One for All: Observations on Classroom Communities
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ABSTRACT
This paper is a reflection on the group dynamics and behaviour of students and the instructor in two level 4 classes at Rikkyo University's Center for English Discussion Class (EDC). Based on entries made in a teaching journal during the 2018/19 fall semester, the roles assumed by students of a variety of apparent English proficiency levels are discussed, along with the results of instructor interventions carried out in response to observations recorded in the journal. In particular, student L1 use, the notion of 'meta-discussion' skills and their potential place in EDC lessons are considered.

INTRODUCTION
As part of the professional development program at the Center for English Discussion Class (EDC) at Rikkyo University, all first-year instructors are asked to keep a reflective teaching journal during their second semester. As Farrell (2007) describes, the practice of journaling may aid teachers to more deeply consider their teaching practices and increase their awareness of what happens in the classroom, potentially leading to continued growth as an educator. In this paper, I discuss my observations of student behaviour and subsequent interventions in two classes during the 2018/19 fall semester. These classes were made up of level 4 EDC students, some of whom seemed exceptionally confident and fluent, while others struggled with basic sentence formation and took significantly longer to express their ideas. Following on from my first semester reflection paper, I chose to focus my journal notes on classroom environment and group dynamics, and how these might be impacted by the range of English proficiency levels present in the group, as well as any effects this might have on students' individual performance throughout the course. I was especially interested in how both stronger and weaker students engaged with and supported each other, and what impact this behaviour had on the classes' performance as a whole. As an instructor, I also wished to reflect on how my presence and actions influenced these dynamics.

Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) point out that group dynamics are particularly salient in the language classroom, resulting in a "pleasant and inspiring environment" which provides a "constant source of success and satisfaction" at one extreme, to a "nightmare" where "conflicts… rebellious attitudes… lethargy or complete unwillingness for cooperation" abound at the other (p. 3-4). The formation and maintenance of healthy classroom groups is thus a key element in the creation of positive and supportive classroom communities wherein students, teacher and subject are interwoven in a way that fosters and sustains motivation and meaningful communication (Palmer, 2007).

With this in mind, I made journal entries after each lesson from week 5 to week 13, primarily in the form of brief notes and comments about student behaviour, with occasional extended reflections on possible reasons underlying these observations and the effects of my actions and interventions during that lesson. I also noted down suggestions and ideas about practical ways to respond in future to issues that arose during the course of the semester. These journal entries form the basis of the following discussion here.

DISCUSSION
Initial Observations
From the outset, it was clear that students in both classes approached EDC lessons with overall positive attitudes and a high level of awareness concerning the tasks that were required in each

lesson. Group cohesiveness and acceptance, in the sense of Dörnyei and Murphey (2003), occurred rapidly, as I observed students consistently supporting and paying attention to each other while actively engaging in classroom activities. This may have been helped by the fact that some students seemed to have existing relationships with their classmates, perhaps having been in the same EDC class the previous semester. I was impressed with the level of peer-to-peer support that quickly developed and, over time, I was able to identify some key elements of the roles that students took on in the provision of this support.

Student Roles
After several weeks of intentionally noticing and recording of student behaviour, it became obvious that all class members, including those with both stronger and weaker English proficiency levels, were performing actions reminiscent of Dörnyei and Murphey's (2003) descriptions of task and group maintenance student roles. In the first instance, stronger students were generally proactive strategizers for the group. This was especially evident in discussion test lessons, when these students would be very vocal during pre-test preparation times, clarifying the discussion questions for all the test group members, reminding them which discussion skills were required, and co-operatively planning for how best to achieve appropriate use of these skills by all participants within the allotted time. During discussion tests and regular lesson discussions, stronger students also regularly prompted others to use the relevant target language phrases, either verbally or through fervent eye movement and gestures, both before and after appropriate or missed opportunities. This is consistent with a *task specialist* role, which may include 'a lot of prodding and nudging of group members to prompt them into action' in order to achieve the group's goals (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003, p. 113).

Additionally, these students would occasionally provide L1 translations of discussion questions, key vocabulary items and task instructions when it became clear that their classmates were unable to comfortably participate in the current activity. It was interesting to note that in most cases, instead of simply giving a word-for-word translation directly, it seemed that they tended to first make a general comment about or provide a paraphrase of the lexical item in Japanese, in this way helping everyone to grasp the concept in a more engaging and participatory way.

A number of group maintenance roles were also filled by stronger students, such as that of the *equaliser*, whose function is to 'make sure that everyone is included to an equal extent by… drawing out some individuals and limiting domination by others' (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003, p. 115). Some examples of specific behaviour that I observed include deference to weaker students, i.e. allowing or encouraging them to take speaking turns first or checking non-verbally with them before taking the floor themselves, and notable patience with all group members, i.e. not putting pressure on slower speakers and being prepared to sacrifice their own speaking time (and hence opportunities for discussion skill use) in order to ensure that everyone could participate in the discussion.

Over the course of the semester, I also noted many roles that were being filled by students with a weaker English proficiency level. Although these students may have been limited in the length and complexity of their contributions, it quickly became apparent that they were equal participants in the classroom community, providing valuable content and ideas in the discussions, as well as assisting all class members to sustain motivation and focus throughout the lesson. Like their more fluent classmates, these students also actively engaged in pre-discussion strategizing and clarification, often checking and confirming the task requirements and question meanings before considering how to effectively include the target language phrases. This behaviour served to not only directly benefit the weaker students, but also assist the stronger students in their

preparation by helping all group members to focus on the immediate goal before them.

In terms of group dynamics, drawing more explicit attention to shared goals also promoted group maturity, i.e. the establishment of a 'balanced, cohesive group in action, doing what it has been set up for' (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003, p. 61). In addition to these observations, I also noted that weaker students showed clear evidence of independent learning. Many of them came to class with notes and/or translations of the discussion questions and key vocabulary from the preparation tasks written in their coursebooks. Preparation such as this proved to be a useful resource, enabling all group members to engage with the topic, and I was impressed with the example it set for other students.

From a group maintenance perspective, weaker students seemed to contribute greatly to the atmosphere and attitude of the class as a whole. Many of these students appeared to be aware of their own limitations when it came to English production but were not daunted or distressed by this. Instead, they were able to accept their current ability and respond positively, even light-heartedly, to any errors they became conscious of. This stance led to a more relaxed and supportive environment, especially in comparison to other classes where small mistakes may be feared as threats which could induce anxiety and knock a student's confidence, to the detriment of their performance. Overall, the weaker students in both level 4 classes showed strong spirit and determination, encouraging each other and the entire group to perform to the best of their ability.

By assuming various roles, all students were able to participate meaningfully in their groups and support one another in the achievement of their goals. A comment from one of my journal entries reflects this: 'I can't help feeling both stronger and weaker students' actions positively affected the group's performance as a whole, as all members seemed engaged and aware of turn-taking, speaking time, the flow and repetition of ideas, and discussion skill use'. This awareness of what may be termed *meta-discussion skills*, born of a cohesive and supportive group dynamic, ultimately benefited all members of the class and assisted students to create successful EDC discussions.

Instructor Interventions

During the course of the fall semester as I continued to make regular journal entries and noticed many of the student roles mentioned above, I became interested in how my actions as an instructor may influence the group dynamics and student performance of these classes. This led me to conduct a number of intentional interventions and minor changes to my behaviour in various lessons, which I was then able to reflect upon in the weekly journal.

Given the foundational importance of interaction in group formation (Dörnyei & Murphey 2003), one of the first interventions I attempted was the purposeful grouping of specific students for each discussion. After trying several different combinations, it became evident that ensuring a mixture of stronger and weaker students appeared to have the best results. When any one group consisted of a majority of weaker students, it generally resulted in a reduction in the motivation and confidence of all group members, in some cases students openly expressed in Japanese that they were finding it too difficult to understand the task and/or content. When weaker students were grouped with a majority of stronger students, they tended to fall silent and contribute ideas minimally, if at all, even when they had been able to share some valuable opinions with a partner during the preparation stage of the lesson. When groups were well-balanced, however, all students appeared willing to support each other and cooperatively work to complete the task, even if it proved challenging for some members. One other successful grouping that I noted occurred when a discussion group of 3 students was formed where one weaker student was partnered with two stronger students. Having fewer people in the group allowed everyone to have more speaking time and, in particular, seemed to remove pressure from the weaker student to finish their turn promptly

in order to avoid denying the other participants sufficient time to take their turns.

A second intervention I conducted over the course of several lessons was allowing students increased discussion preparation time. During this time students are generally asked to compare their opinions on the relevant topic with one or two partners. Although the main purpose of this stage of the lesson is to give students the opportunity to formulate their ideas clearly and practice expressing them in English, often while incorporating the lesson's target language, it also serves as an appropriate moment for students to clarify the topic and any new vocabulary with their peers before launching into an exchange of opinions. By increasing this time by a few minutes (without overtly mentioning this in class or giving any additional instructions), I hoped to provide weaker students with a more significant opportunity to deal with any language-related questions or concerns, in the hope that their attention during the subsequent discussion would be freed to focus more on their classmates and the content of their ideas. In practice, it proved difficult to accurately record and draw conclusions as to what effects this intervention may or may not have had on students' performance, but from my observations it seemed that students reacted positively and appreciated having more pair-work and clarification time.

One final area that the journaling experience led me to focus on was my approach to and tolerance of students' use of L1 in the classroom. EDC lessons are conducted with the aim of developing student's speaking fluency and communicative ability in English and thus instructors endeavour to encourage student's use of L2 as much as possible at all times during the lesson. However, in practice, students' language use is complex and multifaceted, and instructors must continually evaluate whether students' learning is best assisted by explicitly drawing attention to L1 use and/or overtly encouraging L2 use, or whether it is more beneficial to allow some use of L1 for certain functions. Based on my reflections on these two level 4 classes, there appeared to be two specific stages of the lesson when students would most naturally move into L1: during planning or strategizing before a discussion test, and when given a reflection task after a discussion. In both of these cases, the content of students' exchanges was primarily focussed on 'meta-discussion' ideas, i.e. how to best use the target discussion skill phrases, how to ensure that all group members are able to use the target skills within the time limit, which topics to focus on and which to avoid, whether the discussion was successfully completed, and how to improve for next time. Given the evident usefulness of these meta-discussion concepts (which are not explicitly taught as target skills in EDC classes), it seemed in everyone's best interests to facilitate participation from as many students as possible in these exchanges. For class members whose English proficiency would otherwise be a barrier to meaningful engagement, allowing L1 use appeared to be the best option.

After acknowledging this, I intentionally refrained from commenting on students' choice of language during meta-discussion planning and reflection for the remainder of the semester, giving feedback instead on the content they considered. The educational benefits of allowing appropriate L1 use in EFL classrooms have been well discussed (Carson & Kashihara, 2012; Ford, 2009; Hawkins, 2015). Assuming a positive, or at least non-negative, stance towards L1 also sends crucial messages to students regarding the value of their first language and developing multilinguistic competencies. This in turn has beneficial effects on group dynamics, as all members are accepted regardless of their perceived L2 ability, and interaction is maintained without exclusion. Permitting the use of L1 for meta-discussion in EDC classes appeared to assist all students to participate in these stages of the lesson, seemingly helping them to approach the discussions and discussion tests with confidence and clarity.

CONCLUSION

Through my journal entries in the fall semester of 2018/19, I have been able to observe and reflect

on the group dynamics of two level 4 classes, and the ways that students in these classes supported each other. I was also able to consider some of the effects that my behaviour as an instructor had on the classroom community. As a result of this, there are at least two areas that I am specifically interested in exploring further.

Firstly, concerning meta-discussion skills such as planning, strategizing and reflecting on performance. In future lessons I would like to investigate ways of reducing some of the pressure on stronger students to fill the strategizer role, e.g. orchestrating discussion skill use in tests. It may be helpful to explicitly deal with these skills in EDC classes, perhaps by providing additional scaffolding or including attention-raising activities over the course of the semester. I would also be interested in adding meta-discussion planning stages to each lesson to encourage students to proactively prepare for successful discussions and discussion tests.

Secondly, journaling has raised my awareness about my own tolerance of students' L1 use in EDC lessons and how having a generous, flexible and open stance seems to most benefit everyone. For lower level classes in particular, permitting L1 use in addition to English for meta-discussion activities appears to help all class members to remain engaged with each other and the lesson, with positive effects on group dynamics and overall performance. I would be interested in expanding these reflections to include students from classes at other levels, and also consider to what extent L1 may have a place in the meta-discussion planning stages mentioned above.

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