IMPLEMENTING DISCUSSION-BASED LESSONS

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What is a discussion? No one seems to define it. Lowman J. suggested: " a useful classroom discussion … consists of student comment separated by frequent probes and clarifications by the teacher that facilitate involvement and development of thinking by the whole group" [1, 159-160]. The author demystifies the complexity of education and shines a spotlight on three necessary teaching methods as 'synergy of well-being, engagement, and feedback', in other words, Lowman J. is helping teachers focus on what matters – to change the life of each student, and seek coherent ways of academic recovery in a post-pandemic world to support students.

In a time when our schools and communities need teachers more than ever, we provide a road map for new teachers to begin their profession focusing on the most important aspects of the work and give them practical advice for implementing recommendations.

Like all teaching methods, discussion approaches have their limitations as well as their strengths. Teaching discussions is a must do for any teacher looking to build a strong classroom community where all voices are heard, students connect with the teacher and with each other, and take control of their learning. In the state of our current world, students may feel more disconnected from each other face-to face than ever.

Much of our time as language teachers is taken up teaching particular features of phonology, lexis or structure: presenting them, getting students to practice and testing them, etc. But when our students have learnt them, we have the problem of getting them to use their knowledge for actual purposeful verbal communication. This side of language teaching has come into greater prominence in recent years; instead of the idea, associated with the audio-lingual school, that students should use language in more or less controlled exercises until they have mastered its structures to a high degree, and only then begin to talk freely, it is now accepted that some sort of dynamic, individual and meaningful oral practice should be included in English lessons right from the beginning. And this is seen as important at early stages – how much more at the advanced. Most courses now emphasize the importance of fostering learners' ability to communicate in the foreign language rather than their skill in constructing correct sentences, and there is a corresponding increase in the time and energy allotted to communication exercises in the classroom.

It is, however, worth noticing here that if communication practice is one of the most important components of the language learning/teaching process, it is also one of the most problematical. It is much more difficult to get learners to express themselves freely than it is to extract right answers in a controlled exercises.

The most natural and effective way for learners to practice talking freely in English is by thinking out some problem or situation together through verbal interchange of ideas; or in simpler terms, to discuss. Using the word 'discussion' is rather broadly to include anything from the simplest question-answer guessing process, through exploration of situations by role-play, to the most complex political

and philosophical debates; we include not only the talking but also any reading and writing that may be entailed.

In order for communication to be successful, we have to structure the discourse in such a way that the listeners or readers will understand it. It is worth pointing out that spoken English tends to have a higher proportion of formulaic lexical phrases than written English [2, 227].

Live conversation is a spontaneous creation and has a dynamism that no writer can duplicate exactly. One striking element in the conversation above is the large number of questions, including the attached question "don't you think". Another aspect of conversation dynamics is the building of one comment on another so part of our speaking proficiency depends upon our ability to speak differentially, depending upon our audience and upon the way we absorb their reactions and respond to them.

The main objective of a discussion in a foreign language course may be *efficient fluency practice*, whether it is solving a problem, exploring the implications of an idea, constructing proposals or whatever, is to be taken seriously and the results respected by the teacher and students alike [3, 63]. Language, in short, is always means to an end – we cannot expect proper use of the means if we do not supply a reasonable end. Hence *achieving an objective* in itself must form one of our aims in holding discussions. As language teachers, we may see this as more or less secondary, but never negligible; and for our students at least it should be central thought focus during talking.

Learning from content may be another aim; in many discussions there is much to be learnt from what is said: information may be acquired, for example, or new points of view considered. And, of course, we may wish to foster another kind of learning: learning how to participate constructively and cooperatively in a discussion. This involves *clear, logical thought* on the one hand and *debating skills* on the other. By clear, logical thought the ability to generalize from examples is meant, or the converse, to draw analogies, judge priorities, infer causes and so on. Debating skills include listening to what someone else has to say, not interrupting, speaking relevantly and clearly.

For our purposes, a discussion that works is primarily one in which as many students as possible say as much as possible. We are not denying that oral comprehension is as important as speaking – or more so – but listening can be done by all the class simultaneously, whereas only a limited number of students can talk at one time; and talking, therefore, is liable to be practiced less.

A further characteristic of a successful discussion is the apparent motivation of the participants. One of the strongest outside sources of motivation is *the goal,* which students perceive themselves to be learning for. Frequently this is provided by a forthcoming exam, and in this respect it is no surprise to note that teachers often find their exam classes more committed than other groups who do not have something definite to work forward.

The next external source of motivation is *the society* we live in. We should not underestimate a student's natural *curiosity.* At the beginning of a term, most students have at least a mild interest in who their new teacher is and what it will be like to be in his /her lessons. The initial motivation is precious. When students feel that teacher has little interest in them, they will have little incentive to remain motivated.

Nothing motivates like success. Nothing demotivates like continual failure. It is a part of the teacher's art; therefore, to try to ensure that students are successful, because the longer their success continues, the more likely they are to stay motivated to learn.

However, success without effort does not seem to be that motivating. If everything is just too easy, students are likely to lose their respect for the task of learning. The same is true if success is too difficult to attain. What students need to feel is a real sense of *achievement*, which has cost them something to acquire but has not bankrupted them in the process. The necessity to actually formulate reasonable, tactful and helpful answers (the task) forced the participants to delve deeply and carefully into problems involved; and through particular case they found themselves discussing general values and sources of speech activity [4].

Each task consists of a thinking process and its outcome in the form of a tangible result. Here, the thinking – as it often does – involves an aspect of problem-solving: in this case, how to get someone else to do what you want; and its most simple and obvious implication is the use of speech.

The kinds of thinking involved can be described in terms of logical relationships and processes: generalization, exemplification, analysis, synthesis, evaluation, contrast, analogy, comparison, priority, cause, reason, purpose, result, inference, implication, interpretation, summary, amplification, alternativity. This is by no means a definitive list of possible thinking processes.

It is not enough just to think out a problem and explore the ramifications of a conflict: the results must be written down, ticked off, listed, sketched, or recorded in some way – some kind of conclusion must be set down in a form that can be presented to a teacher and the rest of the class. This serves several purposes. *Firstly,* it focuses and defines what the group has to do; it contributes the end product of the talking. *Secondly*, it provides a clear signal that the group has finished; there is no excuse for saying 'we've finished' before completing the task, or for uncertainty or disagreement between participants as to whether they have in fact completed what set out to do. *Thirdly*, it provides a basis for *feedback*, an important aspect of the administration of such discussions [5].

Part of teacher's job is to set an *appropriate level of challenge* for the students [6]. This means setting tests that are not too difficult or too easy, and involving students in learning tasks they can succeed in. It also means being able to guide students towards success by showing them how to get things right next time.

In most cases a brief full class session is needed and some sort of rounding-off summary by the teacher. It is most important not to leave the problems set hanging in the air, but supply all the necessary solutions, answer queries as far as possible, and give students time and scope for exploring misunderstandings and differences that come out of comparing results.

So, teaching discussions involves the heart of the teacher connecting with the heart of each student they may encounter in a student's academic journey to help students meet their goals.

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