, and rehearsing is good but not for structuring what to say afterwards
Oral rehearsal	21%	Easily recalling planning content in the discussion
Written	6%	Organizing thoughts well
None	2%	Just wanting to start the discussion

Although issues about speaking as much as possible in a discussion are sometimes present, it appears that the majority of students felt that simply repeating the discussion by rehearsing it first would help them speak more the next time it was done. Repeating an oral task through rehearsing it has been shown in research to improve student spoken fluency and their reported confidence to speak in oral tasks (Lynch & Maclean, 2000). Practicing listening to others, conceptualizing responses, formulating the language for those responses, and then actually delivering them (as in Levelt's speech model discussed earlier) will store prepared language in a student's short-term memory ready for usage in a discussion afterwards. This may be a crucial part of discussion preparation for learners with

low L2 proficiency levels and should be considered by teachers who experience quiet or silent group discussions among their students.

However, oral rehearsal by itself was reported by the majority of the students as not being enough to prepare them to speak in a group discussion. Many of the students felt that the benefit that written planning offered was of allowing them to organize and structure their ideas. Oral rehearsal may help students prepare spoken language, while written planning may help them structure their ideas across time in a discussion. The majority of students (71%) reported that a combination of both oral rehearsal and written planning worked best for preparing them, as it gave them a chance to practice the task in an oral form, whilst using written planning to structure out their ideas.

Conclusion

The addition of an oral rehearsal or written planning stage has been shown in research to improve the task performance of students in later oral tasks (Foster & Skehan, 1999; Lynch & Maclean, 2000; Mehnert, 1998; Sangarun, 2005). In this study I examined the preferences that Japanese university students have for planning to speak as much as they can in a group discussion in terms the mode they use to plan and the group size. After several weeks of experiencing different modes and group sizes for pre-discussion planning, the students reported preferring to combine group oral rehearsal of discussions with the support of some kind of written planning. Pre-discussion planning that allowed for the exchanging of ideas between students, the practicing of verbalizing responses with each other, and the organizing of ideas with a written plan was the most preferred choice by students. However, as the survey results showed that some students wish to plan alone or not even plan at all it, is also important that teachers account for individual preferences for discussion planning.

The survey data serve as a useful starting point for further research into how students in Japanese universities with low L2 proficiency levels might best prepare to speak as much as possible in classroom discussions. Discovering what combination of planning modes and group size can help students with low L2 proficiency levels speak the most in classroom discussions is of high importance. However, the data collected was limited to self-reported preferences from students with only a few weeks experience in planning in such a way. Great potential exists to overcome the limitations of this study with further research.

Limitations and Future Research

No analysis of observational data during discussions was correlated to the planning. This would be required to confirm that the different planning modes and group sizes that students reported preferring actually had an effect on the amount students spoke in discussions. The study only examined the use of planning for a discussion involving four students. Further research could be done into the effects of planning for smaller or larger group discussions. The mixed planning undertaken by students was not specific in terms of how much each student used oral and written planning. Stricter control about how much they use both modes within the planning time would be needed evaluate the effects. Finally, for the “free planning choice” given in weeks 6 and 7 of the study, it was difficult to offer students a genuine choice for group size, so some students did not get the chance to join a group when they wanted to. More consideration of how to deal with this is needed in future studies.

Bio Data

Robert Stroud is currently undertaking a PhD in applied linguistics at the University of Birmingham and is developing research on the effects of task design on language use in communicative situations. He has an ultimate goal of improving students’ communicative

competence through the combination of task-based learning and computer-assisted language learning. He also holds an MA in applied linguistics and English language teaching from the University of Nottingham. <robertstroud@kwansei.ac.jp>

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Appendix A

Planning Practices Schedule and Discussion Topics

Week	First Discussion Planning	First Discussion (eight mins)	Second Discussion Planning	Second Discussion (eight mins)
1	Class A: No planning (What is the best anime?) Class B: No planning (What is the best shop in Osaka?) Class C: No planning (What is the best university club?)		Class A: Alone/Written [10 m] (What is the best festival in Japan?) Class B: Pair/Oral [10 m] (What is the best weekend activity?) Class C: Group/Oral [10 m] (What is the best career?)	

2	Class A: Group/Oral [10 m] (What is the best shop in Osaka?) Class B: Alone/Written [10 m] (What is the best way to stay healthy?) Class C: Pair/Written and oral [10 m] (What is the best anime?)	First Discussion (eight mins)	Class A: Pair/Written and oral [10 m] (What is the best weekend activity?) Class B: Group/Oral [10 m] (What is the best city in Japan?) Class C: No planning (What is the best festival in Japan?)	Second Discussion (eight mins)
3	Class A: No planning (What is the best way to stay healthy?) Class B: Pair/Written and oral [10 m] (What is the best university class?) Class C: Group/Written [10 m] (What is the best shop in Osaka?)		Class A: Group/Written [10 m] (What is the best city in Japan?) Class B: No planning (What is the best foreign food?) Class C: Pair/Written [10 m] (What is the best weekend activity?)	
4	Class A: Pair/Written [10 m] (What is the best university class?) Class B: Group/Written [10 m] (What is the best part-time job?) Class C: No planning (What is the best way to stay healthy?)		Class A: No planning (What is the best foreign food?) Class B: Pair/Written [10 m] (What is the best way to reduce stress?) Class C: Group/Written and oral [10 m] (What is the best city in Japan?)	

5	<p>Class A: Group/Written and oral [10 m] (What is the best part-time job?)</p> <p>Class B: No planning (What is the best pet?)</p> <p>Class C: Pair/Oral [10 m] (What is the best university class?)</p>	First Discussion (eight mins)	<p>Class A: Pair/Oral [10 m] (What is the best way to reduce stress?)</p> <p>Class B: Group/Written and oral [10 m] (What is the best country to visit?)</p> <p>Class C: No planning (What is the best foreign food?)</p>	Second Discussion (eight mins)
6	<p>Class A: Free planning choice [10 m] (What is the best pet?)</p> <p>Class B: Free planning choice [10 m] (What is the best university club?)</p> <p>Class C: Free planning choice [10 m] (What is the best part-time job?)</p>		<p>Class A: Free planning choice [10 m] (What is the best country to visit?)</p> <p>Class B: Free planning choice [10 m] (What is the best career?)</p> <p>Class C: Free planning choice [10 m] (What is the best way to reduce stress?)</p>	
7	<p>Class A: Free planning choice [10 m] (What is the best university club?)</p> <p>Class B: Free planning choice [10 m] (What is the best anime?)</p> <p>Class C: Free planning choice [10 m] (What is the best pet?)</p>		<p>Class A: Free planning choice [10 m] (What is the best career?)</p> <p>Class B: Free planning choice [10 m] (What is the best festival in Japan?)</p> <p>Class C: Free planning choice [10 m] (What is the best country to visit?)</p>	

Appendix B

Strategic Planning Sheet

Write keywords (not long sentences) for the following sentences. Do not worry about your grammar or spelling.

What is your opinion?

Write at least three reasons why.

Please give examples.

Please think about and make some brief notes on which choices you disagree with and why.

Appendix C

Student Survey

For your discussion test next week, which of the following do you feel will help you speak the most?

1. Style:

No planning

Rehearsal

Written planning

Combining Rehearsal and Writing

Please explain why below.

2. Group:

In a group of four

With a partner

Alone

Please explain why below.