Planning to be Active: Teaching and Researching a Discussion Planning Strategy

Robert A. Smith

ABSTRACT

This paper describes preliminary research into the effects of a discussion planning strategy implemented during the second semester of a university English discussion class in Japan. Over a 14-week semester, 64 students comprising 18 discussion groups planned their discussions using a language use strategy (Cohen, 2011). This strategy was designed so that students could develop a metacognitive awareness of discussion as a process and thereby better organize and use certain functional phrases contained in the syllabus. In order to test the efficacy and utility of the strategy, in the final week of the semester, students chose their own discussion questions and made preparation notes autonomously. These notes were then collected and data relating to how students used the planning strategy was analysed. Data suggests that students do use the strategy to plan for discussions and there is some evidence for an influence on metacognitive awareness.

INTRODUCTION

The English Discussion Class (EDC) is a compulsory undergraduate course for first year university students based on a communicative approach. It is a unified curriculum focusing on the acquisition of a number of Discussion Skills (DS) such as Joining a Discussion, Connecting Ideas and Closing Topics, and their associated Skill phrases (e.g., "Can I start?" "Is there anything to add?" and "I (partly/totally) agree. As you said…"). Each phrase expresses a specific pragmatic function with inherent interactive or organizational intent. When used by groups of interlocutors, the phrases can create interactional patterns that form the basis of extended discussions. Each Skill phrase can thus be considered a communication strategy in and of itself. In an EDC lesson, after spending time on controlled practice, there is a shift to a freer practice stage where students form groups of three to five people and engage in discussions. Here, students are expected to continue practicing the functional language that they have been studying but produce it in a closer to real-life context. Between these two stages of the lesson, students are given time to prepare ideas for the freer practice. Discussion preparation activities that are chosen by the teacher at this point should give students the incentive to communicate meaningfully in the discussions that follow. Brown (2007) states that one of the main goals of a language teacher is to "…equip your students with a sense of what successful language learners do to achieve success…" (p. 259). The way to do this, he argues, is through what he calls *Strategic Investment.* Strategies are often used by successful language learners to achieve their learning goals and he suggests that all learners should be made aware of them. The use of strategies can facilitate the emergence of many other important aspects of learning, such as automaticity, meaningful learning, immediate extrinsic rewards and long-range intrinsic motives (Brown, 2007, p.258). After reflecting on the behaviour of students in classes from the previous two semesters, it became clear that there were students who seemed to have little difficulty in synthesizing the Skill phrases, but there were others who seemed to find this aspect of the course difficult, even after explicit instruction. In an attempt to ensure that all students understand the communicative and interactional intent of the Skill phrases and to help them synthesize these Skills, I decided to create and research a language use strategy (Cohen, 2011) in the form of a Discussion Planning Template (DPT) that students could use to plan their discussions. My two research questions were:

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

2. If so, how do they use the strategy?

Strategy instruction may be of value to EDC lessons for two reasons. Firstly, training students to use a DPT may enable students to synthesize the syllabus material more meaningfully. When writing an essay, there is a need to learn about the grammatical mechanics as well as the underlying processes of how to write a good essay. Collecting information, note-taking, outlining, drafting and revising are examples of some of these processes. Likewise, in a discussion, there is a need for some level of lexical and spoken grammatical competence as well as competence in the underlying processes involved. The Skill phrases associated with each DS in the syllabus have been chosen because they form the basic procedural knowledge students need in order to have smooth discussions. The goal of EDC lessons is to automatize this procedural knowledge (Hurling 2012). As mentioned above, every functional phrase included in the syllabus can be viewed as a communication strategy. The students' job is then to synthesize these communication strategies into a discussion. However, this is not an easy transition. Often, students will use the Skills phrases in isolation without thought for other Skill phrases that, if utilized, would enhance their communication. Griffiths (2013) acknowledges that students need to develop the skill of *orchestration*, "…the ability to use strategies effectively in combination with each other" (Griffiths, 2013, p.166). In order to do this, students need to conceptualize the discussion in broader terms. According to DeKeyser (2008), transferring automatized skill knowledge to other tasks is difficult, for example "…moving from orderly dialogue to argument with multiple interlocutors" (p.100). Another example, more relevant to the EDC context, would be moving from orderly dialogue (during the practice stage of the lesson) to discussion with multiple interlocutors (in the discussion stages of the lesson). Orderly dialogue and discussion with multiple interlocutors are clearly different tasks:

> The implication for training is that two kinds of knowledge need to be fostered, both highly specific proceduralised knowledge, highly automatised for efficient use in the situations that the learner is most likely to confront in the immediate future, and also solid abstract declarative knowledge that can be called upon to be integrated into much broader, more abstract procedural rules, which are indispensable when confronting new contexts of use (DeKeyser, 2008, p.100).

In other words, in discussion class, students need to learn: (1) how to practice the phrases in the practice stage of the lesson with the goal of automatizing procedural knowledge and (2) how to orchestrate the phrases in the discussion stage with the aid of solid abstract declarative knowledge. Without a metacognitive awareness of the expectations and objectives of the discussion stage, many students will simply transfer the orderly dialogue structure from the practice stage into the discussion stage. This may be beneficial to begin with, but ultimately, students need to learn to be more flexible and adaptable in communicative situations.

The second reason strategy instruction may be valuable to EDC lessons is that it may help to unlock aspects of critical thinking and enquiry that are inherent in certain DS. Many abstract (not related to personal opinions or discussion management) DS are difficult to connect to the textbook topics. For example, if the group is given the discussion question, "Is learning English important?" not surprisingly, students' first instinct is to think and talk about their own opinions and experiences—for example, "I think it is" or "I don't think so." Opinions of course form the basis of a discussion but in order to expand on and explore the topic in depth, more abstract critical thinking is needed. Indeed, one of the reasons to have a discussion (and not a conversation) is to think critically about the topic at hand. Amongst a range of important critical thinking skills, Leicester (2010) considers (1) imagining and exploring alternatives and (2) support, justification

and evidence as two of the most important. Four of the DS in the second semester syllabus seem to directly relate to critical thinking, considering Leicester's (2010) definition. The DS of Comparison and Different Viewpoints have the potential to encourage imagination and exploration of alternatives. The DS of Balancing Opinions (discussing advantages and disadvantages) and Sources of Information have the potential to encourage students to support their ideas with reliable evidence and justify them if need be. As these four DS are crucial to critical thinking but difficult for some students to combine in a discussion, they were the skills chosen to include in the DPT. If students learn how best to synthesize these four critical thinking DS, the true value and purpose of the discussion should become more apparent to the individual and the group.

MATERIALS

Griffiths (2013) asserts that there are four main elements that underpin successful strategy instruction. Based on an examination of the existing literature and on successful strategy instruction programmes, she argues that strategy instruction should (1) *raise awareness* of available strategies from which students can choose the strategies that suit their needs, (2) include *explicit teaching* of strategies so that students can transfer new strategies they learn to different learning tasks, (3) *implicitly embed* strategies in the content and (4) include maximum opportunities to *practice* the strategies they have learnt until they become automatic (Griffiths, 2013, p.162). The development of the skill of *orchestration* outlined above, was also an important consideration when designing the materials.

As well as the aforementioned theoretical considerations, DPT were designed with four other points in mind that directly relate to the syllabus being taught. The first point is that the category names of the DS described above—Comparison, Different Viewpoints, Balancing Opinions, and Sources of Information—appeared on the template (Appendix A) so that students could get a sense of how the DS relate to each other and therefore orchestrate the DS. However, target language (function phrases) associated with the DS were not written on the template. The reasoning behind this was that when using notes made for a specific DS, students would have to recall the textbook phrase or a similar functional phrase from memory in order to express their notes, which could facilitate the acquisition of those phrases. The second point is that discussion topics from the textbook were used, but the discussion questions written in the textbook were often adapted to ensure that comparison of ideas could occur. For example, the textbook question "What types of Japanese pop culture are good to share with other countries?" was changed to "What types of Japanese pop culture are *best* to share with other countries?" Thirdly, preparation questions were included in the template in an attempt to ensure that ideas emerging from the group brainstorming were appropriate for each DS. Finally, the DPT were scaffolded over the semester. Templates from weeks 2 to 4 were given to students with DS ideas fully completed and the students simply had to comprehend the notes in order to use them. As the semester progressed and the DS were gradually introduced according to the syllabus order, the sections of the template that included the DS that was being introduced was left blank. In that week, students were then encouraged to brainstorm that particular DS. By week 12 the students were receiving blank templates and had the opportunity to brainstorm as many of the DS sections as they could. The DS of Sources of Information did not have an associated space for making notes. This was because use of this Skill is highly context dependent and brainstorming this Skill as a group seemed redundant. However, the Skill is still included in the template so that students are aware of its importance to the discussion as a whole.

PROCEDURE

The DPT was implemented during the discussion preparation stage of every weekly lesson. After the practice stage has finished, DPT (Appendix A) were given to each student. The teacher instructed students to read the discussion questions, share their ideas about each DS and write the group's ideas onto their own DPT. They were also encouraged to think about and ask each other the preparation questions written on the DPT (see the third point from the Materials section above). Approximately four to seven minutes were given for students to do this depending on the complexity of the topic, the week in which it was done, and the level of the class. In the last week of the semester, for research purposes, the students did not receive a DPT. Instead, a sheet of paper with instructions and a blank space for note making (see Appendix B) was given to them.

When first introducing the DPT to students, some instruction in how to use the DPT is necessary. Students should be advised (in level specific language) that the DPT is a representation of the discussion as a whole. It is a guide for the discussion and how all the DS should be incorporated into the discussion. It should be pointed out that the DS written on the template are the same as the DS used in the EDC textbook and in order to discuss the ideas they write on the DPT, the phrases in the textbook or similar function phrases can be used. However, the target DS introduced in that week is still the main focus of that lesson and an important practice point of the discussion. Particularly in the initial few weeks of the semester, some groups required ongoing instruction and feedback regarding how to best use the DPT. For example, during preparation, some groups had trouble relating the things they were comparing to the viewpoints they brainstormed. In week 6, one question students discussed was, "Is social media more beneficial for meeting new people or learning?" When brainstorming some possible viewpoints, students needed to be guided with questions such as "Who might want to meet new people?" to which the students could then imagine different viewpoints—a freshman university student or an exchange student for instance. In this way, asking certain questions and eliciting appropriate answers or alternatively directly suggesting one or two examples seemed to help them to make this connection. Similarly, during the discussion, some groups continued to discuss simply their own opinions or each person in the group would talk about only one viewpoint thus creating a discussion which includes ideas from the group members but no sharing of opinions about each idea. In this case, these problems were covered in feedback after the discussion. Although groups did become gradually more adept at brainstorming ideas for the DPT over the course of the semester, because the class only met once a week, ongoing guidance in how to use the DPT proved necessary in all classes.

DATA COLLECTION

In the final week of the semester, data was collected from 64 students comprising 18 discussion groups in total. Data from 14 students comprising four groups who did not receive training in the DPT was also collected. In the final week of the semester, groups of three to five students were asked to choose a discussion question from a list. The questions were all related to topics that had been covered during the semester. Once discussion questions were chosen, they were instructed to write down the question they had chosen on a piece of paper (Appendix B) that was given to them. After that and before they started the discussion, they were instructed to work together to share some ideas about the topic and write down their notes for which they were given five minutes. The groups then discussed the questions for 12 to 20 minutes depending on the number of group members. When the time had elapsed, students were instructed to turn over the sheet of paper and write down, in English or Japanese, their answer to the post-discussion question written on it. Finally, these sheets containing their notes and post-discussion answers were collected and analysed.

When analysing the notes made by the group, instances of note-making related to Comparison, Different Viewpoints, Advantages and/or Disadvantages and Sources of Information were recorded, as these skills were the main focus of the DPT. Any other notes the student made regarding a personal opinion, example or experience was recorded under the heading "Other". As groups were instructed to work together to make notes, the notes were in turn analysed by group so that if an individual of the group had made a note related to a DS, this note was representative of the whole group. By and large, individual group members made very similar notes, proving that they were indeed preparing collaboratively.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overall there was enough evidence to show that students did make use of the strategy to prepare for their discussions (see Figure 1). Of the 18 groups who received training in the DPT, 15 groups (83.3%) noted Comparisons, 16 groups (88.8%) noted Different Viewpoints, and 12 groups (66.6%) noted Advantages and/or Disadvantages. Only one group (5.5%) made notes on Sources of Information and six groups (33.3%) made notes about personal opinions or experiences. All of the groups which received the strategy training included at least one DS in their notes. The four groups which did not receive strategy training did not make notes related to any specific DS covered in the syllabus.
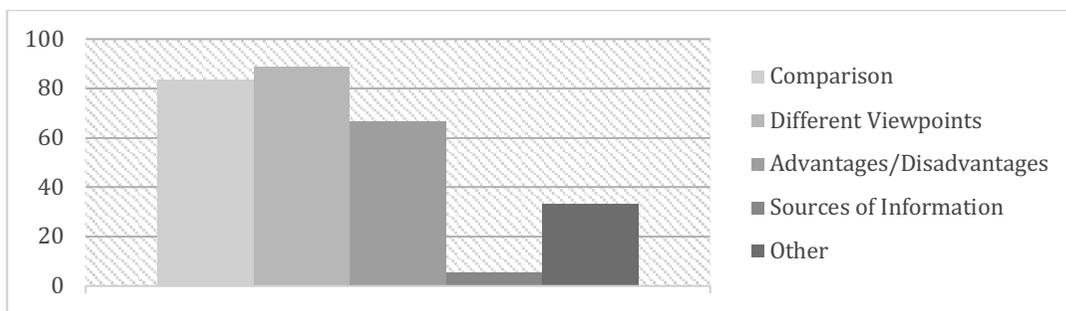

Figure 1. Percentage of DPT Discussion Skills noted by all 18 treatment groups

The data was also analysed by level (see Figure 2). Of the four level I groups (TOEIC Score 680 or above), 3 (75%) made notes about Comparison, 4 (100%) made notes about Different Viewpoints, 2 (50%) made notes about Advantages/Disadvantages and 1 (25%) made notes about Sources of Information. Two groups (50%) also included personal opinions. Of the nine level II groups (TOEIC Score 480 to 679), 8 (88.8%) made notes about Comparison, 8 (88.8%) made notes about Different Viewpoints and 7 (77.7%) made notes about Advantages/Disadvantages. Three groups (33.3%) also included personal opinions. Of the five level III groups (TOEIC Score 280 to 479), 4 (80%) made notes about Comparison, 4 (80%) made notes about Different Viewpoints and 3 (60%) made notes about Advantages/Disadvantages. One group (20%) also included personal opinions.
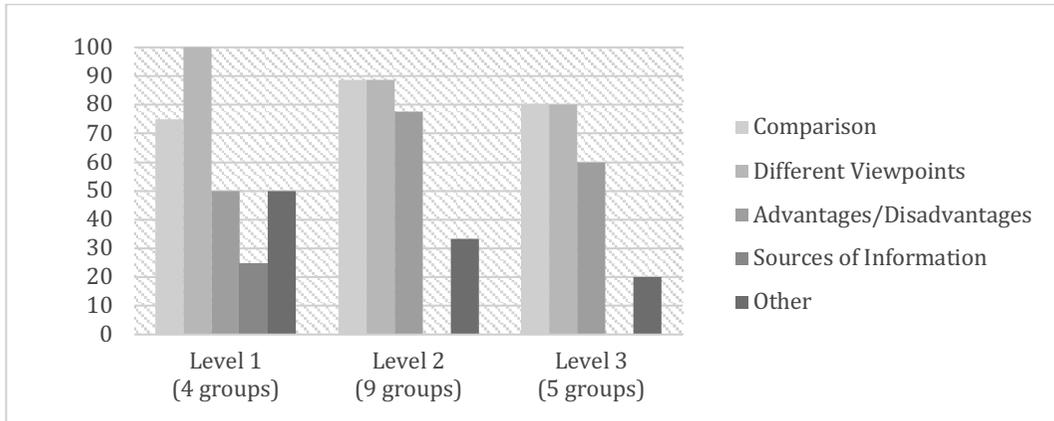
Figure 2. Percentage of DPT Discussion Skills noted by treatment groups by level

It is interesting to note that in all levels, Different Viewpoints and Comparisons were the most frequently noted DS. This could be explained by the fact that students were exposed to and practiced these two DS significantly more than the other two DS. Students started brainstorming Different Viewpoints on the DPT from week 6 of the course practicing it eight times and although the students only brainstormed comparison once, all of the discussion questions the students looked at, starting from week 2, were worded as comparison questions. Advantages/Disadvantages were not explicitly brainstormed as much (only four times) and this may account for the slightly lower rate of this type of note appearing. Preparing Advantages/Disadvantages is also a difficult proposition as the positive and negative effects will change depending on what is being compared and which viewpoint is being discussed. If either of these things change during the discussion the Advantages/Disadvantages will change accordingly. Similarly, the highly context dependent nature of using Sources of Information in a discussion may discourage most groups (except very high proficiency groups) from considering this Skill during preparation. Notes regarding personal opinion or experiences were positively correlated with proficiency level. As proficiency went up, so too did the number of notes relating to personal opinion and or experience. Additionally, notes of this type became much more detailed as proficiency level increased. Incidentally, when the note taking sheet was given to four level III groups who had not received training in the DPT, none of them made any notes about any DS from the second semester. All of these students wrote down their opinions in full sentences for the purpose of reading it to the group when it became their turn. This is indicative of how students probably prepare for EDC discussions—prepare an opinion, and then say it. Of course, this preparation strategy may be beneficial, however, if done in this way, students are preparing for a very one dimensional discussion.

It is not only when students prepare for a discussion that they need to think about the DS. Ideally, when students conceptualse a discussion, the DS themselves should be thought of as valuable communication strategies that can be used to successfully complete a discussion. A significant question then arises. Even if students make notes related to DS, does that also mean that the DPT affects their metacognitive awareness of the discussion process? In an attempt to collect some data on this question, students wrote short answers to a post-discussion question— "In your opinion, what are the most important things to think about and do in order to have a good discussion?" All 78 (64 treatment group and 14 control group) short answers to the post-discussion question were collated and analysed. Every action or behaviour that was mentioned by students was categorized into a specific type of strategy, tallied and recorded on a spreadsheet. Student

responses can thus be thought of as the strategies that they deem to be most important when planning for or having a discussion. Table 1 summarises the most frequent strategies that students mentioned. Two of the strategies that were listed on the DPT are among the top four strategies most mentioned. 27 students (42%) specifically mentioned thinking about Different Viewpoints in their answers and twelve (19%) included thinking about Advantages/Disadvantages. The fact that these DS were mentioned at all suggests that the DPT helped some students to incorporate these DS into their metacognitive awareness of a discussion. Giving further weight to this claim is that students who did not receive training in the DPT did not mention any specific DS in their answers to the post-discussion question. Comparisons and Sources of Information were also mentioned, but only by four students overall. Interestingly, despite the fact that 83.3% of all groups noted comparisons when preparing, only two students mentioned this in their post-discussion answers. This indicates that even though most groups were conscious of comparison during the preparation stage, the DPT did not appear to help individual students incorporate this Skill into metacognition.

Table 1. In your opinion, what are the most important things to think about and do in order to have a good discussion" – summary of most frequent student responses (* denotes specific DS)

Strategies mentioned in post-discussion student responses	# of students
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 beforehand	9
Ask questions	9
React to the speaker	8
Agreement/disagreement	4
Use (non-specific) DS	4

CONCLUSION

When compared to groups and students who did not receive training in the DPT, these findings indicate that groups which are trained in the DPT did make use of the strategy when preparing autonomously for discussions. The way the students used the strategy was fairly consistent across levels. It can be claimed, therefore, that this type of strategy training has utility and efficacy in discussion classes. The main findings from this study appear to be that:

- The DPT encouraged DS use regardless of proficiency level
- The DPT encourages students to incorporate some DS into a metacognitive strategy that they can then potentially use in any discussion

Repeated use of and ongoing guidance in how to use of the DPT seem to be the key elements to the success of this pedagogical technique. In order to further investigate the efficacy of strategy instruction and how it relates to EFL discussion classes, refinement of the current DPT in terms of ease of use and comprehensibility could be implemented. Additionally, more data on higher level groups and lower level groups should be collected. The affective influence (if any) of the DPT could also be researched. Questions regarding how the strategy may affect individual

confidence and/or motivation could be researched as well as any possible effects on group dynamics.

REFERENCES

Brown, H. D. (2007). *Teaching by Principles. An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy.* New York, NY: Pearson Education ESL.

Cohen, A. D. (2011). *Strategies in Learning and Using a Second Language.* Harlow, U.K.: Pearson.

DeKeyser, R. (2008). Skill Acquisition Theory. In VanPatten, B. & Wiliams, J. (Eds.), *Theories in Second Language Acquisition: An Introduction* (pp. 97-113). New York, NY: Routledge.

Griffiths, C. (2013). *The Strategy Factor in Successful Language Learning*. Bristol, U.K.: Multilingual Matters.

Hurling, S. (2012). Introduction to EDC. *New Directions in Teaching and Learning English Discussion*, *1*(1), 1.2-1.10.

Leicester, M. (2010). *Teaching Critical Thinking Skills*. London, U.K.: Continuum.

APPENDIX A – Example Discussion Planning Template from Week 2

APPENDIX B – Pre-discussion Note Making Sheet and Post-discussion Question
<u>**Before the discussion**</u>

Together with your group, choose a discussion topic from the "Practice" list on page 95 of your textbook. グループの人と一緒に教科書９５ページの Practice リストの中からディスカッション・トピックを決めてください。Write the question below.決まった質問を下の空欄に書いてください。

_____

Prepare for the discussion by writing some notes in the square space below. (Notes in English or Japanese are acceptable.)下の空欄を使ってディスカッションの準備をしましょう。英語でも日本語でも大丈夫ですので、自由に書いてください。

<u>**After the discussion**</u>

In your opinion, what are the most important things to think about and do in order to have a good discussion? 良いディスカッションをするためには、どのようなことを考え、行うことが最も大事だと思いますか？あなたの意見を書いてください。