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Feature Article

- 3** NGSL Coverage of the SHS Entrance Exam and the National Center Test
Miki Iwamoto & Brandon Kramer

Readers' Forum

- 9** Assigning Roles in Small Group Discussions for Maximum EFL Learner Participation
Cathrine-Mette Mork

TLT Interviews

- 17** An Interview with Professor Karl Maton
Thomas Amundrud, Ayumi Inako, & Dominic Edsall

My Share

- 22** Classroom ideas from Jeff Au, Ivy Liwa, Philip Olson, and Luke Houghton

JALT Praxis

- 26** *TLT* Wired
28 Younger Learners
33 Book Reviews
35 Teaching Assistance
38 The Writers' Workshop
42 SIG Focus: Reflections: SIG Officers
45 Old Grammarians



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Assigning Roles in Small Group Discussions for Maximum EFL Learner Participation

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This paper outlines research on group role classification and explains methods of introducing discussion work to Japanese English as a foreign language (EFL) learners who may initially lack the language skills and/or discussion skills required for fruitful group discourse. Assigning specific roles to each member in a group can diffuse responsibility to every participant for a successful discussion or even a simple exchange of ideas. With a clearly defined role and set of phrases useful to that role at their disposal, learners are empowered to participate actively in class discussions.

本論は、グループにおける役割の分類に関する研究を概説する。また、実りあるグループディスカッションに必要な言語能力や技術が初めから不足しているかもしれない外国語としての英語 (EFL) を学習している日本人学習者に、ディスカッション活動導入の方法についても説明する。グループ内の各メンバーに特定の役割を割り当てることによって、円滑なディスカッションや簡単な意見交換を行う際であってもその負担をすべての参加者に分散させることができる。明確に定義された役割とその役割に役立ち、かつ自由に使える便利なフレーズ集を用意することにより、学習者は授業内のディスカッションに積極的に参加できる。

Group discussion is a form of active learning that facilitates learners practicing to develop second language (L2) speaking fluency. It is an obvious activity choice for content and language integrated learning (CLIL) or content-based instruction (CBI) since course content supplies topic matter for discussion. Group discussions can afford students exposure to multiple perspectives that can help them more fully explore complex issues, with better communication and analytical skills fostered in the process (Soranno, 2010a). Even in more traditional communicative English language learning settings, where language use is stressed over the topic content used for discussion, small group discussions provide a context for learners to apply and develop their L2 communicative skills.

However, particularly in the Japanese context, early attempts at getting students to discuss in English can be met with failure, particularly when

students are given broad instructions requesting they simply discuss a topic for five minutes and see how many ideas they can come up with. Even students with knowledge and opinions about the topic and sufficient facility with the English necessary to discuss it may fall into silence. A lack of experience with discussion as a learning tool in their native tongue, cultural and social dynamics, and confidence issues are some reasons why this might occur. Other times some individuals may dominate any discussion that does ensue.

What can language instructors do to increase the likelihood of discussion that is fruitful and in which all members contribute in a positive way? Here I argue that teachers who understand some of the research on group roles and who prepare some basic role information for group members will increase the probability of successful discussion. I also argue that building up to group discussion using group roles through scaffolding can be impactful and result in discussion experiences that are less daunting for learners.

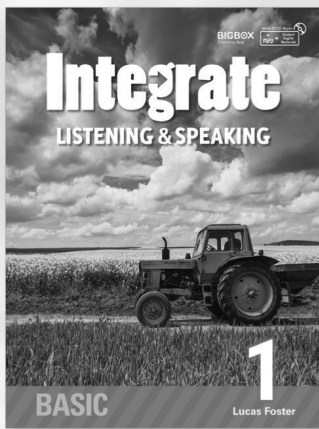
Classification of Group Roles

Group roles are patterns of behavior that people exhibit when in a group. These are either customarily performed or expected by others to be performed. Soranno (2010a) notes that, "the most useful discussions are those that have a clear direction and goal and have a procedure to meet that goal" (p. 1). Students having a specific role to play in group discussions can be part of an effective classroom discussion procedure.

There is no simple, all-encompassing theory of group roles. There are many different explanations of small group roles and functions (Cagle, n.d.). Each takes a slightly different perspective, but it is generally believed ("Benne and Sheats' group roles", n.d.) that a range of positive roles (defined below) are important to effective group discussions. In addition, groups need to be able to adapt. Opinions change and conflicts occur in group discussions and

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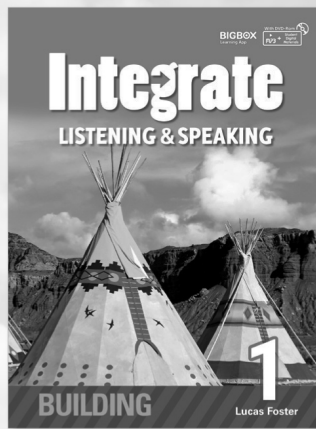
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so groups need to be flexible and understanding to continue to work well together.

Benne and Sheats' (1948) classic *Functional Roles of Group Members*, despite refinement over time, provides useful insight into group behavior and a framework or inspiration for structuring small group roles in the English language classroom. In their work they define many roles that can be played by one or more people within a group that can be classified into three main categories:

1. Task roles are productivity-focused, and their function is to help the group achieve its objectives. Task roles all focus on efficient task generation and completion.
2. Social (maintenance or personal) roles are cohesion-focused, aiming to help the group maintain harmonious relationships and a cohesive interpersonal climate. Social or maintenance roles all focus on human development and are invisible if a group discussion is working well. Relationships, group dynamics, and individual comfort levels and feelings about the group can affect its workings and ultimately its productivity.
3. Dysfunctional (individualistic or self-centered) roles are individual-focused, serving the needs or goals of individuals at the expense of group productivity and goal attainment. In these roles self-centered role behavior is directed toward personal needs, negatively affecting both the ability of task and social role members in their quest toward serving group needs. Such behaviors inevitably cause group conflict. These roles need to be addressed quickly and effectively in order to get the group back on track toward working efficiently and collaboratively.

In contexts where learners are both new to discussion and have rudimentary English communication skills, it is probably best not to assume that any of the positive (task and social) roles will naturally emerge and that any negative (dysfunctional) roles that surface will be suppressed by group members. It is preferable to allow Benne and Sheats' (1948) social roles to emerge naturally over time as relationships form during classroom discussions. Many of these roles are personality-oriented and do not directly contribute to goal completion. Also, at least in the initial stages of learning how to discuss, attention to positive roles is preferable; if dysfunctional roles appear over the course of discussion, the teacher can facilitate their suppression. Again, once students are more comfortable and competent with discussion, they can start to mediate any emerging dysfunctional roles on their own.

The more functional roles should be the center of attention in the EFL classroom. Bales (1969) argues that task roles are the most important. Some of the task roles outlined by Benne and Sheats (1948) include Initiator, Information and Opinion Seeker, Information and Opinion Giver, Elaborator, Coordinator, Orienter, Evaluator, Energizer, Procedural Technician, and Recorder. These roles require simplification for use in English language classes.

Another source of group role research that is both more recent and more relevant to those using group discussion as a learning tool is Soranno (2010b). She advocated the use of three different roles for use with three or more participants in group discussions: a "facilitator" (p. 84) to perform duties such as asking questions, probing a comment/idea in-depth, paraphrasing for clarification, referring back to earlier comments, giving positive reinforcement, encouraging quieter members, and summarizing; one or more "participants" (p. 85) for providing one or two topics for discussion, providing insights and questions, giving answers to posed questions from the facilitator, and actively listening and interacting; and a "recorder" (p. 85) to perform duties such as writing participants' topics, providing a written summary and synthesis of ideas, and also playing the role of participant as much as possible.

Specific approaches suggested by Soranno (2010a & 2010b) to those assigned to a facilitator role, as she defines it, are to keep the meeting focused on the topic by pointing out when the discussion has drifted or by restating the original topic; to clarify and summarize contributions, to state problems in a constructive way, to suggest procedures for moving a discussion along, and to avoid judgments, criticisms, assertive behavior, or lengthy comments. This role embodies many of the task and social roles outlined by Benne and Sheats (1948).

At first glance it may seem that the role of facilitator as defined above bears most of the responsibility for effective group discussion, but this is not true. What is progressive about Soranno's (2010a & 2010b) model is that the burden of supplying the content for the discussion rests not with the facilitator, but rather with members who have roles that are traditionally considered less crucial; the regular participants. This is a great way to diffuse responsibility in class discussions. Her method, however, was originally designed for use with graduate-level, native English speakers. In that situation it is much easier to imagine a successful, completely peer-facilitated discussion. In first-year Japanese undergraduate EFL classes, it is the teacher who will likely supply discussion topics and questions, even in CLIL or CBI contexts. Although the work

of facilitating discussions can be assigned to certain roles, the instructor will probably contribute as a facilitator as well.

This is not to say that EFL students cannot or should not completely facilitate their own discussions. Getty (2014) attempted a “silent teacher” approach, and although students persisted in looking to her for guidance and answers, many students were able to interact when asked to discuss with one another without detailed instructions from the teacher. However, eventually she decided to build up to teacher-free discussions more gradually, as students reported anxiety and wanted more teacher feedback and instruction. She found that the more groundwork she laid out at the beginning, the more successful peer-facilitated discussions appeared to be. An example of such groundwork (scaffolding) is having students prepare discussion questions in advance and going over the appropriateness of questions and offering suggestions for improvement prior to the discussion.

Assignment of Roles in the EFL Context

In contexts where learners are both new to discussion and the English language, roles should probably be defined and assigned (possibly at random) by the teacher. Defining and assigning responsibilities in beginner discussion groups empowers students with the knowledge and experience necessary to facilitate discussions completely on their own once they have gained a certain degree of discussion proficiency.

Full peer-facilitation with students in early attempts at class discussions is best avoided. In Japanese university settings, students generally require training in how to discuss or setbacks and frustration can ensue. At the very least, assigning students responsibility gradually over the course of many discussion opportunities provides essential scaffolding.

Regarding the ideal size of a discussion group, instructors need to balance the need for multiple views with the need to maximize student participation, engagement, and opportunities to speak English. My preference is groups of three to five students, ideally four, and to assign at random distinct roles. Group members and the roles they hold can be rotated during class, as repeating the same discussion content with different people can develop fluency and confidence. The functions of these roles and English phrases appropriate to each role are explained to students before most discussions. In strictly EFL classes (as opposed to CLIL), topics for discussion either touch on themes covered in other

courses taught concurrently, make use of topics used in the actual course, or consist of everyday relevant topics familiar to students.

The simplified roles used are:

1. Leader (task oriented): Initiates and closes a discussion with a summary and also facilitates.
2. Moderator (social and task-oriented): Facilitates by making sure everyone speaks, the topic(s) is/are explored, and the discussion stays on point.
3. Timekeeper (task-oriented): Makes sure the discussion follows an appropriate pace, reminds group when time is nearly up, and prompts the leader to summarize.
4. Recorder/Reporter (task-oriented): Takes minutes of the discussion and may present a summary of the discussion to non-members in follow-up activities.
5. Language Monitor (task-oriented): Encourages use of English, tracks non-English use, records anything that was difficult for members to express in English, reports tracking results to Recorder/Reporter. (Any ideas that were difficult to express can be referred to the teacher.)

The roles above borrow from Benne and Sheats (1948), as indicated by the role type in parenthesis. Most roles are task-oriented, which is consistent with Bales' (1969) view that task roles should take precedent. The roles can be combined or further divided; the Timekeeper and Language Monitor could be combined, and the Reporter/Recorder role could be further divided.

Appendix A includes a handout given to students reminding them of their role responsibilities and basic phrases they can employ in each role. Students should ideally already have been exposed to much of the language before the small-group discussion work. This may not take place until after the first semester for many Japanese freshman students. They should already have internalized much of the language of Part B of the handout in particular, which includes language for more general interactions. Note also that students are not given much detail about the duties associated with their roles. Through regular discussion practice and gentle teacher encouragement, students gradually gain a sense of their responsibilities without being over-burdened with explanations and definitions.

A Further Note on Facilitation

Facilitation is concerned with making it easier for group members to understand each other's point of view. A facilitated discussion is one in which a

facilitator keeps in mind the group's values and objectives while guiding members through the discussion. The facilitator provides processes for thinking about an issue and for creating effective group participation (Hogan, 2003). Effective facilitation encourages participation from all participants rather than relying on someone with expertise or charisma to control the discussion content. A facilitator should ideally be in tune with the needs of the participants and help them understand why they are there, treat participants equally, remain neutral in discussions, create an open and trusting atmosphere, actively listen to what is being said, use simple language, and be open to ideas they may not favor.

Good facilitation can lead to shared responsibility for collective learning, giving learners more investment in the outcome. The term facilitator can be and often is used as a separate role title, one that carries social in addition to task-oriented characteristics. However, it can be hard to account for if assigned as a role to students. Other roles have some form of obvious accountability when the task is well-designed, but it may be difficult to get students to facilitate. Indeed, Soranno (2010a) notes that facilitation of group discussion rarely happens automatically. The job of facilitator may therefore have to be given to a certain group role or roles. Interestingly, Benne and Sheats (1948) did not list facilitator as a role title in any of their group role categories, but it would seem that some of the duties of a facilitator appear in their roles of Initiator, Information and Opinion Seeker, as well as Gate Keeper. In the simplified model I use (see above), facilitation is ascribed to the Leader and Moderator roles, knowing that these individuals may need extra assistance from the teacher during discussion.

In the ideal small group discussion with no pre-assigned roles, participants facilitate, collectively or via an individual who steps up to the task. In the EFL classroom, however, facilitation will likely need to be assigned to someone, either as a separate role or part of another role, who is then assisted by the teacher if and when necessary. As previously stated, for learners new to group discussions, facilitating any of Benne and Sheats' (1948) dysfunctional roles that can surface (particularly dominating or withdrawing) might be best left to the instructor.

Preparatory Activities for Discussion Work

Before delving into group discussions in beginner communicative English classes, teachers can further scaffold learning by using preparatory activities. One such activity that has produced some success

for me is assigning opinions to students in addition to roles. This is done so learners can focus on acquiring a degree of mastery over phrases appropriate to their role, with less concern over the content of ideas and the syntax of what is being said. This also provides a model for future discussions with student-generated ideas in that clear linguistic support for giving opinions is supplied. Additionally, students can get a sense of what it is like to defend positions with which one does not necessarily agree (useful for debating skills) and learn some new vocabulary in the process.

Initially, using assigned opinions results in unnatural interactions where students simply take turns reading off their prompts round robin style. However, gradually, with practice using different topic sets and feedback from the teacher, discussions start to become more fluid and natural. Appendix B shares two example sets of opinions given to groups of four students. These ideas, though edited, are not the author's original work. Sadly, the original source is unknown. The topics do lend themselves more to Part B of Appendix A (more general-use English phrases) than Part A (role-based English phrases), but it is a start and does exemplify one way that discussion activities can be scaffolded.

An obvious way to build up to small group discussions for learners who are not prepared for it is to start with pair work. Pair work allows for more individual talk time, less performance pressure in front of peers, fewer instances of potential turn-taking confusion, and structured practice that is easier for students to follow. Teachers can assign a discussion topic to each pair and assign the simplified Leader role above (with phrases) to one student. Pairs can exchange roles with new topics. Initiating, moderating, and facilitating tend to be challenging for Japanese students, so focusing on these types of tasks in pair work first is logical. Having one student report on the discussion results to someone from a different pair can help to keep participants engaged and accountable.

Conclusion

Providing defined roles and phrases appropriate to those roles can initiate students into partaking in small group discussions. An understanding of the typical roles that emerge naturally in group discussions along with their classification is useful in assisting teachers to decide what kinds of roles best fit their situation. To be held accountable for their individual participation in the discussion, students benefit from clear instructions and a clearly defined role. Instructors should be willing to be flexible,

experiment, and facilitate group discussions in the beginning, but also willing to gradually diffuse responsibility to students such that they are more empowered to take direction in their own learning. For beginning EFL learners, especially those coming from a school culture where class discussion as a mode of learning is not ubiquitous, the process of learning how to discuss to improve both general and L2 communication skills can be arduous but is achievable with regular, scaffolded practice including guidance and encouragement from the instructor.

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Appendix A

Discussion roles and typically associated phrases

PART A: Role Responsibilities and Useful Phrases

LEADER

Signals the start of a discussion and describes the task. Examples:

Shall we begin? Shall we get started?

Today, we need to discuss two points. The first is . . .

Let's begin by sharing our ideas about . . .

We're here today to talk about . . .

Let me begin by giving some background.

Signals the end of a discussion. Examples:

I think we've covered everything.

Let's finish here.

Summarizes a discussion. Examples:

So, we've decided that . . .

So, we have all agreed that . . .

I'd like to summarize the main points of our discussion.

To summarize our views, X feels (that) . . . Y thinks (that) . . . and Z believes (that) . . .

MODERATOR

Makes sure everyone speaks

What do you think, Minako?

What is your view on this, Keisuke?

How do you feel about this, Shintaro?

What do you believe . . ., Yuka?

What do you think about Keita's suggestion?

Tomoyo, do you have anything to add?

Makes sure the topic(s) is/are explored. Examples:

Any other comments/ views/ opinions?

Would anyone else like to comment on this?

I think we need to talk more about ~.

We've covered ~, so let's move on to ~.

Keeps participants focused. Examples:

That's an interesting idea, Tomoko, but maybe we can talk about that another time.

I see your point, Saya, but let's stay on topic.

Excuse me, everyone. This is all interesting, but I think we need to stay more on track.

TIME-KEEPER (uses a timer)

Makes sure the discussion follows an appropriate pace. Examples:

I'm afraid we're running short on time. Let's go on to . . . and come back to this later.

Our time is running out, I'm afraid. Let's move on to . . .

Sorry, everyone, I have to manage our time. Shall we move onto the text topic/question/issue?

Reminds group when time is nearly up. Examples:

We only have a few minutes left.

Excuse me everyone, our time is almost up.

Prompts the leader to summarize. Examples:

Leader, would you care to summarize our discussion?

I think it's time for a summary.

RECORDER (takes notes)

Takes minutes (notes) of the discussion. The recorder may need to use control language (see PART B) to ensure points are recorded. Examples:

Sorry, Shiho, could you please repeat what you said about . . . ?

Excuse me, Kazuki, could you please say that again?

REPORTER

Presents a summary of the discussion to non-members (The reporter typically uses the past tense (often reported speech) and phrases common to the leader. He/she can use the notes taken by the recorder).

Examples:

Daichi said (that) . . .

According to Mr. Green, . . .

We agreed that . . .

In our group, we thought that . . .

LANGUAGE MONITOR (takes notes)

Encourages use of English. Examples:

Shunsuke, let's stick to English only.

Shotaro, can you please say that in English?

Oh no, I think we're forgetting to stay in English!

Let's do our best to communicate in English, everyone.

Tracks non-English use & records anything that was difficult for members to express in English.

Reports tracking results to Recorder/ Reporter.

Examples:

These are things I thought that members could not easily say in English.

This is what I wrote down about things that were difficult for us to say.

EVERYONE

All discussion members should be active in expressing ideas, maintaining a discussion, agreeing and disagreeing, interrupting, and clarifying. Examples:

In my opinion, . . .

I think/ feel/ believe (that) . . .

What about . . . ?

I'm afraid I don't see it that way.

Actually, I don't quite agree.

Exactly! I think so too.

Yes, I also believe that.

I'm sorry to cut in, but . . .

Could you tell me more?

Excuse me for interrupting, but . . .

PART B: Useful Phrases for General Use (used by everyone)

1) Control Language

INTERRUPTING

Excuse me, (but) . . . / Sorry, (but) . . . / Pardon me, (but) . . .

Sorry to interrupt, but . . . May I interrupt for a moment?

STATING YOUR LEVEL OF UNDERSTANDING

I don't know.

(I'm afraid) I don't understand.

I didn't catch what you said.

I'm not sure what to do.

SOLICITING REPETITION & ASKING FOR CLARIFICATION

Pardon? / I'm sorry?

What did you say?

What did you say before . . . / after . . . ?

Could you please say that again / once more / one more time?

Could you please repeat that / what you just said / what you said earlier?

Could you please speak slower / speak more slowly / slow down?

Could you please speak louder / speak more loudly / speak up?

How do you pronounce this / that?

How do you spell . . . ?

SOLICITING MEANING

Could you please explain . . . ?

Could you please say that another way?

What does . . . mean?

How do you say . . . in English / Japanese?

RESTATING & SOLICITING RESTATEMENT

Is . . . the same as . . . ? Did you say . . . or . . . ?

Did you say . . . ? Do you mean . . . ?

2) Rejoinders

EXPRESSING HAPPINESS

That's great!	Fantastic!
Terrific!	Super!
Wonderful!	That's excellent news!

EXPRESSING SADNESS

That's too bad.	That's a shame.
Oh, no.	That's a (real) pity.
I'm sorry to hear that.	

EXPRESSING INTEREST

I see.	Oh, really?
That's nice.	Uh-huh/Um-hum
Oh, yeah?	

EXPRESSING SURPRISE

You're kidding!	You're pulling my leg!
I can't/don't believe it!	You're joking!
No way!	You can't be serious!
Oh, really!	Wow!
Holy cow! (<i>slang</i>)	You're not serious!

3) Phrases to Confirm (*Most phrases can be amended with "so far".*)

Are you (still) with me?
 Am I being clear?
 Is that clear?
 Is everything clear?
 OK so far?
 Do you follow (me)?
 Are you following (me)?
 So far, so good?
 Is everyone with me?
 Have you got it?
 Do I make sense?
 Am I making (any) sense?
 Do you get my point?
 Are you getting my point?
 Am I getting my point across?
 Is everyone OK?
 Do you understand what I'm saying?
 Do you get what I what I'm trying to say?
 Do you catch what I'm saying?
 Do you catch my drift? (*slang*)
 Clear as mud? (*slang*)

Appendix B

Examples of pre-made opinions

TOPIC 1 - Foreign Language Study in High School: Compulsory or Optional?

OPINION 1: *Foreign language study should be compulsory in high school.*

REASON: Foreign languages are important for the individual pupil. Employers value people who are able to speak more than one language. Learning a language will therefore help students get good jobs when they are older. It will also increase their understanding of other cultures.

OPINION 2: *Foreign language study should be optional in high school.*

REASON: Many young people are hardly able to do simple sums or read and write in their own language. More time should be spent on these basic skills, not foreign languages. Not all workers need to know foreign languages. There is therefore no point in making everyone learn them.

OPINION 3: *Foreign language study should be compulsory in high school.*

REASON: The more languages someone can speak, the more places they can work. Foreign language skills help companies do business with other countries. Since languages are important for the economy, governments should make all young people learn them.

OPINION 4: *Foreign language study should be optional in high school.*

REASON: It should be up to the individual to decide what is useful for them to study. A pupil may not want a job that would need a foreign language. It is wrong for the state to tell people what is important for them. Cultural understanding can be gained in other subjects.

TOPIC 2 - Changing the Voting Age to 16: Good Idea or Bad Idea?

OPINION 1: *The voting age should be dropped to 16.*

REASON: 16-year-olds are mature enough to make important decisions such as voting. Their bodies have matured. They have been educated for at least 10 years, and most have some experience of work as well as school. All this allows them to form political views and they should be allowed to put these across at election time.

OPINION 2: *The voting age should NOT be dropped to 16.*

REASON: 16-year-olds are not mature enough. The large majority still live at home and go to school. By 18 they have become much more independent and are able to make their own way in the world. Their political views are likely to be more thoughtful compared to 16-year-olds, who may just copy the opinions of others.

OPINION 3: *The voting age should be dropped to 16.*

REASON: Many 16-year-olds have other rights, such as leaving school or leave home, the rights to have sex, to marry and to have children. If young people are considered old enough to make important choices about their own future, why can't they have a say in deciding the future of their country?

OPINION 4: *The voting age should NOT be dropped to 16.*

REASON: Just because 16-year-olds have the right to do some things, it doesn't mean that they should use them. If all 16-year-olds left home at 16 and started families, it would be considered a disaster. Because voting is so important, it should be one of the last rights to be gained.

[JALT PRACTICE] TLT INTERVIEWS



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Welcome to the September / October issue of TLT Interviews! In this edition, we bring you a fascinating interview with Karl Maton, the creator of Legitimation Code Theory (LCT). Professor Maton sat down with Thomas Amundrud, Ayumi Inako, and Dominic Edsall to talk about LCT and its application in language education. Karl Maton is a professor of sociology at the University of Sydney, Director of the LCT Centre for Knowledge-Building, and a visiting professor at Rhodes University and the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa. His most recent books include: *Knowledge and Knowers* (2014, Routledge), *Knowledge-building* (2016, Routledge), *Accessing Academic Discourse* (2020, Routledge), and *Studying*

Science (2021, Routledge). Thomas Amundrud holds a PhD in Linguistics from Macquarie University and is an associate professor in English Education at Nara University of Education. His research interests include how language and other modes interact in classroom pedagogy. Ayumi Inako is a teacher and linguist with a PhD from the University of Technology, Sydney. She is interested in exploring how to apply discourse analysis to improve language and communication skills. Dominic Edsall is a PhD candidate at the UCL Institute of Education specializing in Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Assessment. He has over 20 years of teaching experience in the UK and Japan. So, without further ado, to the interview!