【Teaching Practice Report】

Challenges and Adaptive Strategies to Teaching English Debate Online

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Abstract

Rikkyo University implemented a new 14-week English Debate course for all first year students in the 2020 Fall semester. At the same time, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic resulted in many classes being conducted online, with the newly created English Debate course among them. Online learning environments can present many challenges for students, and among them is cognitive overload. Information overload is an ever-present problem in second language classes, and this can be compounded when these classes are taught online. In an effort to improve student outcomes by reducing cognitive overload, several course and lesson design principles were employed. This paper reflects on the strategies used to reduce cognitive overload among students in an online English Debate course at Rikkyo University with the aim of improving overall student retention. Finally, conclusions are drawn from these strategies that can serve to inform the future creation of course materials for English Debate, as well as using online learning spaces.

Keywords: cognitive overload, online instruction, course design

Introduction

Due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, many universities in Japan switched to online instruction in the Spring 2020 semester in order to reduce the risk to students and university staff of contracting the disease. With the pandemic still ongoing, Rikkyo University allowed only a limited selection of classes to resume face-to-face instruction in the Fall semester. However, English Debate, a newly introduced class for all freshman students, would be conducted online. The course was designed to have 20 students meet once a week for 100 minutes over the 14 week Fall semester, with the aim of teaching them how to argue a position in a debate, refute the ideas of the opposing side, as well as think critically and apply research to support their opinions. When the English Debate course was originally conceived, it was intended for students to meet on campus and for lessons to be conducted in person. The very nature of a debate class, wherein participants must present arguments to, and listen to those given by, an opposing side requires inter-person communication among teams of students. Under normal circumstances, this fact could already make the class difficult to run smoothly depending on students' willingness to communicate, for as Osterman (2014) found, Japanese university students can hesitate to communicate with each other in class for a variety of reasons. However, the circumstances presented by COVID-19 meant that the class had to be adapted to an online teaching environment. At the same time, with English Debate being a new class, teachers had to build a curriculum and design lessons from the ground up in order to meet the objectives of the course. The combination of creating a syllabus and lesson plans for an entirely new course with teaching a debate class in an online learning environment presented a distinct set of challenges that had to be considered and resolved in tandem, while ensuring that course goals were met.

Online classes meant Internet connectivity issues, both for students and for myself, and on several occasions, Wi-Fi problems resulted in stuttered or dropped connections to Zoom, the online

conferencing platform I used for my classes. Students would also connect to Zoom lessons late, or email me and say they had no Internet and thus would have to miss class. Another problem with online classes was in supervising students. Zoom allows for breakout rooms, so that groups of students can work with their team on a given segment of a debate, but it becomes impossible for a teacher to be in every room at once with only one device. This lead to situations where I would enter a room and find students with their cameras and microphones turned off, obviously not contributing to their team or even being engaged in the lesson. With the exception of Wi-Fi genuinely failing, these problems are not exactly unique to the online teaching environment. Students will come late, or miss class completely, with in person lessons as well. Students can also disengage from group work and "turn off" when in a live class, though it is much easier to see that happening and nudge them back into participation when sharing a physical classroom with them.

Cognitive load is another problem that exists both in the physical English learning classroom, and the digital one. However, the problems of cognitive load can be compounded by the very nature of the online learning environment. Chen et al. (2011) found that some learners can more easily feel cognitive overload in an online learning environment because of English skill deficiencies and inadequate computer and technical skills, as well as individual learning styles and preferences. Students who are using a second language (L2) to perform another task must process content about that task and understand their L2 simultaneously. The weaker a student's L2 ability, the more difficult this becomes. The aim of course design and the creation of lesson materials in the context of classes where students perform another task in their L2 is therefore to reduce the cognitive load they experience as much as possible.

Discussion

In this paper, I outline some of the design principles I employed in creating my course plan and lesson materials for the online lessons of English Debate at Rikkyo University in the Fall 2020 semester, with the aim of reducing students' cognitive load and improving the quality of the learning experience. Below, I outline four of the strategies I used to reduce cognitive load in my English Debate classes: "chunking" information, doing pre-task activities, allowing the use of L1 during preparation activities, and creating opportunities for frequent practice.

Chunking Information

It is very important to introduce new material in small pieces so that students can process it. Harrelson and Leaver-Dunn describe this as "chunking", or "grouping information into small, manageable units" (Harrelson and Leaver-Dunn, 2003). How much each learner can intake at once, or the size of the "chunks" is based on their knowledge and expertise. In the context of an English debate course, this means that students with a stronger command of English, or prior familiarity with debates, are able to handle learning more at once. For Rikkyo University's English Debate classes, I expected a great deal of variance in this regard based on my prior experience teaching English Discussion at the university. Even though students are grouped according to TOEIC scores, not all students have the same prior experience communicating in English.

To make things manageable for students of any level, I structured the pacing of the course and made introducing content gradual, similar to the English Discussion class of the Spring semester. Each component of a debate (affirmative and negative team speeches, cross-examination, refutations,

replies, and closing statements) was taught separately in its own lesson. In later lessons, I added complexity to some segments of debate, such as teaching more advanced cross-examination questions, but this was always done a little at a time so as not to overburden students with new content and confuse them. In each lesson of the first half of the course, I introduced three to five pieces of debate terminology related to the corresponding stage of the debate the students would learn that lesson. Following this, I sometimes had students put what they learned into practice by doing work in pairs or small groups, and then finally the students would have a debate, using the terminology and expressions associated with each stage they had learned up to that point. To also make doing the early activities and debates easier, I made sure the handouts I created were scaffolded. In the earlier lessons, I provided many hints in the handouts and a partially filled-in template to follow. These handouts allowed students to concentrate on learning the process of the debate stages and not have to worry about English grammar or spelling as much. Then, in later lessons, I removed the hints from the class handouts and left a blank template. Major and Calandrino (2018) believed that delivering short and manageable content for learners to consume engages adult learners who want to apply their knowledge to solve a problem and connect with others. By limiting the instruction portion of my classes, students had more time to practice and apply the debate skill "chunks" they had learned in a given class, thereby enhancing their understanding and making the debate skills easier to internalize.

Doing Pre-Task Activities

So that students could spend more class time debating or using skills to practice a particular portion of a debate, I often used a pre-task activity that they would complete outside the classroom. I did not want students to struggle in class to brainstorm ideas for a particular debate topic, so I assigned homework whereby students would have to post reasons agreeing or disagreeing with a debate topic on an online debate website: www.kialo-edu.com. After showing students how to create an account and use the website, I put up links on each debate class Blackboard to debate topics on Kialo. I then asked students to post on both the agreeing and disagreeing side of the topic, so that no matter what side they were on in the following class, they would be able to draw upon an idea they had already thought of, as well as those suggested by their classmates. By making the in-class debate topic of the following class similar to the one students had done as homework, I could reduce the preparation time spent making opening speeches, and thus allow more time for other parts of the debate during class.

Research by Tonkin et al. (2019) found that doing pre-task activities like this outside of the classroom in a flipped teaching style helped reduce the cognitive load of students in the L2 classroom. With students thinking of reasons that agree and disagree with a debate topic prior to the class, they can feel less pressure to do so in class, and thereby be less intimidated by their peers who may think of reasons faster than them. This helps create a more balanced learning environment in which everyone has an idea to share, reducing the hesitation many students may feel in communicating in their L2 through an online platform such as Zoom.

Allowing the Use of L1 During Preparation Activities

While students were able to quickly think of ideas for in-class debate topics because of the pre-task activity, they still had to discuss with their group which reasons were best. Following this, they had to think together to come up with examples and do research to support their arguments. This

meant they had to talk amongst their group to choose the reasons their team would use, and then work together to support them. In addition to this, team members would work together again to prepare refutations to the points put forth by the opposing side. I placed the students in each group in separate breakout rooms in Zoom while they were preparing. While they were preparing supports for their arguments or making refutations to the other team's points, I permitted them to use their L1 in order to facilitate the sharing of ideas.

Research by Bruen and Kelly (2014) found that allowing students to use their L1 in the language classroom can reduce cognitive load during activities, since it allows classmates to explain difficult concepts to each other more easily. In a debate setting, this can help students explain to their classmates certain words they intend to use in the team speeches, or words that were used by the opposing team in their speech. Ochi (2009) also reported that the use of L1 in the classroom can help students more easily recall things. In the context of an English Discussion class, this can prove useful, because students make refutations to the arguments of the other team, and being able to recall and explain the other team's points is important in doing so.

Creating Opportunities for Frequent Practice

Harrelson and Leaver-Dunn (2003) suggested that frequent practice helps reduce cognitive load by moving things from short-term memory into long-term memory. As students rehearse particular debate activities, be it segments of a debate, or even a full debate, the activities become more second-nature and they no longer have to think about *what* they need to do, or *how* to do it. This helps them become more successful at performing those skills, since they can devote more effort to concentrating on what they are doing.

With some preparation done outside of class, and only a short time spent introducing new content or reviewing previous material, more English Debate class time can be spent on pair and group activities to reinforce debate skills, or actually debating. By allowing time for two full five-versus-five debates each class, students can complete all portions of a debate every lesson, thereby building familiarity with the structure of a debate, as well as improving the analytical and responsive skills needed to make refutations and replies. Students also listen to the debate of the two other teams, further reinforcing what they have learned by watching others do it. There is also typically enough time in class that I can devote a portion of the beginning to an activity that enhances students' proficiency in a particular segment of a debate, such as researching information quickly to support ideas, making refutations, or replying to the other team's refutations. By doing these focused tasks in addition to a full debate each lesson, students can increase their expertise in debating. Van Gog et al. (2005) recommended that activities to enhance a certain aspect of a skill should be done in an authentic context to enhance the whole skill, but this will only work to reduce cognitive load and improve performance if learners are motivated and make an effort. When applying this principle to debate instruction, it is therefore important to make activities designed to practice particular elements of a debate as similar as possible to an actual debate, while at the same time making certain students are not intimidated by their L2. It is here that teachers must be sure to provide meaningful and constructive feedback, while also keeping student motivation high.

Conclusion

Debating in an L2 can be a daunting task for anyone, because they must work to process the

vocabulary and grammar of their second language, as well as the content of what the other team is saying in the debate, in order to be able to respond. To help reduce the burden on students, it is important for teachers to consider strategies for reducing the cognitive load on their students when designing their course and creating lesson materials. Key things to consider are breaking course content into smaller and more manageable chunks, assigning pre-task activities, allowing the use of L1 during preparation, and creating sufficient opportunities for students to practice and apply what they have learned so they can improve their skills.

Online instruction can come with many benefits, such as the means for students to quickly research facts and ideas to support their points, and the means for teachers to create and share materials more quickly through the use of their computer than they would otherwise be able to do in a typical classroom. This can make assigning and reviewing online pre-task activities easier and help students who may struggle to think of several reasons for a given idea, or reasons that run contrary to their personal viewpoint.

During the age of online instruction, it can be difficult to judge student attentiveness due to their webcam positioning, the nature of screen sharing, and computer performance issues. At the same time, it is important to be aware that not all students may be well suited to online learning, and some may experience mental fatigue more quickly in an online class than in an in-person class as a result of the draining nature of conferencing software. With this in mind, teachers need to design their online courses so as to reduce cognitive overload as much as possible among their students, by being more mindful of the quantity of material covered in a single class.

It can be very easy for language teachers to feel distant and detached from their students and fall into the trap of overexplaining things because of the inherently less personal nature of online classes. Webcams make it difficult to see the looks of understanding and looks of confusion on students' faces that many teachers would be able to recognize easily in an in-person class. However, it is still vital for language teachers to remember their role as a facilitator, and guide the students through the learning process while providing targeted feedback so that students understand what they need to do to improve. This will ensure they make a conscious effort with each attempt, which also helps them move their understanding of the language and skills from their short-term memory to their internalized repertoire, thereby reducing their cognitive load.

This paper has looked at some strategies for reducing cognitive load within the context of online English Debate classes at Rikkyo University, but the overall principle behind these strategies can be employed in other situations—whether it is teaching another subject or doing in-person classes. Of course, there are other effective ways of reducing cognitive load in the classroom, such as employing collaborative learning strategies and scaffolding, but it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss those.

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