Achieving Quality Peer Interaction in EAP Programs

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Talk in the classroom can take many forms. In an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program, it is particularly important for learners to have academic discussions in which they engage more deeply with the content and each other, developing thinking, collaboration, interaction, and language skills at the same time. This type of academic discussion gets learners exploring topics from multiple perspectives, building on and extending ideas until something new is created. It also fosters habits of providing and evaluating evidence, referencing texts, and synthesizing and summarizing. These are all important academic skills. To achieve good academic discussions, however, requires a structured and comprehensive program with clear goals for specific discussion skills. It also requires considerable modeling, formative feedback, and practice. The purpose of this paper is to consider conversation among students in EAP classes.

　教室での対話には多様な形式がある。大学の英語プログラムでは、学生同士が学問的なディスカッションに参加することが特に重要であり、学習内容や対話相手をより深く理解し、同時に、各人の思考、他者との協同や交流、ならびに言語能力の発達が促進される。学習者が扱われる題材を多角的に吟味することで、新たな視座が生成され得る。さらには証拠の提供や検証、テキストの参照、総合的に物事を扱うことや、要約することなどに関わる習慣の育成にもつながる。これらは、重要な学術的なスキルである。一方、これらディスカッションの遂行に際しては、明確な目標を設定した段階での授業デザインとプログラムの実施が不可欠であり、入念な実践計画が要請される。本研究の目的は、英語教育における学生間での対話のあり方について検討することである。

The classroom is a particularly important context where English is learned as a foreign language because the regular face-to-face peer interaction is often the main opportunity learners have to speak and interact in the target language. As many teachers know, having students speak in pairs and groups can maximize these opportunities. Group work itself can also help to improve language learning by facilitating language acquisition and development. That is, if done in a structured and cognitively appropriate way, oral classroom interaction can act not only as a means of practicing language, but as a way of developing academic skills and language in a meaningful context. In English for academic purposes (EAP) settings at universities in Japan, speaking is sometimes not leveraged significantly, however, because of an emphasis on test preparation. Many universities equate EAP with academic test preparation (often using the institutional TOEFL ITP), and it is common for courses to focus on the receptive skills of reading, listening, and vocabulary recognition. Classroom talk is often not emphasized as the curriculum focuses on decoding academic language quickly. This approach may not be optimal, however, because classroom talk can actually help learners reach a better understanding of the target material and even create new knowledge in collaboration with others, all while allowing for the development of critical academic skills, such as clarifying or supporting ideas, and facilitating fluency practice with the target language.

Not just any type of talk in the classroom can do this, however. In an EAP setting, teachers should strive to get learners to engage in a certain type of discussion in which they examine multiple perspectives, cite and consider evidence, think carefully about the target content and the utterances of other students, and build greater understanding together. For this to happen, it is important to have clear content, thinking, and language goals, and create a system where meaningful collaboration and interaction take place. This will require the teacher to train learners in cooperation, thinking, and discussion skills. In this paper we look at the rationale for focusing on a particular type of classroom talk and point out some of the key issues in introducing and developing this type of talk with learners in EFL settings.

Why Talk in the EFL Classroom
Learning Through Speaking

It is well known that language learners benefit from opportunities to produce the target language orally (Swain & Lapkin, 1995). This has been shown also for learners in academic settings, where students retain both language and concepts better when they have the opportunity to create and communicate their own original messages (Walqui, 2006). Talk in the classroom has many pedagogic functions, however, so it is important to clarify what kinds of learning outcomes can be achieved through increased use of pair and group work. Of course, the distinction between teacher-student interaction, student-student pair work, and student-students group work can be more or less important depending on the proficiency of students and the familiarity students have with speaking in class and the types of activities in which speaking plays a central role. Depending on the setting and the experience of learners, some time may be required before learners feel comfortable enough with other learners and familiar enough with the procedures of activities to engage in them with less structure, supervision, or both, as learners move from apprenticeship, where they can do their best to imitate and participate, to appropriation, where they are able to participate more fully and independently (Walqui & van Lier, 2010). According to Chappell (2014), there are at least five functions of group work in the language classroom: (a) building interpersonal relations between students, (b) developing and extending knowledge of the topic or theme under focus, (c) developing oral fluency, (d) emphasizing language form and function, and (e) facilitating a focus on the semantic properties of texts. These do not happen automatically, however, when learners are asked to speak out in class or speak with partners or in groups. The functions rather emerge over time. Some emerge as a supportive community develops, and some emerge as the result of learners interacting sufficiently with the content and each other and building proficiency. They all require both time and careful design by the instructor to be realized.

The Challenge of Talk

One of the major problems with talk as it is often realized in the classroom seems to be its superficiality. In many settings, learners only speak in short, unconnected utterances. In response to a prompt (usually from the teacher), learners often give only short, unconnected responses in turn. There is very little creating of ideas, clarifying, fortifying, or elaborating of ideas and almost no negotiation of ideas. Zwiers, O'Hara, and Pritchard (2014) called this phenomenon the "popcorn share" (p. 188) because learners do not really even need to listen to the other utterances as they prepare their own. It is easy to understand how this undermines the goals of developing and extending knowledge, developing oral fluency, or facilitating a focus on the ideas in a text.

Textbook activities often exacerbate this problem. Many simply ask for learners to give opinions, often "scaffolding" with support language such as "I think_____." Very few books provide learners with models for how to develop an idea. For example, argument elaboration techniques, such as Claim-Support-Explain or Claim-Support-Question (Ritchhart, Church, & Morrison, 2011), are rarely covered. In addition, very few books demonstrate or teach learners how to react to the ideas of other students beyond basic agreement or disagreement. The result is that textbook speaking activities often manage to get learners to produce a sequence of short questions and answers. This limits the potential for development of oral fluency because it limits the volume of language and interaction. It also limits the exploration of ideas because ideas are reacted to in only a simplistic manner. It also does little to provide opportunities for developmental processes to occur in zones of proximal development, something identified as essential for learning to happen by Vygotsky (1934/1986). To be more effective, talk should strive to facilitate learners in "exploring a topic from many angles, building connections, challenging long-held assumptions, looking for applications, and producing what is for the learner a novel outcome" (Ritchhart, 2014, p. 48). The problem is how to reach this kind of interaction.

Types of Talk
Not All Talk is Equal

There are many types of talk that can be done in the classroom. Chappell (2014) gave a comprehensive list. First, there is *rote* talk, which is simple repetition, usually as part of drill or listen and repeat activity. This type requires no creative construction by the learners. Another type is *recitation and elicitation*, where the teacher asks questions, usually in an initiation-response-feedback (IRF) sequence that is controlled by the teacher. Here the focus is on the product of the learners' thinking, and the utterances by students are typically short. A similar, and yet qualitatively very different type is *process elicitation*. Here, at the whole-class level, the teacher gets students to think about the process of their thinking, often by asking them for reasons, elaboration, clarification, or examples. This type of talk can be very useful in that it supports semiotic mediation—whereby the meaningfulness of the activity helps generate new cognitive activity—and provides a good model for how learners can engage with each other and the content. It is essential to demonstrate these to learners if we expect them to engage more deeply in pair or

group discussions. Without this modeling, it is unlikely that learners can pick up these techniques on their own. The next type is *discussion*. This kind of talk focuses on the exchange of ideas for the purpose of sharing information and problem solving. It is good for fluency development and can provide multiple language learning opportunities. It can also be easily linked to text-based activities. The final type, and for developing academic thinking the most important, is *inquiry dialog*. This involves exploring the topic through mutual sharing and enquiry, leading to cumulative knowledge building and joint knowledge construction. The exact result is unpredictable, but includes greater shared understanding through collaborative knowledge exploration. In practice, it usually involves few interrogative forms, but rather more dialogic enquiry acts as learners invite other learners or the teacher to consider, reflect on, or explore ideas. Although Chappell uses the term *inquiry dialog*, the term *academic discussion* will be used here because it is more intuitive to most teachers and students and because it emphasizes that discussions will usually involve multiple participants and referencing of texts.

What Happens in Academic Discussions

One of the major reasons academic discussions are not more common is that teaching learners to engage in them takes considerable time and attention to specific skills (Zwiers & Crawford, 2011). Most people regularly use many of these skills, though not always in an explicit or purposeful manner. Some of the skills are, however, very rare in regular conversations. How often do people evaluate the quality of evidence in nonacademic conversations, for example? These skills thus have both a cognitive function and a linguistic element and thus are a challenge for EFL students to even identify; they are especially difficult to make use of in a real-time conversation without dedicated effort. With a comprehensive teaching plan in place, however, they are teachable, and teaching them can result in surprisingly richer interactions. Zwiers et al. (2014) have organized them into four skill sets. The first skill set is *creating*. It involves getting a discussion started, checking comprehension of the task or topic, and generating initial ideas. The next skill set is *clarifying*. This is important because it allows for better understanding of ideas through explanation, reformulation, questioning, or paraphrasing. It may also, at higher levels, include representing ideas with analogies. The next skill set is *fortifying ideas through support with evidence.* This is a critical skill for academic settings. Learners must be able to provide evidence from within or outside of a text. They must also become able to evaluate the strength of possible evidence. Techniques such as the previously mentioned Claim-Support-Explain or Claim-Support-Question are very useful for exercising this skill (Zwiers et al., 2014). The final skill set is *negotiating*, which involves paraphrasing arguments and synthesizing ideas and may involve testing or challenging evidence.

Achieving Academic Discussions
Developing the Discussion and Thinking Skills of EFL EAP Learners

The development of academic discussion skills must take place within a larger program to develop basic conversation and interaction skills. Students must be able to engage in basic conversation and, in particular, be able to react to the utterances of others (for example, back channeling, interjecting with simple follow-up questions, and adding comments including opinions, personal experience, or simple suggestions). Students entering most universities in Japan usually have these skills, albeit with wide variations in proficiency. In my experience, adding some pair practice in these skills at the beginning of an EAP course can be a useful refresher for students.

In order to truly scaffold EAP learners into an academic discussion skill apprenticeship period and then toward solid appropriation, several curriculum elements seem to be necessary. The first is to have clear goals. This entails being very clear about what skill sets we want learners to be able to use and what language we will expect them to employ in doing so. This means identifying the various skills and providing language for each. Having a clear progression of goals is essential because academic discussion can get very complex. Without training in individual skills, engaging in full discussions using multiple skills is likely too challenging. This requires the teacher to have a strong familiarity with the skills themselves and a syllabus that introduces them in a manageable progression. After a few have been introduced, rubrics and checklists can be created for use with learners.

Another element that is necessary is that learners work with appropriate texts and tasks. Authentic genre example texts are probably best for academic learners, as gaining familiarity with them is always one of the major goals of any EAP program. Because learners should be regularly providing evidence from the text(s), having good texts that are not too difficult and not too easy is essential. The same is true for the tasks. As much as possible, tasks should be similar to tasks that are common in the academic discipline that the learners are aiming for (Zwiers, 2014). To reiterate, both the texts and the tasks should be as authentic as possible.

In order both to make the academic discussion skills salient and to provide scaffolding for learners, language chunks need to be provided, and the use and timing of these will have to be pointed out to students. Learners will need to gain familiarity with chunks or strings such as, for example, "What makes you say that?" or "Does that make sense to you?" before they can use them. They must then be given practice, starting with controlled practice with limited language. As learners grow in proficiency with their array of chunks, more can be introduced, including those for other skills and variations on

those they already know. It is important to avoid overwhelming learners, considering the large number of skills and language options that are possible, so considerable practice is essential. Through experience I have also found that some chunks and skills are much easier for learners to grasp, remember, and use. For example, techniques for asking for clarification or elaboration can be easily taught, and students quickly begin doing so in discussions. Other skills, for example paraphrasing, require considerably more time and effort before students can make even rudimentary attempts in real-time discussions.

Actually teaching the skills requires a host of modeling and demonstrating for learners and regular monitoring and feedback. It is important that the skills are modeled as they are taught and that the teacher interacts with learners. Process elicitation mentioned earlier plays an important role as modeling and labeling help students to see what, how, and when to use the skills. Activities such as academic discussions with the whole class discussing something with the teacher can be useful. This allows the teacher to control the discussion, walking through it at a speed that allows learners to easily process the content and the language being used and to pause at key points to highlight what can be done and what effect it can have.

From there, proceeding to a fishbowl activity can allow the students to participate and play greater roles, while still in a controlled discussion in which the teacher can comment or make salient points. In this activity, some students engage in the discussion while the majority of students observe and take notes on the interaction and use of skills and language. Usually, the teacher and the observing students make comments and suggestions for improving the quality of the discussion before switching in new participants and doing the discussion again. Finally, because real-time language processing requires considerable cognitive resources, recording, transcribing, and analyzing conversations is a very important tool for learners to see when and how to use the various discussion skills. Regular opportunities to practice are also essential. Once students have gained even limited proficiency with core skills, academic discussions can begin to be used to explore topics and ideas, and teachers will likely find that they can introduce further skills as the need arises.

Academic discussions also can be combined nicely with individual or group presentations or summary writing. Indeed, collaborating and co-construction involve similar skill sets, and teachers may find that by focusing on these skills, the quality of interaction in the classroom and student-produced work improve.

Examples of Discussion Skills

The following list of discussion skills was assembled from many sources, principally Zwiers et al. (2014), Zwiers and Crawford (2011), and Ritchhart (2014). These authors were all working in ESL settings, and so considerable adjustments have had to be made for EFL use. The list has also undergone a lot of trial and error revision through use in several university EAP EFL classroom settings in Japan over the past 3 years. Originally, a shorter version formed the core of a syllabus that focused on discussion in the second half of a 1st-year listening and speaking English course that met once per week. The current version, deployed in a content and language-integrated (CLIL) course that meets four times per week, is much more complete and includes the following skills:

- Defining the task and getting started
- Defining terms and assets (graphs, statistics, and so on)
- Getting and giving initial opinions and reactions
- Elaborating and clarifying
- Supporting with examples
- Reacting to ideas that arise:
  - Checking language comprehension
  - Paraphrasing (checking idea comprehension)
  - Praising contributions/sharing
  - Disagreeing
  - Agreeing and adding
  - Expressing confusion or indirectly disagreeing
  - Extending
  - Returning to older points
- Comparing and evaluating arguments and evidence
- Dealing with obstacles
- Synthesizing and making connections
- Finishing up (and getting ready to summarize and report in writing or presentation)

For each of these skills, suitable language must be provided. At least two lexical strings will be needed for each skill as typically different strings are used when someone is prompting or asking a question and when they have the floor and are transitioning

between speaking moves. An example of this for paraphrasing might include these two strings: "So you're saying ___?" for when interlocutors are paraphrasing to check comprehension of an idea, and "What I mean is ___" when the speaker herself is paraphrasing her own utterance to check for idea comprehension. The exact choice of strings will depend on the proficiency of the learners and the types of tasks in which they will engage. As a general rule, however, short utterances are best (e.g., "Really? Why?" or "For example?"). These are much easier for most students to use in real time.

Conclusion

Academic discussions do not just happen. Like good thinking practices or good presentations, they require a comprehensive program of instruction and practice. The transition, however, from just having learners practice "speaking" by exchanging in turn individual utterances to having learners actually go through the process of introducing a topic, examining it from multiple perspectives, supporting their opinions with evidence from their lives, the text, or both, and then creating new knowledge and summarizing their discussion allows learners to interact far more deeply with ideas and each other. This allows for the development of better thinking skills (analyzing, arguing, summarizing, and synthesizing) as well as richer and deeper language processing and more language use and exposure. It also helps them to learn how to have academic discussions, which is crucial for students hoping to study abroad someday. In short, it facilitates the development of exactly the types of academic skills we hope to develop in an EAP EFL program. It does, however, take time and a concerted effort using a comprehensive program as outlined here.

Bio Data

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