Toward Student Autonomy in the English Discussion Classroom: A Consideration of Non-Visible Timer Use in Discussions

Andrew Tyner

Abstract

In this paper, I reflect on a small but impactful change to my lesson practice, namely, that I no longer display a timer visible to students during either of the 12–20+ minute discussion portions of my English discussion lessons. My focus is largely on the effectiveness of this practice in remedying certain shortcomings observed while using a highly visible timer during discussions. I find that removing the timer from students' view apparently improves motivation and performance in the discussion (production) phase of the lesson. I explore relevant literature to better understand the effects observed, particularly in light of metacognition and student motivation, and conclude that the use of a non-visible timer during discussion (production) phases is of significant benefit. I finally suggest an avenue for additional research with regard to the effects I have informally observed, suggesting a connection to recent neurocognitive research.

Keywords: English discussion, student motivation, timing, metacognition

Introduction

In this paper, I shall focus on a small alteration to my classroom practice for English discussion class. Namely, while I carefully monitor the timing of all parts of the lesson, I no longer display a timer that is visible to students during the two production, or discussion, phases of the lesson. At my workplace, Rikkyo University, English discussion classes are 100-minute, once per week classes. Each class has, on average, ten students. The lessons present students with skills (i.e., asking for reasons, giving opinions, giving different points of view, etc.), provide for skill practice, and allow for production of skills during two extended discussion sections, each being multi-person and 12–20 or more minutes in length. Each discussion is punctuated by periods of feedback[1].

In all sections of the lesson, the expectations of what students should do are clear, through both verbal and written instructions. Students have a specific time limit[2] in most sections of the lesson. Commonly, students hurry, say, to practice a given language skill as many times as possible in a short period. However, in the longer discussions, the total time for which students are expected to speak is somewhat more flexible, with definite minimums, but with maximums defined more by available class time and student skill level. Though the actual speaking time in discussions for any given class may vary little from week to week, as both total class time and general lesson structure are more-or-less fixed, from the Spring 2022 semester, I have made one very small but impactful change to the way in which expectations are communicated regarding the multi-person discussions. I have stopped

1 I have written on this feedback in detail elsewhere. Tyner, A. (2020) Self and Group: Dynamics of Reflection in Student-to-Student Feedback. *New Directions in Teaching and Learning English Discussion* 8, 65-70. In short, feedback in this context consists of students self-assessing their discussion performance using a provided general framework, reporting that assessment to their discussion partners, and receiving brief instructor feedback to reinforce their assessments or direct their attention to any major deficits in skill use. The general intention is to foster students' self-awareness regarding language use so that they may be more self-sufficient, more autonomous in their process of improvement and growth as language users.

2 This limit is tracked using a timer visible to all students in the room.

tracking the discussion length with a timer visible to the students. Instead, I use a small stopwatch that is visible only to me. This change, while minor in many respects, bears further discussion as its effects have been both positive and significant.

In the past, prior to the start of the students' lengthier discussion, I would announce specifically how much time would be allotted for the discussion and, subsequently, track this time on a highly visible timer. In many cases, this had a markedly negative effect, specifically, that of continuing the discussions only to a point somewhat close to the end of the allotted time. If there were, for instance, only a minute or two left, students would often hesitate to venture into a new idea or area of consideration, thinking, perhaps, that there was not enough time to do so effectively. Other times, students might exhaust their initial ideas after only about half the time had elapsed and would then seem demotivated by what they may have perceived as an overwhelming amount of remaining discussion time.

In response to these issues, I continue to track the discussion times and ensure that they always meet the minimum lengths set forth in the class syllabus as before; however, I remind students only of the minimum discussion time, and I use a stopwatch that is generally only visible to me. This has the effect of virtually eliminating the first problem, encouraging students to continue sharing their ideas freely until we proceed to the next part of the lesson. The second problem, that of students being demotivated by what they may perceive as an overwhelming amount of remaining discussion time, has also, somewhat surprisingly, been much improved as well.

As encouraging as these observations may be, I must note a concern that I had prior to switching to a non-visible timer for discussions. I pose this concern as a question: Is it possible, or even more likely than in the past, that students' more freely structured discussions (at least in consideration of the fact that they are not actively working toward a definite ending of the discussion) may be interrupted? Yes. In my experience, when using a non-visible timer, the discussions often are interrupted, but they are interrupted as the students are actively engaged, as opposed to a beeping timer that signals merely the official end to a discussion that has more-or-less ended already. So, in so far as the period of meaningful engagement in discussion has been extended, I am comfortable with the resultant need to interrupt discussions that might otherwise continue indefinitely. Further, while it may be argued that ending a discussion is a discrete skill unto itself, I would counter that ending a discussion at the cost of not engaging as deeply or extensively in the discussion in the first place is not a reasonable exchange.

While I could speculate on the causes of the improvements noted above, the modification to my instructional methodology was not conducted in an experimental context. My observations of the effectiveness of the improvement are subjective and informal. Perhaps, by turning to relevant literature, we might explore some theoretical underpinning to the methodology I have employed and of the beneficial effects I have observed.

Discussion

The teacher's role in managing student discussion may have profound quantitative and qualitative effects on the resultant discussion. In quantitative terms, at least within the scope of our present discussion, I have already noted the limiting effect of a countdown timer. Qualitative differences may be subtler.

One qualitative difference of note is that of the role of the listener. As Lee highlights, "nonvocal conduct, rather than talk, plays a crucial role in the organization and regulation of coordinating

speakership." (p. 673) Citing Goodwin, Lee further notes that, "hearers, just like speakers, are co-participants in a temporally unfolding interactional event, actively displaying their participation through local projection." Even the silent listener is participating, and meaningfully so, as the "Organization and regulation of coordinating speakership" is an undeniably important component not only of a discussion but also of one's competence and ability in using any language. If students stop carrying out these tasks, silently or otherwise, because the end of the discussion is known to be only a minute or two away, they are no longer participating in the discussion as they otherwise might. They are no longer playing their role as a language user; they are no longer actively participating, vocally and non-vocally, in a genuine discussion. A meaningful silence becomes merely empty. Perhaps then, by encouraging the *active* continuation of both listener and speaker roles, the absence of a visible timer allows not only for lengthier periods of language production but also higher-quality discussion considering time spent by students meaningfully filling different roles in the discussion.

To explore this difference more thoroughly, we might consider the meaningful continuation of the discussion not simply as an end in itself but as a sign of student motivation. Indeed, this motivation is not limited to the listener even if it is in the listener's largely silent role that one might most easily observe a meaningful difference of the sort noted above after switching to the use of a non-visible timer. Kelen notes that while "language used in the classroom, measured in terms of the 'real' usage of native speakers…is one index of a classroom's level of motivation…motivation more broadly conceived is a better measure of the reality of the target language for…students" (p.233). In so far as students can use language to accomplish something, in our case communication within a discussion, English becomes more real, more meaningful to them. The longer they are engaged, both as active speakers and listeners, the more English becomes real to them, the more it becomes a genuine language, a vehicle for the receipt and expression of ideas. To carry this consideration of autonomy and ownership of language still further, one might consider how students conceptualize the parameters of a discussion as they carry it out.

Metacognition is an area much researched and discussed in relation to many types of instruction, including ESL. We shall define metacognition[3], in our restrictive case, as one being actively aware of and guided by a given task's parameters, requisite skills, and strategies for effective completion while one is engaged in the completion of said task. It is one thing to be aware that a language task must be completed and to, perhaps, react to the questions or prompts of others. It is very much another thing to work actively toward the completion of a discussion task while holding in mind the language skills to be used by both one's self and one's partners (so one may not only use said skills but cue their use in others), simultaneously being mindful of the requisite strategies to begin and maintain a discussion in which all members may actively participate, and successfully communicating one's ideas and responding to those of others.

Fostering metacognition within the L2 classroom can, in the words of Maftoon & Alamdari, "help teach... [students] how to regulate their own comprehension and learning" (p.2). Citing Anderson (2002), Maftoon & Alamdari note that students' metacognitive awareness "can not only guide them to plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning process…but also…[enhance] the development of cognitive skills." (p.4) Further, they note the opinion from Wenden (1998) that "metacognitive awareness is regarded as the self-direction necessary for L2 performance and learning" (p.4). So, metacognition is, depending on one's viewpoint, either beneficial or requisite for learning in the language classroom. How then does this very large concept of metacognition tie-in with the use of a

3 Our definition of metacognition is a simplification of the concept in order to highlight its relevance to the discussion at hand. Metacognition, as it is more broadly studied, encompasses far more than task parameters.

non-visible timer? What is the connection?

In so far as students are managing all aspects of a discussion in the metacognitive sense noted above, metacognition is possible. However, in so far as a teacher, excess scaffolding, a timer, or other factor imposes artificial limits upon the task of discussion, the student loses the autonomy, the capacity for free decision making and self-management, that is requisite for the sort of metacognition discussed here.

In a somewhat more extreme but illustrative case, Maftoon & Alamdari (2020) note a study conducted by Vandergrift and Tafaghodtari (p.5) in which students of French as a second language, in the control group or their experiment, were given a detailed lesson plan, including elements such as evaluating, problem solving, and planning, to aid in their completion of a listening task. The experimental group was given no lesson plan. The experimental group significantly outperformed the control group in the final measure of comprehension. Certainly, completing a listening task and being an active participant in a discussion are two different things, but the suggestion remains that providing a strict framework for task management is not only not always necessary, but may, indeed, be harmful rather than beneficial regarding student performance. We might acknowledge that a timer is perhaps not as restrictive as a detailed lesson plan, but to the extent that it influences decisions about time management in the manner discussed previously, it is a limiting factor. It is only through removal of as many such limiting factors as possible that a space for metacognition may be fostered. If students are cognizant of the criteria for successful completion of a task, it may indeed be that they could benefit from less 'help' in the task's completion.

Conclusion

While the theoretical underpinnings may be numerous and varied, and largely beyond the scope of our present considerations, the effectiveness of using a non-visible timer in the discussion section of an English discussion lesson is, I believe, clear. Far from being a discouragement, as a visible timer may sometimes be, an unseen timer acts as a tool for motivation. One might argue that the removal of the timer from the students' view removes some of the contrivance and artificiality of discussion in the context of a discussion class. Both speakers and listeners continue in their roles indefinitely (even if the limits of class time are definite). The idea that the timer or arbitrary time limit itself is the arbiter of the scale and scope of a discussion is at least mitigated through the use of a non-visible timer, and the concomitant drive in the presence of a visible timer to 'watch the clock,' is done away with entirely.

While the results of using a non-visible timer have been quite positive in my experience, my experiences have been, as I have noted, subjective, non-scientific. I have simply reflected on my teaching practices. Considering how a more thorough examination might be undertaken, an avenue of academic consideration somewhat beyond the scope of this paper occurs to me. Generally, it may be worth considering the neurocognitive effect of lesson design and delivery choices. More specifically, considering the small lesson design change focused upon in this paper, recent research into variability of what is called "the readiness potential" (Travers, et al., 2021) comes to mind. The readiness potential is a form of brain activity measurable by electroencephalogram that precedes an action (Travers, et al., 2021, p.14). Study of this readiness potential is of great interest in consideration of the neural processes that underly decision making. Citing Brass & Haggard (2008), Travers notes, "stronger… [brain][4] activation for free actions than cued actions." It may be that an action decided

4 I use "brain" as a simplification to make a point. The original notes "SMA activation" (Travers, et al., 2021, p.15). 'SMA' here

upon by oneself is what one might call, unscientifically, a more genuine choice. Further, Travers finds that readiness potential signals are stronger[5] if one learns through their own experience how long to wait in each circumstance before taking whatever action, in other words, if one learns to manage one's own timing and actions. The same source notes that this has the effect of actions becoming "less random, more preplanned" (p.21). This ties directly back in with the earlier notes on metacognition in that students who are more self-sufficient and self-aware in completing tasks improve more readily at completing those tasks. If we, in the language classroom, intend to equip students to engage, at least ultimately, in the unguided, unaided use of a language, providing circumstances more conducive to genuine decision-making regarding language must be considered invaluable. Regarding the readiness potential itself, its examination specifically with regard to language as opposed to discrete physical action seems an area open to further exploration both in the medical and academic fields.

Returning to our immediate scope of concern, if teachers wish to empower students to use a language, we must ultimately take a step back. We must, to take Kaur (2015) slightly out of original context, "give…[students] the space to experiment with language so that learners may develop a sense of ownership for their [use of the language]" (p.374). We must allow for genuine engagement with the roles of speaker and listener. We must trust in students' abilities to be cognizant not only of task parameters but also of themselves *as* speakers and listeners. Certainly, there is space for guidance. As I have noted, the periods of discussion in my class are punctuated by feedback. However, just as they may be 'on their own' in the future when called upon to use their English language ability, I try to let students be as autonomous as possible within the periods of discussions. Removing the timer from view during discussions is simply one more way to allow students this freedom.

refers to portions of the brain known as the Supplementary Motor Areas, "which…receive strong drive from the subcortical circuitry of the basal ganglia" (Travers, et al., 2021, p.14).

5 Specifically, "[readiness potential] amplitude increases as participants learn through experience how long to wait before acting…their actions become less random, more preplanned and more predictable" (Travers, et al., 2021, p.21).

References

Kaur, K. (2015) The emergent nature of strategic mediation in ESL teacher education. *Language Teaching Research*, 19(3) 374-388. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1362168814547074

Kelen, C. (2002) Language and Learning Orthodoxy in the English Classroom in China. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 34(2), 223-237. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1469-5812.2002.tb00299.x

Lee, J. (2017) Multimodal turn allocation in ESL peer group discussions. *Social Semiotics*, 27(5), 671-692. https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2016.1207353

Maftoon, P. & Alamdari, E.F. (2020) Exploring the Effect of Metacognitive Strategy Instruction on Metacognitive Awareness and Listening Performance Through a Process-Based Approach. *International Journal of Listening*, 34, 1-20. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10904018.2016.1250632

Travers, E., Friedemann, M., & Haggard, P. (2021) The Readiness Potential reflects planning-based expectation, not uncertainty, in the timing of action. *Cognitive Neuroscience* 12(1), 14-27. https://doi.org/10.1080/17588928.2020.1824176

Tyner, A. (2020) Self and Group: Dynamics of Reflection in Student-to-Student Feedback. *New Directions in Teaching and Learning English Discussion* 8, 65-70.