Discussions Without Argument in English Classrooms

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In this paper we examine the characteristics of classroom discussions in English among Japanese university students. It is often said that discussion is an effective way of teaching English at the university level because it can help to develop not only learners' English skills, but also their critical thinking skills. In this study, the participants were told to discuss the following topic: "Should high school students join club activities?" We found that the participants did not scrutinize the topic from different perspectives or challenge other participants' opinions. Analyzing the data based on M-GTA (modified grounded theory approach), we found 6 features in their discussion and organized them into 3 categories: limited perspectives, communication gaps, and going on-and-off the discussion. We believe that these findings will be beneficial for English teachers in Japanese tertiary education in terms of how they can plan to use discussions in their classrooms.

本論文は、日本の大学英語授業におけるディスカッションの特徴を質的に分析したものである。学習者の英語スキルやクリティカルシンキング力を養う効果があるという理由で、ディスカッションは大学レベルの英語を教えるのに効果的な方法であると言われている。本研究では、参加者に「高校生はクラブ活動に参加すべきか。」という題目で議論をさせた。参加者は異なる視点から題目を精査することも、他の参加者の意見に異議を申し立てることもしなかった。ディスカッションはクリティカルシンキング力を養う効果があると考えられるが、そのために必要なアーギュメントが今回のグループには欠けており、一面的な見方で結論を導こうとする傾向が見られた。4人の大学生によるディスカッションの録音データから、M-GTA（modified grounded theory approach）に基づき、議論の構造とそこに見られる特性を同定し、さらにそれを3つのカテゴリー＜視野の狭さ、コミュニケーション・ギャップ、オンとオフの使い分け＞に分類した。本研究結果から、授業にディスカッションを取り入れることは、日本の大学英語教員にとって有益であると考える。

In modern tertiary education, active learning now plays a more important role than before. Active learning is an educational process in which students "do meaningful learning activities and think about what they are doing" (Prince, 2004, p. 223). It is often contrasted with more traditional lecture-style classes in which students are more passive. Many researchers have pointed to the ways in which active learning can lead to better learning in universities (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Prince, 2004). Specifically, in Japan, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) published a report on "quality change" in tertiary education (The Central Education Council of Japan, 2012). It stated that tertiary education should nurture the students' ability to find and solve problems in unexpected situations. For this purpose, the report suggested that active learning should be the focus.

Pawk and Owens (2011) argued that discussions encourage active learning. They said that discussions provide a chance "to reflect on ideas through the perspectives of multiple minds instead of simply your own" (p. 338). In other words, discussion is not supposed to be merely a chance for participants to present their opinions. It should be a chance for an issue to be considered from various viewpoints, followed by critical and multilateral discussion.

Discussion is also a beneficial way to foster students' critical thinking skills. Critical thinking skills are necessary for students to succeed in tertiary education, as they enable students to identify problems and solve them. It is a process of thinking that is clear and rational. Lipman (1987) identified three characteristics of critical thinking: (a) it is self-corrective, (b) it uses criteria, and (c) it is sensitive to context. Also, critical thinking is a social learning process (Brookfield, 2012). It is something most people cannot do by themselves. Consequently, discussion is a suitable place for critical thinking. We become aware of our assumptions and examine them by contrasting them with the opinions of others.

Researchers tend to assume that discussion should be argumentative. R. H. Johnson (as cited in Hitchcock, 2002) postulated that "an argumentative discussion is a sociocultural activity of constructing, presenting, interpreting, criticizing, and revising arguments for the purpose of reaching a shared rationally supported position on some issue" (p. 1). Based on this idea, it is considered that argumentative discussion is made possible by critical thinking skills. According to Brookfield (2012), critical thinking includes four processes: (a) hunting for assumptions, (b) checking assumptions, (c) seeing things from different viewpoints, and (d) taking informed action. Usually, we are guided by some assumptions. We start with being aware of them. Then we evaluate whether these assumptions are as valid as we think. In order to assess our assumptions, we examine them from various points of view. Finally, we take action based on these critical thinking processes. In argumentative discussions, by using the definition adopted here, participants use their assumptions to support their viewpoints with good evidence. Good and strong evidence will help them persuade other participants. Other participants then challenge the viewpoints with their own evidence. In a discussion that has more than three participants, in order to reach a shared position, the participants will have to scrutinize the issue by examining several different viewpoints with different pieces of evidence. Even when they agree with each other, participants should check their assumptions by imagining what other groups of people would say. In this sort of discussion, the participants go through the first three processes above. Thus, argument in discussion does not mean conflict or quarrel, which could sometimes be emotional. Rather, argument should be based on logical and critical thinking.

We have suggested that discussion is an effective way of promoting active learning and fostering critical thinking skills. However, it is also true that discussion is not widely adopted in university English classrooms in Japan. There are two possible factors hindering the use of English discussion in Japanese classrooms. One reason has to do with the cultural features of Japan, such as its *high-context*, *interdependent nature*, and its emphasis on *harmony* and *collectivism*. Saying that Japanese culture is high-context means that information is not necessarily verbalized, but is understood based on the context (Hall, 1976). When English teachers use discussions in classrooms that consist primarily of Japanese students, teachers should expect that their students will act in a reserved manner and will not actively show their opinions (high-context), mutually depend on each other to understand and to be understood (interdependency), avoid conflict and keep peace among the discussion group (harmony), and try not to stand out by basically agreeing with other members (collectivism). Obviously, this is not suitable for argumentative discussions by our definition. Another factor is the lack of teaching materials. According to Kaneko and Kimizuka (2007), most textbooks used in Japan do not explicitly teach discussion skills in English. For example, questions such as "What is your favorite restaurant?" are found at the end of a unit. Some textbooks call this kind of question a discussion question. These kinds of questions simply encourage the students to speak in English; actual discussion, that is argumentative discussion, is rarely covered in textbooks. It is true that there are some textbooks for the purpose of instruction of discussion skills such as *Speaking of Speech* (Harrington & LeBeau, 2011), but generally, these textbooks are not widely chosen by Japanese English teachers.

We believe that discussion should be implemented more positively in university education. To begin with, we need to know the reality of English discussion in Japanese university classrooms and to find specific features in these class discussions. Kitsuno and Kobayashi (2016) analyzed two groups of students participating in an English discussion and categorized them according to four criteria: personality, English level, limited perspective, and culture. The research was conducted in only one class in a private university, so more data is needed to uncover the characteristics of Japanese discussion.

The present study was carried out to build on the previous research. It describes an English discussion by Japanese university students in order to identify its features through qualitative analysis. Our research question is, "What happens in Japanese university students' discussions in English?"

Method
Participants

In this study, participants were four EFL students who had registered for a 2nd-year English course at a private university in Japan. Participants' English proficiency was evaluated by their teacher based on the results of a written exam using the textbook. Two of the students were advanced learners, but the level of the other two was lower intermediate to intermediate. In addition, one of the advanced learners had scored 780 on the TOEIC, but was not a fluent speaker of English. Three of the students were L1 Japanese speakers and the other was an L1 Indonesian speaker who had been studying Japanese for about 10 years and was very fluent in both Japanese and English without a strong Indonesian accent. They were all art majors. Their specialties were photography, animation, and interactive media. All the participants' names have been changed to pseudonyms. Table 1 shows the participants' L1 and their English level.

Table 1. Participant L1 and English Level

Participants	L1	English Level
Aki	Japanese	Intermediate
Goro	Japanese	Advanced
Hide	Japanese	Lower-intermediate
Sally	Indonesian	Advanced

Data Collection

In the spring semester of 2015, the participants had a 30-minute discussion session, which was audio recorded. After the discussion, all participants were asked to answer questionnaires in Japanese to provide background information and a self-evaluation. Following is the list of questions asked:

1. Do you think today's discussion went well?
2. Please explain why you think so.
3. Do you think you played a significant role in the discussion?
4. Please explain why you think so.
5. If you think you learned or gained anything, please tell us about it.
6. If you found anything difficult in the discussion, please tell us about it.

   After a week, participants were interviewed so that we could follow up on our initial review of the data.

Discussion Question

In choosing a discussion question, we needed a question that was appropriate for our participants in terms of their level of English proficiency (Takanashi, 1992), their interests, and the level of difficulty of the issue. The four students who took part in the discussion were motivated enough to take an elective course of English, but were not necessarily very proficient in English. They might have had difficulty using abstract words and technical terms spontaneously in English discussion. On the other hand, because they were cognitively mature university students, the topic also needed to satisfy their intellectual curiosity in order to motivate them. Thus, we did not choose a topic about everyday life, but selected a value-judging type topic. Accordingly, the question chosen was "Should high school students join club activities?"

Prediscussion Activities

Before the discussion proper, one class was spent on prediscussion activities to present a model discussion, help with related vocabulary and phrases, and provide students with background information of the topic. The contents of the prediscussion activities were as follows:

1. brainstorming,
2. watching a video about high school club activities,
3. sharing the participants' experiences,
4. learning useful expressions for discussion, and
5. preparing for discussion (assignment).

Data Analysis

We applied a modified grounded theory approach (M-GTA) to data analysis. This approach is a qualitative analysis method advocated by Kinoshita (2003, 2007) for constructing an assumption or a theory by coding and categorizing data. Reading through a text, several concepts or features are identified and named (open coding), and then those concepts are related with each other and are integrated into wider categories (selective coding).

   The 13-minute audio-recorded discussion was transcribed and analyzed in two stages: (a) identifying discussion structures and features, and (b) categorizing the features. In the first stage, we summarized the overall structure of the discussion and identified its features. In the next stage, we categorized these features and analyzed the nature of the students' discussion. After each of us had examined the data independently at each stage, we had meetings to confirm the process and the analysis.

Results
Discussion Structures

Here we summarize the overall discussion. Hide was the first person to give his opinion. He disagreed with club activities in high school saying that high school students need to study for university entrance exams. Because Hide was not a proficient speaker of Eng-

lish, it took some time for the others to understand what he meant; they had to spend most of the time checking their understanding by asking clarifying questions. Then, the same student, Hide, raised another, opposing view. His reason, this time, was that sports students need to do sports clubs. Again, it took some time for others to understand him. After everyone had made sure they understood him, Sally, the Indonesian student, summarized the discussion by proposing a consensus. Everyone agreed and was happy to reach a conclusion.

In considering this summary, it became clear that the participants did not have enough argument to deeply discuss this issue. Discussion should be developed through considering a topic from various perspectives, but the participants talked about only two opinions: first that high school students should study hard without joining any club activities, and second that sports students should do some club activities to enter universities. More interestingly, the same student stated the two opposing views. The participants did not examine this topic from sufficiently varied viewpoints.

Features

We identified six features of this discussion: (a) rush to consensus, (b) differences in English proficiency, (c) gaps of background knowledge, (d) repetition, (e) soft voice, and (f) lack of facilitator. Here we describe these features with some examples. The participants' utterances have not been corrected.

Rush to Consensus

Six minutes into the discussion, Sally started to talk about "having a consensus." Rather than seeking out different points of view, the participants aimed at achieving a consensus. As explained earlier, they did not try to explore various perspectives on school club activities, but hurried to reach common ground. The following are examples of Sally's utterances.

Sally: I think that three of us agree that it should be optional.

Sally: Ah you should, but you shouldn't be forced. Your opinion is that the same thing, right? So we have consensus that it's good but you shouldn't be forced to doing it.

Sally: I think all of us have the consensus that, you think, the club activity is good, and you should do it, but it shouldn't be something you are forced to. Do you agree?

According to the participants, the reason to join a club activity is that students who have to take sports exams have to do sports activities. On the other hand, the reason not to join a club activity is that many high school students have to study hard to prepare for university entrance exams. However, these reasons are two extreme cases and do not apply to the majority of high school students. Also, the participants only focused on sports club activities, but usually, there are more diverse kinds of club activities in high school such as music, drama, art, computer, or *shogi*. In a more mature discussion one might expect the participants to consider a wider range of club activities. As for the reason not to join a club activity, not all high school students have to study so hard to enter university that they do not have time to do any club activities. There are many students who continue to participate in club and study at the same time. If the participants had focused on these other high school students, they could have found other perspectives. There could be other reasons to join a club such as making friends, relief from stress, gaining some skills, and so on. Some reasons not to join a club activity are saving money, working part-time, and so on. They did not scrutinize these other cases, but rushed to a consensus.

Differences in Proficiency

Student English level is another feature, as differences in proficiency appeared to influence participant discussion. Again, Hide started talking before the others, but they did not understand his English. The following is a part of the discussion that revealed differences in proficiency.

Hide: High school is basically, basically don't put seriously . . . about school club activities. So because university is . . . university is such . . . high school's, high school's study.

Aki: What do you mean?

Hide: Uh, high school is study, university exam, such like ( ) university exam or work.

Aki: University?

Hide: University exam.

All: (silence)

Goro: Exam?

Hide: *Juken* [entrance exam] (soft voice)

Gaps in Background Knowledge

Sally, a female student from Indonesia, did not share the same background knowledge about the system of Japanese university entrance exams that the other three Japanese students had. As a result, she asked clarifying questions about this point. She mistakenly thought that in the university entrance exams students might be asked about their engagement in club activities, which is usually not the case.

Sally: Do they ask what club you are doing in the university exam?

Hide: (   )

Sally: Do they usually ask you what club you are doing in the high school (that?) you, ah, come to apply for university, like in the interview or the school letter?

Repetition

We observed repetition of words or phrases in the discussion. In the following example, they repeated the word *option* to clarify what Goro meant by this word.

Goro: We think we should be given the <u>option</u> that join the club activity or not. I want to have option, join or not. Right?

Hide: Option?

Goro: Option.

Sally: Option?

Goro: Join or not… right?

Aki: Option?

Goro: Option.

Aki: Choose agree or disagree?

Below is another example of repetition. Unlike the previous one, in this example repeating the phrase "don't must" is showing agreement. "Don't must" is a grammar error made by Hide, but Goro simply repeated the phrase.

Goro: Club activity is good, but

Hide: But don't must

Goro: Don't must

Hide: Don't must be (   )

Soft voice

The fifth feature is soft voice, which was often used when the participants talked in Japanese. Use of Japanese was not encouraged in this discussion, but students sometimes spoke in Japanese when they were trying to clarify meanings or make themselves understood. When they used a soft voice, the volume of their voices was controlled as if they were offstage; when they talked in a normal voice, it was like they were onstage.

Aki: Ehh, ehh . . . If some people want to, want to go university, that test is, university test is sports test, so uh . . . what do you say? Eh . . . *Nante ieba iinda?* [What should I say?] (soft voice)

Goro: Exam?

Hide: *Juken* [entrance exam] (soft voice)

Lack of Facilitator

For a successful discussion to progress and develop, a facilitator may be needed. None of the four participants adopted the role of a facilitator—someone who helps the discussion along by prompting others, summarizing what others have said, or raising a new topic. It might seem that Sally tried to facilitate the discussion. However, according to her teacher, she was a humble and reserved student, and the teacher thought that Sally was speaking only because nobody else was speaking.

Discussion

After examining the features of our participants' discussion, we considered the relation between the features and identified categories of related features. The three categories based on the discussion data are as follows:

1. *Limited perspective*: rush to consensus, lack of facilitator;

2. *Communication gaps*: differences in English proficiency, gaps of background knowledge, repetition; and

3. *Going on-and-off the discussion*: soft voices.

The first category is limited perspective. In the Japanese language, there is an expression *kuuki-o yomu*, meaning to read between the lines. Our participants rushed to consensus because they read between the lines and did not try to challenge other participants' views in order to avoid conflict. In other words, they did not play devil's advocate and consider the issue from various perspectives. In Japanese conversations, if you play devil's advocate, you will be called "KY" or *kuuki-o yomanai,* not reading between the lines. It seems our participants followed this Japanese norm. A study by Kitsuno and Kobayashi (2016) yielded a similar finding from analyses of two discussions. In one discussion, the participants clung to their own situation and did not imagine other kinds of situations. (The participants were all art students, and they only talked about the same kind of students although they were supposed to discuss university students in general.) In the other group, the participants tried to challenge each other's views, but this resulted in some pressure on them, which created a tense atmosphere.

The lack of a facilitator can be categorized as part of the limited perspective as well. Most teachers may want certain kinds of students to play the role of facilitator, for example, students who can speak English well or who tend to be actively involved in discussion. Among our participants, there were two students who fit these criteria. Goro had a TOEIC score of 780. He was one of the most advanced students at the university. However, he could not take a role as facilitator. We assume that this was because he had studied English mostly for the test, but his listening ability was not good enough to understand what the Indonesian classmate said even though she did not have a strong accent. Another candidate for facilitator was Hide. As shown before, Hide often started talking first regardless of his lack of English ability, which shows he could also possibly have acted as facilitator. However, he was unable to facilitate the discussion because the other students did not understand him well.

The second category is communication gaps. Differences in English proficiency, gaps in background knowledge, and repetition of words or phrases were all factors that prevented the students from having a good discussion. Finally, the soft voice feature was categorized as going on and off the discussion. It seems that students shared two layers with other members. One layer is ON the discussion, in which they concentrated on the discussion. The outer layer is OFF the discussion, in which they sometimes talked in soft voices because they were speaking offstage. Also, in this layer they checked the vocabulary and their understanding in Japanese.

Based on the discussion examined in this study, we suggest two possible ways to make students' classroom discussion more argumentative and in depth. One is having the students draw a concept map during the discussion. By asking one student in a group to draw a concept map showing the development of their own discussion, they can check where the argument is going, how many reasons they are discussing, if they are arguing based on various perspectives or not, and so on. Another method is to designate a facilitator in a group who introduces the topic, asks questions of others, or summarizes the outline of the discussion, while taking an objective overview of the discussion. To make this more effective, a teacher could play the role of facilitator at first to provide a model.

Conclusion

In this paper, we examined the characteristics of Japanese university students' discussion in the belief that discussion is an effective way of teaching English at the university level in that it can develop not only students' English skills, but also their critical thinking skills. The qualitative analysis we carried out showed that the discussion by Japanese students lacked the features of argument that could have created a deeper and more substantial discussion. We identified several features of the nonargumentative discussion: rush to consensus, differences in English proficiency, gaps in background knowledge, repetition, and soft voice. Moreover, we categorized these features into three groups: limited perspective, communication gaps, and going on-and-off the discussion. In particular, the category of limited perspective could have played a significant role in the students' discussion because having a wide range of perspectives is related to critical thinking. Generally, it can be said that the Japanese students are not used to thinking critically due to the cultural norms that they are accustomed to. When teachers of Japanese university students use discussion in their classroom, they should pay special attention to this category.

An awareness of the nature of students' discussions may be helpful for teachers. However, further research is needed with different levels of students, different kinds of discussion topics, and employing different methods of analysis. This will lead to more effective ways of using discussion in university English classrooms and consequently help students develop their English proficiency and critical thinking skills.

Bio Data

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