

## To What Extent Do the Topics on a Japanese University Discussions Course Support Fluency Building?

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### Abstract

This paper presents research exploring teacher and student attitudes towards the topics used on a first year university discussion course in Japan. The research was designed to explore the suitability of topics as related to the key course goal of fluency, but also to gather opinion in a more general sense. Students completed qualitative surveys about the topics, answering questions related to the constructs of engagement and background knowledge. They also wrote short comments on the topics, which shows their opinions in a more qualitative way. Further to this, eight discussion course teachers were interviewed on their attitudes towards the topics. The results of the research were synthesised against the goal of fluency, and some common themes are extracted and analysed in the following paper. Among the major themes, there is strong evidence that familiarity is the most important element in a successful topic on the course. There is also evidence that student background knowledge of certain topics might be mixed, suggesting further support might be beneficial. Finally, students show evidence of content learning from discussing the topics, learning that previously might have been overlooked by faculty.

**Keywords:** *Topics, background knowledge,*

### Introduction

This paper aims to shed light on the opinions of various stakeholders on the topics used on a discussion course at a Japanese university.

When it comes to teaching speaking, it seems like there is a wealth of research published on the language and skills that are involved in speaking in various situations. While this is undoubtedly valuable, it seems that in contrast there is a scarcity of research done on the topics of conversation students discuss. Research tends to focus more on how students speak as oppose to what they speak about. However, topic selection in such classrooms is surely important. For example, if the topic does not engage students, then their motivation to speak will surely decrease. Likewise, if a topic is difficult for students then they will be less willing and able to discuss it.

However, while many teachers have probably observed such issues, specifying what these issues could be is perhaps rather complex. Discussing a topic might be difficult for students, but what makes it difficult? What kind of topics are motivating or demotivating to my students? Why do certain topics seem to work particularly well with certain students? What are students learning from discussing these topics?

Therefore, the motivation of this research is to investigate the topics used in the discussions textbooks. Firstly, to attempt to establish the suitability of the topics based on the main course outcomes. Secondly, to look at attitudes towards the topics of key stakeholders on the course in a more general sense, in order to help start investigating this under-researched area.

## Topics in Curriculum Design

Published advice on curriculum design places a high emphasis on topics (Nunan, 1988 ; Ur, 1996; Richards, 2001). For example, Ur (1996, p.90) points out that many textbooks base their syllabus around topics.

Nunan offers a survey to explore the possibility of basing content-selection on learner's interests (1988, p.148), and Deckert (2004) also suggests finding a consensus on which topics interest students. He claims this is relatively easy in homogenous classes, but can be a challenge when students come from various backgrounds and have different goals (2004, p.80). He also suggests students will appreciate a role in the selection of topics. Kouhotova (2006, p.36) suggests that using a variety of topics will maintain engagement, and cautions against using topics that are particularly abstract.

Other published works advise careful consideration of topics when drafting materials. Rubdy (2014) advises a holistic approach, recommending topics that can evoke learner interest, and that can enrich learners' knowledge and personality. Others say that the topic chosen in language classes can help students gain general and academic knowledge (Deckert, 2004, p.80).

In English for Specific Purposes, there is an ongoing debate over whether topics should be student-selected, teacher-selected or selected via negotiation between stakeholders. According to Benesch (2001, p.77), each method offers benefits. Teacher-selected topics will give students experience in fulfilling external requirements, which reflects many academic situations. Student-selected topics offer benefits to autonomy and the possibility of sharing a wider variety of information with the class, whilst negotiated topics allow students to participate in democratic decision-making, which is also a critical skill. She (2001, p.80) recommends that a flexible approach to topic selection is beneficial, and that students and teachers should be encouraged to reflect on course topics in order to build a critical discourse on the themes we use in the classroom.

Brown and Adamson (2014, p.14) advise against changing topics regularly in academic settings as this can hinder the development of ideas, and that basing studies around a single topic over a number of lessons will provide "deeper rather than broader coverage" (2014, p.16).

In Japan, a survey revealed that students view topics about both everyday life and social issues as appropriate for learning English, whereas teachers view everyday life topics as slightly more appropriate (Matsuura, Chiba, & Hilderbrant, 2001). Watanabe's (2006) study finds that Japanese High School students generally prefer casual, everyday topics over topics based on social issues. She says that this supports the government-mandated target of high school students becoming proficient in conversations about daily issues (2006, p.130).

There seems to be lack of research that focuses on how individual topics impact students, but there is literature that focuses on how a lack of knowledge of a topic can affect speaking performance. Leong and Ahmadi (2017) believe this lack of knowledge to be detrimental, resulting in more L1 and a lack of willingness to communicate (WTC). Tuan and Mai (2015) found that both teachers and students strongly agree with this notion, and Riasati and Rahimi (2018) argue that students will be willing to communicate about topics that are familiar to them and interesting. Finally, Vongsilla and Reinders (2016, p.3) cite various researchers who have demonstrated that students tend to lack confidence discussing topics in which they lack background knowledge.

## Course Context

The course in question is a discussion course that takes place at a university in Japan. The course is standardised via a textbook, meaning that each week lessons follow a similar format. Students read a short text at home, before participating in a series of activities which lead to the main speaking tasks, which are two group discussions. Faculty suggest these discussions last between 12 and 20 minutes and emphasise the importance of student talking time. To help with this, students learn a new discussion skill each week. These skills are designed to help generate content (e.g. giving examples, advantages/disadvantages) or organise the discussion (e.g. changing topics, summarising). Students also learn skills designed to help negotiate meaning in case of communication breakdown (e.g. paraphrasing).

The course is mandatory for first years, meaning that students with a wide range of ability levels and major study areas take part. However, the ten classes assigned to me this year, and therefore the research participants, were all either placed at B1 (TOEIC 480-700) or A2 (TOEIC 280-480) ability levels of the CEFR scale according to a pre-course TOEIC exam given by the university.

One of the main designated outcomes of the discussion course is for students to improve their general spoken fluency and communicative competence in English. While there are various ways to describe fluency, Hurling's (2012) introductory paper to the course references Schmidt, who discusses the idea of automatization throughout his paper, which in a language-learning context means a user is able to retrieve lexis without effort. In a paper used in mandatory course training pre-2020, Gatbonton & Segalowitz (1988, p.474) define this kind of fluency as being able to produce language comfortably, at speed and without interference from other cognitive processes (Gatbonton & Segalowitz, p. 474). For example, if a student can speak at length without pausing to think of vocabulary, then they could be said to have achieved a certain level of fluency.

Hurling (2012, p.1-2) writes that students need a substantial amount of practice time to develop fluency, and therefore lessons are arranged for as much student to student interaction as possible.

The topics used this semester are shown in the table below:

Week	Topic
2	The Importance of Communication
3	Entering University
4	Independence
5	Living Abroad
6	Globalization of Japanese Culture
7	Japanese and Foreign Customs
8	Learning Foreign Languages
9	Social Media
10	Crime and Punishment
11	Social Issues

## Methodology

As mentioned, the purpose of this study was to gather information on attitudes towards the topics used on the discussion course. In order to achieve this, I sought opinion from both teachers

and students involved with the course.

A mixed methods approach was used. Student attitudes were gauged using a mix of qualitative and quantitative questions. Quantitative data was obtained using 6-point Likert scale survey questions, while qualitative answers were gathered with comments on the various topics. As for the teachers, a qualitative approach was taken in the form of semi-structured interviews.

The main research questions used were:

- To what extent to the topics used on a Japanese university discussions course support the main course goal of fluency?
- What are the factors affecting student and teacher attitudes towards the topics used on the discussion course?

The first question targets the specific course goal of fluency, in order to help gauge the suitability of the topics of the course. However, the second question aims to investigate topics in a more general sense, in order to investigate what effect the topics have beyond the course goals. Together, they should help to inform a rounded view of discussion topics.

## Main Constructs in the Research

I was unable to find any similar surveys asking students about individual topics in detail, and therefore wrote my own. The constructs were chosen based on a mixture of my own experience, background research (e.g. Leong & Ahmadi, 2017) and informal discussions with colleagues.

The initial surveys contained five constructs, but three - vocabulary, critical thinking and appropriacy – have been removed from the analysis due to issues with relevance to the research question. Therefore, the remaining two constructs and the questions used to test them are shown below:

### 1. Engagement

*i) The topic was interesting to discuss.*

*ii) The topic was fun to discuss.*

Questions (i) and (ii) relate to engagement. Topics that are fun and interesting should engage learners, and engaged learners will be active in a discussion. This kind of engagement should help to support fluency-building activities.

In this case, the difference between ‘fun’ and ‘interesting’ is that ‘fun’ is more related to enjoyment, and ‘interesting’ is more related to intellectual engagement. I checked this with a native Japanese speaker, who confirmed the difference to be similar in Japanese. However, I do think it is possible that some students took them to be synonymous.

### 2. Background Knowledge

*iii) I had enough background knowledge to discuss this topic.*

Question (iii) is about background knowledge. This is important for speaking performance, in

that students without knowledge of a topic will struggle to discuss it. On previous courses, it sometimes seemed to me as if students lacked the knowledge or experience with a topic to discuss in detail.

These constructs inform both the student surveys and the teacher interviews.

### Student Surveys (Quantitative)

The intention of the surveys was to quantify student feelings towards the discussion topics as related to the constructs. Students answered the questions using a 6-point Likert scale (1=strong disagreement 6=strong agreement). An example item is shown below:

1. 私にとって興味深いトピックでした。 - It was an interesting topic for me. \*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
興味がない Not interesting	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	興味深い Interesting

Students answered on each topic (ten in total), according to the following schedule:

Round One: Topics 1, 2&3 (n = 96). Conducted in week 5.

Round Two: Topics 4&5 (n= 93). Conducted in week 9.

Round Three: Topics 6&7 (n = 96). Conducted in week 12.

Round Four: Topics 8, 9&10 (n = 88). Conducted in week 13.

As the topic review surveys were done on multiple occasions, the number of participants varied as indicated by the n= number above. 96 students participated in the research overall, although participation in individual surveys varied due to student absences.

Results were tallied as a whole and analysed. For the engagement constructs, answers were grouped into positive and negative. A survey answer of 1-3 was considered to be a negative response, whilst 4-6 was considered to be a positive.

For the background knowledge question, results for all classes were analysed by mode and frequency.

Results were also collated for each individual class, however, due to the general homogeneity of class ability level, as well as the nature of the results, I feel it is unnecessary to share individual class results and instead just present the results of my whole cohort. Perhaps in the future, with a wider range of abilities, analysis of individual classes would be worthwhile.

### Student Comments (Qualitative)

The surveys also offered a section for comments. In the first two rounds (topics 1-5) of the survey, the prompt for this was “Do you have any comments about this topic?” Writing a comment was optional and there was a low response from students. However, the comments that students did make were revealing, and so I made them compulsory for rounds three and four. This came to form a significant part of the topic review.

For mandatory comments, I chose a sentence completion style, which was intended to provide more focus than the previous open question. Students completed the sentence: “This discussion topic was \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.”

Students wrote their comments in Japanese, and comments were translated via Google Translate, and then checked by a Japanese-English bilingual to ensure accuracy.

Comments were thematically coded and counted, with the most prevalent themes becoming the subject of the relevant analysis.

### Semi-Structured Teacher Interviews

In order to triangulate viewpoints, teachers were interviewed online. A semi-structured approach was designed (see Drever, 2005), with several questions drafted and compiled onto a power point. In order to test the interview format, I conducted a pilot interview with a teacher who is working in a similar context at a different university. In the end, I interviewed eight Rikkyo discussion teachers.

These interviews covered a wide range of themes, often in each interview, and therefore were not coded but rather I used my own judgement to decipher the more common or widely held viewpoints of teachers. Also, the teacher interviews were conducted after the student research and therefore was able to explore the teachers' views on the student-generated themes from the quantitative research.

### Topic Review Research Results

In the following sections, I present the results and analysis of the Topic review research.

Due to the one-sided nature of the results for the 'fun' and 'interesting' questions, I have decided to present the results divided into positive and negative answers. Meaning that on the Likert scale, a score of 1-3 is a negative response, and 4-6 is a positive response.

However, the 'background knowledge' question produced more nuanced results, and so I will present this data as modes and frequencies while also referring to the results in terms of positive and negative.

### Engagement Constructs ('fun' and 'interesting')

For these two constructs, I decided to rank the topics in terms of popularity. This was done out of curiosity of which topics could be termed 'most popular' amongst our students.

**Table 1**  
*Results of the Engagement Construct Questions*

This Topic was Interesting				This Topic was Fun			
Ranking	Topic	Positive	Negative	Ranking	Topic	Positive	Negative
1=	Independence	98%	2%	1	Independence	98%	2%
1=	Foreign Language	98%	2%	2	Customs	97%	3%
2	Customs	97%	3%	3	Foreign Language	96%	4%
3	Social Media	96%	4%	4	Social Media	95%	5%
4	Social Issues	95%	5%	5=	Living Abroad	91%	9%
5=	Globalization	94%	6%	5=	Globalization	91%	9%
5=	Entering University	94%	6%	6	Communication	90%	10%
6	Living Abroad	91%	9%	7=	Entering University	89%	11%
7	Communication	90%	10%	7=	Social Issues	89%	11%
8	Crime	89%	11%	8	Crime	76%	24%



The immediately striking aspect of these results is how positive the students are about the topics. The vast majority of students say that all of the topics are interesting and fun. This indicates that the topics used in the textbook are well received by students and this probably contributes strongly towards engagement.

**Table 2**  
*Results of the Background Knowledge Question*  
Background Knowledge

Topic	Mode	Frequencies					
		1	2	3	4	5	6
Communication	4	0%	8%	26%	34%	23%	7%
Entering University	4	0%	2%	21%	37%	27%	11%
Independence	4	1%	4%	20%	32%	31%	10%
Living Abroad	5	1%	3%	16%	31%	38%	11%
Globalization	5	0%	6%	16%	25%	39%	14%
Customs	5	2%	3%	8%	39%	40%	8%
Foreign Languages	5	0%	3%	11%	35%	38%	13%
Social Media	5	1%	1%	13%	23%	49%	14%
Crime	3	1%	16%	33%	22%	19%	9%
Social Issues	4	2%	10%	17%	32%	30%	9%

Overall, students answered positively in this category, with half of the topics achieving a mode of 5, indicating that students feel they have a comfortable amount of background knowledge to discuss the topic.

In the other half of the topics, the mode is 4, except for the Crime and Punishment topic where the mode is 3. This could be interpreted as students feeling less comfortable with the topics in terms of their background knowledge.

The Independence (26%), Social Issues, (28%) and Communication (35%) topics have more than a quarter of students answering negatively. As there are ten students per class, this could mean there are two or three students in each class/lesson who are struggling with their knowledge of these topics.

Crime and Punishment stands out as the most difficult topic in this category. As mentioned, it has a mode of 3, and over 50% of students feel negatively about their knowledge of this topic.

The frequencies of threes and fours for most topics are over 50%, indicating that although no topic is particularly overwhelming (with the possible exception of Crime and Punishment) plenty of students might not be particularly confident in their background knowledge of topics. From looking at the frequencies, we might also say that classes will have a mixed level of background knowledge on each subject.

## Themes in Student Comments

The positivity of the quantitative survey results continue in the student comments, with positive comments mainly relating to the familiarity of topics. There were also a significant amount of positive comments on the theme of learning from the discussion content. Comments that were less positive mainly focused on difficulties. The main reason given for difficulty in discussing a topic was a lack of familiarity or knowledge. Apart from this, students sometimes mention that discussing a topic with

various possible answers is difficult.

In the following section, these factors are discussed in more detail.

## Topic Familiarity

**Table 3**

*Quotes from students on the theme of topic familiarity*

Quotation	Topic
“This discussion dealt with social media, which is familiar to me, so I could discuss it with a sense of ownership.”	Social Media
“Discussions on this topic were appropriate for us taking English lessons. Because I was able to think like myself and get interested, and I was always able to talk about my experience”	Learning Languages
“It was easier to talk about topics that were close to me (such as university).”	Entering University

As demonstrated in the above quotes, familiarity or relevance was most often cited as a reason students had a positive experience discussing a topic.

The comments often contain the Japanese word ‘みじか’(mijika), which when translated means ‘familiar’. For example, in the Social Media topic, roughly 75% of comments say something positive about familiarity or relevance. While perhaps not synonymous, familiarity and background knowledge are closely related and therefore support the notion that discussions will be easier for students when they have sufficient knowledge of a topic.

With topics that focus on everyday life, such as university-related and Japanese culture-related topics, students seem to appreciate the ease with which they can participate in a discussion. With the more difficult topics (e.g. Crime and Punishment, Social Issues), they sometimes say that although not familiar, the topics bear relevance to their lives.

For the Japanese and Foreign Customs topic, students say they enjoy discussing their own culture, and the Learning a Foreign Language topic stokes interest as every student studies two foreign languages in their first year at university.

It is likely that students finding familiarity or at least some relevance in the topics goes some way to account for their overall popularity in the quantitative survey results.

## Learning from Discussions

**Table 4**

*Quotes from students on the theme of learning from discussions*

Quotation	Topic
“The topic was meaningful because I was able to reflect on the language learning I am doing now”	Learning a Foreign Language
“It was interesting . This is because I was able to deepen my understanding of other cultures and learn about their differences from Japanese culture.”	Japanese and Foreign Customs
“It’s an interesting opportunity to listen to various opinions and learn a perspective that I didn’t think of, and to re-organize the advantages and disadvantages to deepen my thoughts on the situation in Japan.”	Social Issues

The second most prevalent theme I identified was the expression of satisfaction with a topic because students had learned something content-related from the discussions. As in the quotes



above, students use verbs such as ‘experience’, ‘reflect’, and ‘learn’ in order to describe content-based learning. This was quite consistent throughout the topics. For example, in the Learning a Foreign Language class comments, several students seem positive about reflecting on their own language learning. In the Japanese and Foreign Customs comments, students enjoyed learning about different cultures and/or comparing foreign cultures to Japanese culture. Comments for university-related topics say that it was good to think about being independent, and to ponder the bigger picture of why they have come to university. Also, in the more serious topics (e.g. Social Issues and Crime and Punishment), some students describe considering certain issues for the first time.

### Difficulties with Unfamiliar Topics

**Table 5**

*Quotes from students on the theme of difficulties with unfamiliar topics.*

Quotation	Topic
“It was difficult. Because quite and punishment didn’t seem familiar to me, and I never thought about the death penalty.”	Crime and Punishment
“It was a difficult topic to speak in English because it is a topic that we don’t discuss much in Japanese.”	Hikikomori
“A little difficult because I was not very familiar with the customs of other countries.”	Japanese and Foreign Customs

A lack of familiarity or knowledge is the most common reason given for difficulties in discussions. Students sometimes say directly that they do not know enough about a topic, but more often say they have not thought about it before or it is not something they discuss or think about often in Japanese.

Such comments were most common in the more abstract topics (e.g. Social Issues and Crime and Punishment) but there were occasional comments occurring in most topics. For example, some students say they found discussing learning languages difficult because they lack knowledge in that area. At the same time, for most topics there are also comments saying they enjoyed the topic because of its familiarity, showing that students probably have a mixed level of background knowledge.

Personally, I find it interesting to see some students saying that hikikomori was a topic that they have not thought about much, or they do not talk about in Japanese, as I had previously assumed it to be familiar to these students.

### Difficulties with Nuanced Topics

**Table 6**

*Quotes from students on the theme of difficulties with nuanced topics, or topics where there are no easy answers.*

Quotation	Topic
“I thought the discussion on this topic was a huge problem. There were many unanswered questions, so it was difficult to discuss.”	Social Issues
“There was no correct answer, so it was difficult.”	Social Issues
“It was difficult to decide my opinion in the discussion on this topic. Because there were equally pros and cons about the death penalty.”	Crime and Punishment

Especially in the more abstract Crime and Punishment and Social Issues lessons, a notable amount of students say they find it difficult when there is no easy answer. This could be connected to a lack of knowledge or experience in these areas. If students have not thought about these issues deeply before, then we cannot expect them to have a fully formed view on them yet.

However, this could also be interpreted as a critical thinking issue. Due to cultural and educational background issues, it seems that students are conditioned during their previous education to look for one right answer (Dunn, 2015 ; Reid, 1998, p.20), and these comments might indicate difficulty when they have to evaluate several possible angles to an issue.

This could be something for discussions teachers to ponder, as critical thinking currently occupies a more important role in university curricula than it had previously, both institutionally and nationally (see Mishima & Yamamoto, 2020).

### Main Themes in the Teacher Interviews

In this section I present some themes of the teacher interviews. Teachers were named Teacher A – Teacher H, and are represented in the quote tables below via this nomenclature.

The main point which teachers and students seem to agree on is that familiarity with a topic is important, and a lack of familiarity or lack of knowledge hinders a discussion. Elsewhere, teachers raised interesting issues about how the topic affects nuance in a discussion, and also raised a point about the questions used in the textbook.

### Teachers on Familiarity

Teachers cite general spoken fluency as the main goal of the course, and reported being generally satisfied with the topics in this regard. Much like the students, teachers most often suggest that relevant or familiar topics best support fluency building.

**Table 7**

*Quotes from teachers on the theme of familiarity with topics.*

Quotation	Interview
<i>“I guess the Entering University, Life at University, Becoming Independent topics (best support fluency) as they’re able to talk quite a lot about those topics. I guess because they’re all in that situation so it’s very relevant to their lives at the moment.”</i>	Excerpt from Teacher A interview
<i>“I mean it’s important that they have something to say if the goal of the course is to get them speaking as much as possible, it’s important that they’re able to say something about the topic.”</i>	Excerpt from Teacher D interview
<i>“I think just based on the design of the course because they’re being thrown into discussions with very little prep ... . So for them to be able to generate ideas it needs to be something that they can relate to ... . because it’s like a bit of a cognitive load where you’re telling them you got to use these skills, but you’ve also got to introduce ideas that you’ve never thought about before.”</i>	Excerpt from Teacher F interview

Some teachers point out that having something to say is essential in discussions, so it is best when students have a lot of opinions ready to go. One teacher connects the importance of topic familiarity to the course structure: there is little time to prepare and students often need to produce ideas instantly. If they need to think of original ideas immediately then their cognitive load is

increased and communicating becomes difficult.

Another interesting point made was that familiar topics not only aid fluency, but also seem to help students bond as they can identify what they have in common:

**Table 8**

*Quote from teacher on a benefit of using familiar topics.*

Quotation	Interview
<i>“Certain students would kind of relate to each other and comment on the same things; they find those things in common. So it was more useful for bringing the students together and improving the dynamic, just because they kind of had things in common”</i>	Excerpt from Teacher F interview

This could be important to the course, both in the sense of enjoyment and improving communicative competence. In Brereton et al.’s study (2019, p.285), students on the course most commonly attribute a positive change in attitude towards speaking English to the atmosphere they experience in discussion classes.

### Teachers on a Lack of Familiarity or Background Knowledge

Several teachers suggest that topics where there is a lack of familiarity to students prove to be the least productive:

**Table 9**

*Quotes from teachers describing how unfamiliar topics cause students problems in discussions.*

Quotation	Topic
<i>“...basically they hadn’t thought about it (Social Issues: Poverty) before, they didn’t think it was possible to solve it, so it was just too abstract I think.”</i>	Excerpt from Teacher D interview
<i>“They’ve really only got knowledge about Japanese culture and the problem is (the course) doesn’t really give them the background knowledge to discuss topics like foreign customs and globalization of Japanese culture ..... I mean they’re able to talk about it, but I guess they could do with ..... different perspectives to discuss it in more detail.”</i>	Excerpt from Teacher A interview
<i>“... lots of my students have got no experience of studying abroad, they’re not really thought about it, they’re first-year students ... the majority of my students, they’ve never thought about this topic and it’s just ‘It is a good idea?’ ‘No, it’s expensive.’”</i>	Excerpt from Teacher G interview

As these comments show, teachers find that students have difficulty producing detailed discussions on topics where they do not know enough. One teacher advocates for offering more perspectives, perhaps suggesting scaffolding could support student ideas. In any case, there is a strong feeling that topics which students have not considered before tend to less productive.

## Teachers on Nuanced Discussions

**Table 10**

*Quotes from teachers on the benefits of topics which provoke a nuanced discussion.*

Quotation	Interview
“It seemed like there was more to say (for advanced topics) and less uniformity of ideas kind of thing. It was like, do you think studying a foreign language is good? Well, everyone thinks yes. So ... the ones where everyone’s ideas weren’t the same, I think was what was interesting.”	Excerpt from Teacher B interview
“(Crime and Punishment as the best topic) ... I think the main thing that I like about this lessons is it’s a good way for students to really understand how to have a nuanced discussion.”	Excerpt from Teacher E interview

Although teachers identify difficulties with more advanced topics, they also tend to point towards such topics as the most interesting, primarily when that provoke more nuanced discussions. This adds perspective to the student comments, which tended to say that more nuanced discussions can be difficult. Perhaps teachers do not necessarily view this difficulty as unwelcome.

On a similar note, some teachers express dissatisfaction with discussions in which students give short, repetitive answers:

“Should everyone study abroad?”

“No, it’s too expensive. Many students do not have money, so they can’t study abroad. What do you think?”

This was an example given of unsatisfactory student dialogue, and several teachers expressed frustration with this sort of brief exchange, which is apparently quite common. Some teachers connect these shorter, repetitive answers to questions on topics where background knowledge is perhaps limited. As in the quote above, few students have experience studying abroad and therefore sometimes cannot discuss the question at length. Teachers say students tend to gloss over such questions rather than consider them deeply. Some teachers point out that because they have to teach each lesson 10 times or more, this frustration might be amplified, but most of the teachers seem unsatisfied with discussions that elicit repetitive answers. Overall, my impression is that teachers would like more depth in discussions.

However, a lack of depth to discussions might not be the fault of the topics used. Some teachers suggest that the textbook could be the problem:

**Table 11**

*Quote from a teacher discussing the limitations of discussion questions used in the textbook.*

Quotation	Interview
“I think the problem with the book is a lot of the questions don’t really lend themselves to saying that much about the topic. A lot of the questions are very simple ... in some of the questions in the book it could almost just be like a one-word answer and then there’s not really anything to say.”	Excerpt from Teacher E interview

The above quote states that textbook questions, not the topics, are the issue and two other interviewed teachers also state a problem with some textbook questions. They say discussion questions are sometimes written in a binary manner, which often elicits just a short answer from students. The textbook does contain several binary questions, as shown in the table below:

**Table 12**  
*Examples of Textbook Questions*

Topic	Question	Page
Life at University	Is it important for students to plan for life after university?	27
Becoming Independent	Should all university students have a part-time job?	34
Living Abroad	Should everyone study abroad?	42

*(What's your Opinion?, Fearn-Wannan; Kita & Sturges, 2020)*

These are examples of closed questions, or questions that could be completed with yes/no or very short answers. While questions such as these give students easy practice with target phrases, they tend to elicit very brief discussions, which limits student use of target skills and the possible development of ideas. It might well be that it is this kind of binary question, rather than the topic of discussion, that results in repetitive answers. Therefore, teachers could find that rewriting binary or closed questions into more open, or even task-based, type questions produces more nuanced discussions, and that the topics do not necessarily need to be altered.

### Other Teacher Interview Themes

Elsewhere, teachers raise various issues related to the topics although there was not a lot of consensus on these points. Some teachers suggest that topics could be more academic, and/or focused on current events, while another teacher advocated for topics that are more directly related to students' major areas of study. Although they acknowledge that such changes are not necessarily required for fluency building, they suggest that topics along these lines could offer a more holistic learning experience, suitable for the university environment.

## Discussion

### Familiarity and Prepared Ideas

Familiarity seems to be the most important factor in a successfully engaging topic on the course. Students and teachers say that immediately familiar topics are engaging and motivating, and cite a lack of familiarity when they say a topic is difficult. This is supported by research that states students feel less confident when they are called upon to discuss topics they have little background knowledge in (e.g Tuan & Mai, 2015). Most commonly, writers say this affects student WTC. Kang (2004, p.283) says that a lack of knowledge leads to students feeling insecure, because they worry that they will struggle to follow the conversation, or that their lack of ideas will bring the conversation to an abrupt halt. It seems likely that a lack of background knowledge does lead to lower WTC. Also, more fundamentally, it seems logical that students will struggle to build an expansive discussion on topics where they have little knowledge.

As it relates to the goal of fluency, I suspect the issues around familiarity and background knowledge perhaps come down to one important thing: it really helps if students have ideas ready to use before they start a discussion.

Pre-2020, discussion course INSETT materials used a model of fluency by Gatbonton (1988), known as creative automatization. This kind of fluency is achieved when speakers can express themselves without interference from other cognitive processes. This can be related to Levelt's

model of articulation (1989, ret. from Griffin & Ferreira, 2006), in which the communication of an idea occurs in three stages; conceptualization, formulation and articulation. In order to communicate, you need to generate an idea, think of how to express it, and then physically express it. Each stage requires mental resources, so if you have to spend time generating ideas, this detracts from your ability to express yourself. Therefore, in a course where the main goal is building spoken fluency, perhaps it is best to have a topic where students will have ideas already formulated. In other words, familiar topics.

The results of this research show that student topical knowledge levels are probably quite mixed, and that in each lesson there might be a quarter of students or more who feel they are lacking sufficient background knowledge. If students will not always have ideas ready, or indeed if some are likely to be struggling with their background knowledge, then it is probably a good idea to offer them some support.

The textbook already offers some support in this area via two regular activities: a homework reading and discussion preparation activities. However, these methods are perhaps insufficient – the reading can be completed without much analysis of the issues, and the discussion preparation activities are designed to be done as spoken activities, so the time dedicated solely to thinking in the classes is actually quite low.

Due to Covid-19, some interviewed teachers used a flipped classroom this semester, utilising idea-scaffolding methods such as articles and videos to help students develop opinions on the topics before classes. This is one way of helping students to generate more ideas on the topics, and the teachers claim that these methods did seem to help somewhat. In future face-to-face courses, such scaffolding maybe less desirable due to time constraints. However, teachers might find giving students some kind of extra input on the topics prior to the class will help to support their ideas and in turn discussions might be more fluent.

If this kind of preparation is not desirable, then a more pragmatic solution could be to ask students to think about discussion questions before the class. Perhaps it would benefit students to sit and think for a more prolonged period of time, such as 15-20 minutes. Setting this as homework could help students come to class with ready ideas.

While I doubt that we could hope to equalise student topical knowledge through input, perhaps allowing all students extended time to generate ideas before class would allow students lacking in background knowledge to come to class feeling more confident.

## **Learning from Discussions**

Having taught the course for two years without much focus on the content, it was very interesting to see students describing content-based learning in their comments. Students describe various critical processes such as comparing, reflecting, analysing and learning new information. Previously, the strongly unified curriculum meant that less attention was paid to this kind of learning, because teachers were focusing on how students were using the skills. However, this area of learning should probably not be overlooked. Even without a teacher focus, students are experiencing the content of the course and it might even be the key thing they take away from classes. If we consider that one of the primary purposes of a discussion is to learn by sharing opinions (Simpson, 1939), then a lack of focus on this kind of learning might be detracting from the potential of the course.

Some discussions teachers have previously found a lack of balance in the course structure, and some students also find the heavy focus on skill use to be constricting (Brereton et.al; 2019, p.288).



Teachers addressing the discussion content related to the topics could help balance focus between the language and content, which could result in a more holistic experience for students in the future.

One way to do this could be to adapt the descriptors in the lesson outcomes. One descriptor in the textbook is currently “**Discuss Japanese and Foreign Customs**”. This describes the activity, but not what students might be learning from it. The experience could be better acknowledged by changing it to: “**Analyse Japanese Customs and compare them to foreign customs**”. Students can refer to this at the start of class, and reflect on it towards the end.

Another idea could be to use activity and lesson feedback time to have students reflect on their experience with the content. Questions such as “What did you learn about Japanese and Foreign Customs today?” could help them to reflect on their content learning.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This year my assigned classes were all roughly in the pre-intermediate and intermediate range of speaking ability. While this range tends to make up the bulk of the students who participate on the course, there are advanced level classes as well as beginner level classes. These classes might have different views on the discussion topics, and could be surveyed in the future.

The constructs of ‘interesting’ and ‘fun’ were initially aimed at testing student engagement with the topics. Due to perceived time constraints, only one question was used to test the background knowledge construct. It is widely recommended that several questions per construct be asked in order to obtain more valid results (Dornyei & Csizér, 2012). Therefore, while the results here might be indicative, more investigation is needed to further establish the extent of the relationship between these constructs and the topics.

Upon reflection, I might have been overly concerned with making the surveys quick to complete, and more questions based around these constructs would probably have been possible without using too much time. This would probably have led to more reliable data.

Finally, it is regrettable that the comments were not compulsory from the first round. These comments were insightful, and had a strong influence on the research. Indeed, there is plenty of scope to expand the qualitative aspect of this research. For example, focus groups could allow for deeper exploration into the student perspective on topics.

### **Conclusion**

The textbook topics are popular with students, and the results of this study indicate that they are happy discussing them. This indicates some measure of engagement, which in turn indicates that they are useful for the fluency building focus of the course. Familiarity seems to account for this engagement, and the more relevant the students feel the topic is the more they seem to like it. It is probable that such topics are the most suitable for fluency building, as students have more ideas ready to use.

It is likely that individual student background knowledge varies on each topic, and I feel it would probably be beneficial for students to have more time to explore the topics before class. More dedicated thinking time would allow them to have more ideas prepared going into discussions and this would in turn allow them to focus on expressing ideas rather than formulating them.

While the textbook topics seem popular with students, it is not to say that teachers could not find value in changing or adapting them. However, it is worth bearing in mind the issues with familiarity

and background knowledge, and ensuring students are supported accordingly.

While I believe that establishing that the topics are ‘fun’ and ‘interesting’ gives a measure of engagement with the topics, further research could explore the idea of engagement with the course on a deeper level. A topic could be fun and interesting, but not engage students enough to inspire a discussion that expands for the 16 minutes that has traditionally been required on the course. Research that measures how much discussion the topics tend to produce could give a more in-depth indication of how engaging topics are.

Finally, this research has shown that students are learning from the content of the discussions. Previously, the unified curriculum used on the course meant that less attention was paid to this aspect of learning, and I believe teachers could probably deliver a more holistic experience by focusing on the content learning taking place in discussions. Future research on this kind of learning could investigate the benefits of this kind of focus.

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