A Strategic Discussion Plan for Critical Thinking

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Course Context
Students

- Levels based on TOEIC scores
  - Level 1 – 680 to 990
  - Level 2 – 480 to 679
  - Level 3 – 280 to 479
  - Level 4 – Below 280

Course Context
Syllabus

- Small group discussion (3-5 members)
- One class per week (14 week semester)
- Functional syllabus
  - Functional phrases = "Discussion Skills" (DS) in the curriculum

Theoretical Background
Cognitive Information-Processing

1. **Declarative knowledge stage:** learners develop knowledge of the communicative skills that allow meaning to be conveyed in a discussion context.

2. **Associative stage:** planning and practice of discussions.

3. **Procedural knowledge stage:** strategies are no longer used for discussions. The necessary skills have become automatic and habitual.

Theoretical Background
Facilitating movement through stages

Information Processing Stage

Declarative knowledge stage	→	Associative stage	→	Procedural knowledge stage

Learning Strategy

Cognitive "Functional phrase strategy"	→	Metacognitive "Functional phrase strategy" + "Discussion planning strategy"	→	Strategies have become unconscious and effortless

Research Background
The Purpose of a Small Group Discussion

➤ Group discussions inherently have a **shared purpose**

1. Solving a problem

2. Making a decision

3. Deepening the participants' mutual understanding of the topic (especially through <u>critical thinking</u>)

Research Background
Critical Thinking in the Syllabus

Group Discussion Skills (DS)	Potential type of critical thinking encouraged by the behaviour
Comparison	• CT (Exploration of alternatives) "X is good." ⟶ "Is it better or worse than Y?"
Different Viewpoints	• CT (Exploration of alternatives) "I think X is good." ⟶ "How about from Y's point of view?"
Balancing Opinions (talking about advantages and disadvantages)	• CT (Support and justification) • CT (Exploration of alternatives) "X is good." ⟶ "What are the advantages of X?" "Are the any disadvantages of X?"
Sources of Information	• CT (Support and justification) "X is good" ⟶ "How do you know about that?"

Student A

Does not understand the shared purpose

No awareness of L2 critical thinking skills

No confidence

Student B

Understands the shared purpose

Awareness of L2 critical thinking skills

Confident

Research Background
A Strategy for Planning a Discussion

➡ In order to have more effective, interactive and meaningful discussions:

1. Students need to plan for and then practice using the critical thinking behaviours/skills

2. Students must develop an awareness of the shared purpose/goals

3. Students should develop a metacognitive awareness of how all the Discussion Skills work together to fulfill the goals

Research Background
A Strategy for Planning a Discussion

- A Discussion Planning Template (DPT) was created which focuses on:

  1. The critical thinking aspects of the syllabus

  2. Group collaboration

  3. Guiding students in <u>how</u> critical thinking behaviours/skills can be <u>used in combination</u>

Discussion Topic

What to Do
With Money

What should people do or not do with their money?

Viewpoints

A married couple	An unmarried office worker	A University student	An elderly person

Comparison

Saving for an emergency	Buy things (clothes, games, skis)
Saving for a house or wedding	Travel abroad

Balancing Opinions

Saving for an emergency (+) (-)	Saving for a house or wedding (+) (-)	Buy things (clothes, games, skis) (+) (-)	Travel abroad (+) (-)

Sources of Information (Support)

Discussion Topic

The Aging Population

What are some good solutions to the aging population problem?

Viewpoints

Comparison

Balancing Opinions

(+)	(+)	(+)	(+)
(-)	(-)	(-)	(-)

Sources of Information (Support)
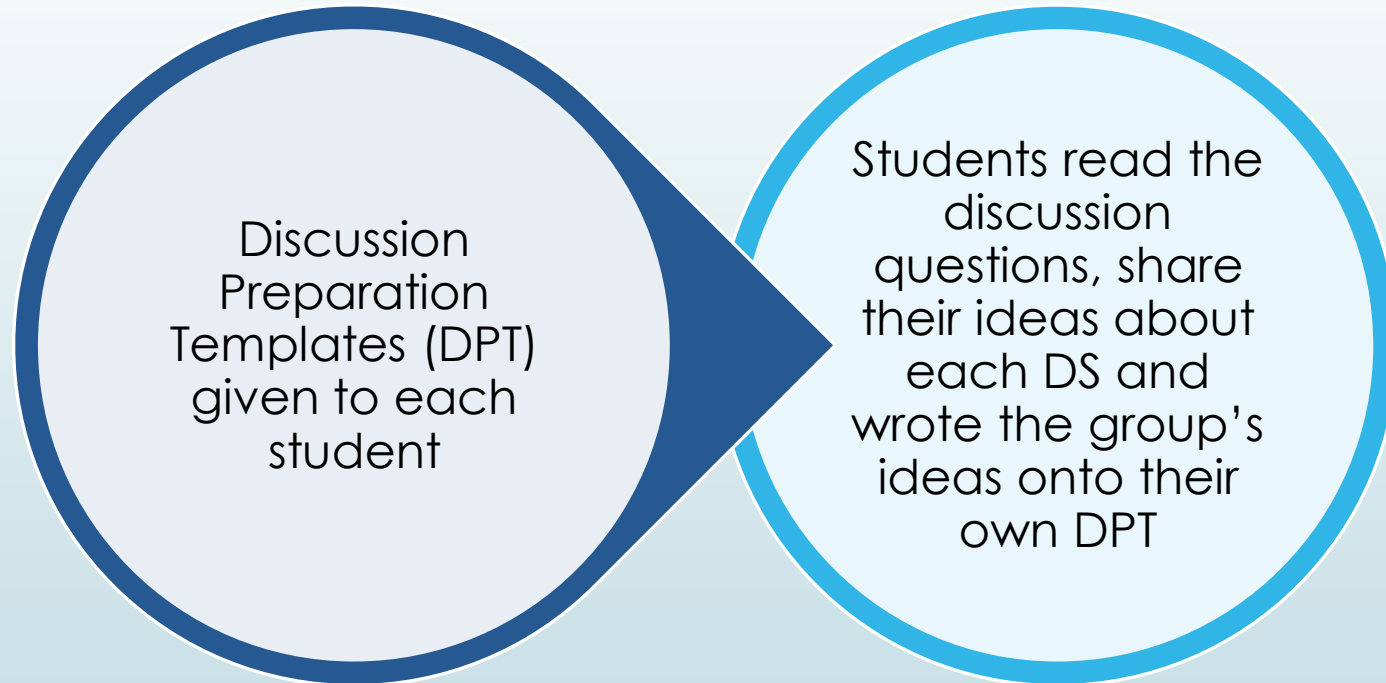
Research Summary
Research Questions

Question 1

- Do students use the taught strategy when they autonomously prepare for a discussion?

Question 2

- If so, how do they use it?

Weekly procedure for treatment groups

Discussion Preparation Templates (DPT) given to each student

Students read the discussion questions, share their ideas about each DS and wrote the group's ideas onto their own DPT

Research Summary
Data Collection

- Treatment group
  - 64 students comprising 18 discussion groups

- Control group
  - 14 students comprising 4 discussion groups

Research Summary
Data Collection – Pre-Discussion Note Making

Final week discussion preparation task

Groups were asked to choose one discussion topic from a list of topics
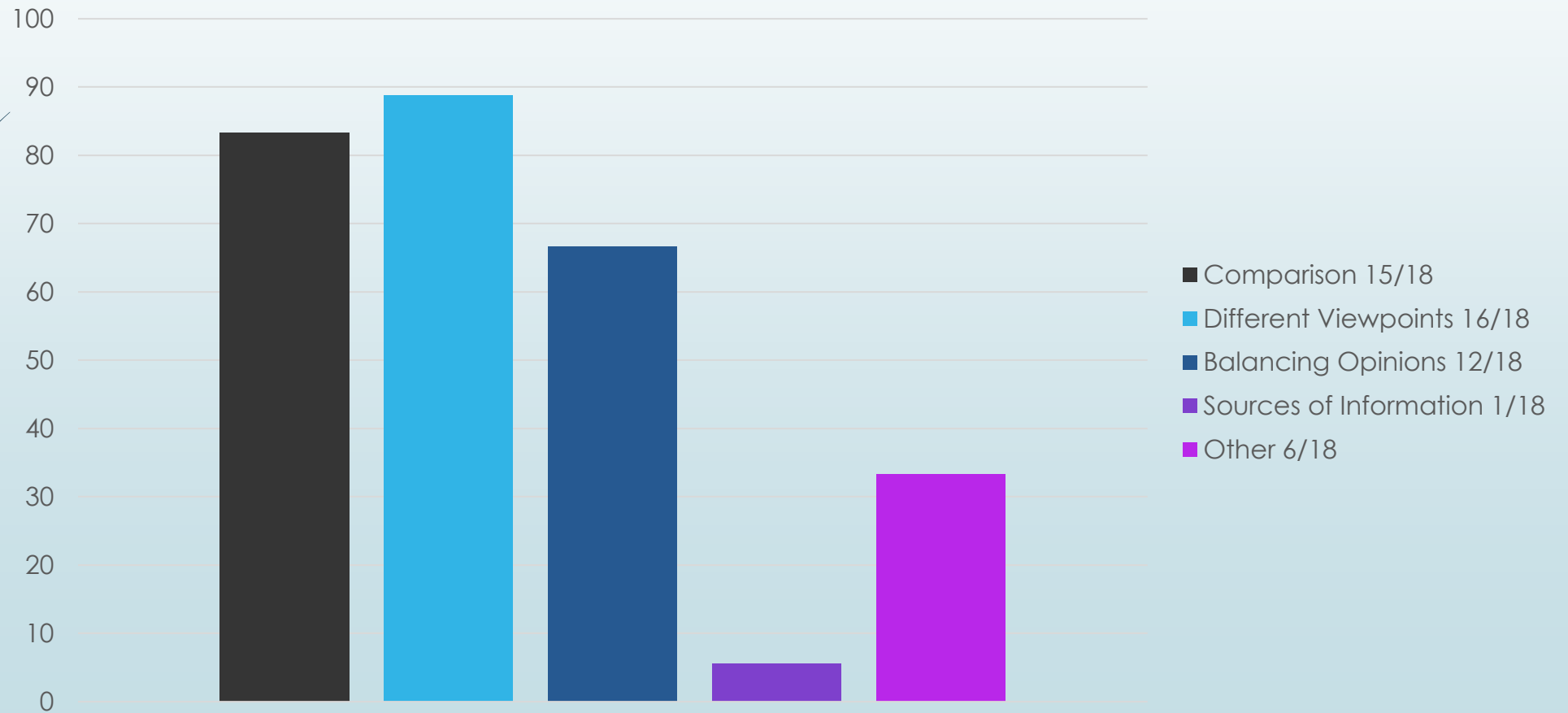
Students wrote down the question they had chosen on a pre-discussion note making sheet

Students shared ideas about the topic and wrote down their notes in a blank space

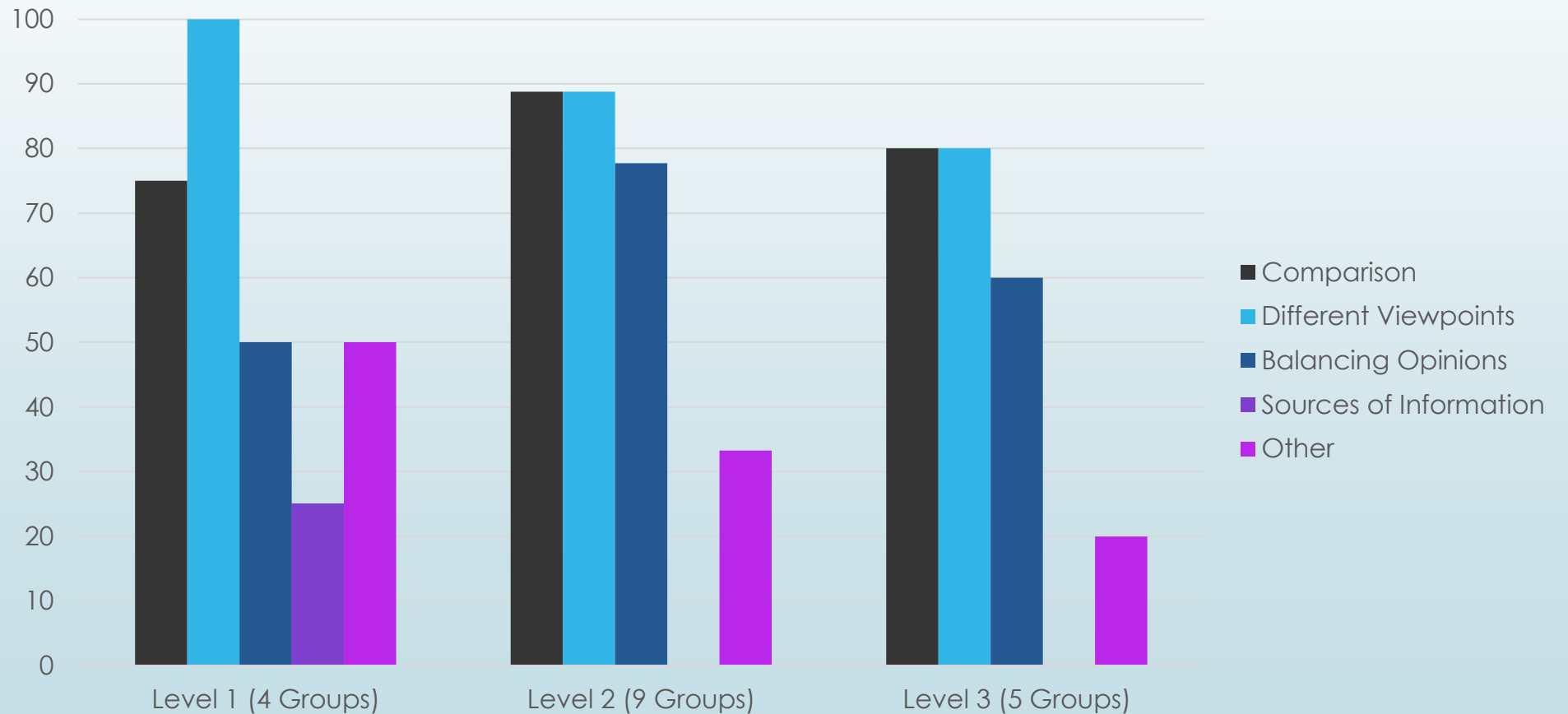# Research Summary
Results – Pre-Discussion Note Making

"Discussion Skills" noted during the planning stage
(18 Treatment Groups - All Levels)

Legend:
- Comparison 15/18
- Different Viewpoints 16/18
- Balancing Opinions 12/18
- Sources of Information 1/18
- Other 6/18

Research Summary
Data Collection – Post-Discussion Survey Question

- Post-Discussion Survey Question

    "In your opinion, what are the most important things to think about and do in order to have a good discussion?"

- Answers were written in English or Japanese

- An open question without multiple choice answers – students came up with the answers on their own

Research Summary
Results – Post-Discussion Survey Question

Strategies mentioned in responses (treatment group)	# of students (n=64)
Listen actively	29 (45%)
Think/talk about different viewpoints *	27 (42%)
Think/talk about personal opinion	14 (22%)
Think/talk about advantages/disadvantages *	12 (19%)
Balance speaker turns equally	11
Study the topic before class	9
Ask questions during the discussion	9
React to the speaker	8
Agree/disagree	4
Use (unspecified) Discussion Skills	4

Conclusions
Research Question 1

- Do students use the taught strategy when they autonomously prepare for a discussion?
  - Students in all levels used the strategy to plan for critical thinking behaviours
  - Students who are not taught the strategy do not make notes related to critical thinking behaviours

- If so, how do they use it?
  - Most often to brainstorm 'comparison' and 'different viewpoints'
  - Often to brainstorm 'balancing opinions'
  - Hardly ever to brainstorm 'sources of information'
  - Some evidence for acquisition of the strategy into metacognitive awareness

Reference

- Smith, R. A. (2020) Planning to be Active: Teaching and Researching a Discussion Planning Strategy. *New Directions in Teaching and Learning English Discussion*, 8, 209-217