

Examining the Unit 3 Goals of English Discussion Class

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Abstract

Commencing Spring 2020, textbook writers of Rikkyo University's English Discussion Class (EDC) have divided the course into three units: 1) sharing and supporting opinions, 2) organizing a discussion, and 3) challenging and evaluating ideas. However, EDC students might need more assistance than that offered by Kita et al.'s (2022) "What's Your Opinion?" to achieve the third unit goal of challenging and evaluating ideas. In the EDC Handbook (2022), there also exists a lack of clarity regarding the relationship between the Unit 3 goals and the Unit 3 discussion skills. In this paper, I review the current textbook's explanations of the Unit 3 discussion skills, present alternative explanations, and thereafter, outline potential in-class activities. With these new explanations and activities, students might gain a better understanding of how to use the third unit's discussion skills for the purpose of challenging and evaluating ideas.

Keywords: EDC, Objectives, Challenging, Evaluating

Introduction

English discussion class (EDC) is a requirement for all first-year students at Rikkyo University. The course is designed to improve academic discussion skills, communication skills, and spoken fluency (Hurling, 2012). EDC textbook writers have divided EDC into three units: a) sharing and supporting opinions, b) organizing a discussion, and c) challenging and evaluating ideas. These units are further separated into discussion skills. Table 1 on the next page shows unit goals with discussion skills and examples.

The first unit goal of sharing and supporting opinions featured in Table 1 has three discussion skills: opinions, supporting opinions, and follow-up questions. Students demonstrate their competence of sharing and supporting opinions by asking for and giving opinions, reasons/examples, and follow-up questions in the discussion. The second unit goal of organizing a discussion has three discussion skills of connecting ideas, joining a discussion, and changing topics. Students demonstrate their ability to organize a discussion by using these skills during discussion. The last unit goal is challenging and evaluating ideas. The discussion skills are different viewpoints, balancing opinions, and sources of information. During the discussion, students show the extent to which they can challenge and evaluate ideas by using these three skills.

In the following sections, I discuss the problems with not providing definitions and examples for challenging and evaluating ideas, then examine the current textbook explanations. After, I provide new explanations with examples to mitigate these problems. Lastly, I present classroom activities that might help students gain a better understanding of the terms challenging and evaluating ideas.

Table 1*Unit Goals With Corresponding Discussion Skills and Examples From Kita et al. (2022)*

Unit Goal	Lesson No.	Discussion Skill	Examples
	1	Introduction to English Discussion Class	
Sharing and Supporting Opinions	2	Opinions	In my opinion,... I think... What do you think?
	3	Supporting Opinions	One reason/example is... Why do you think so?
	4	Follow-up Questions	What...? Which...? How...? Do you...? Can you...?
	5	Test 1 on Sharing and Supporting Opinions	
Organizing a Discussion	6	Connecting Ideas	I agree/disagree. You said... What do you think of my idea?
	7	Joining a Discussion	Can I start? Can I say something? Would anyone like to ask a question?
	8	Changing Topics	What shall we discuss first/next? Is there anything more to add? So, we agree/disagree about...
	9	Test 2 on Organizing a Discussion	
Challenging and Evaluating Ideas	10	Different Viewpoints	From (X's) point of view... How about (X's) point of view?
	11	Balancing Opinions	One advantage/disadvantage of... What's one advantage/disadvantage?
	12	Sources of Information	According to... I read/heard/saw/learned... Where did you read/see/hear that?
	14	Test 3 on Challenging and Evaluating Ideas	

Note. Information from *What's Your Opinion?* 2nd Edition (Kita et al., 2022)

Challenging Ideas

Showing the relationship between the discussion skills and the unit goals can make the purpose and use apparent to students, which facilitates a greater likelihood that students use the skills appropriately. Without providing such clarity, students might not realize the unit goals. The last unit goal, challenging and evaluating ideas, comprises the following three discussion skills: different viewpoints, balancing opinions, and sources of information. Using the unit three discussion skills does not necessarily equate to fulfilling the goal of challenging ideas because students can use them for the purpose of supporting their own ideas. In the dialogue below, Aki uses viewpoints to support her own idea while Ryo uses it to challenge Aki's idea:

- Aki: I agree with you. From the point of view of doctors, they believe that English is important because if there is a tourist who gets injured and doesn't speak Japanese, then the doctor can still communicate with him.
- Ryo: However, from the point of view of ambulance drivers, English is not so important because paramedics are in the vehicle, and they are required to speak English.

Supporting ideas is important for the process of evaluation but challenging ideas using viewpoints requires searching for views of people who disagree with each other. Yet only the lowest-

proficiency students (i.e., Level 4) have “challenging and evaluating ideas” translated in their textbook.¹ The Unit 3 goals have been translated to *Takaku-tekina shiten to iken no hyōka* (多角的な視点と意見の評価), which means evaluating multifaceted opinions and perspectives. This lack of translation or definition of “challenging ideas” for other levels is problematic because highly proficient students might not be able to give a definition, even in their native language, of what it means. In the Collins Dictionary (2022), the writers define “challenging ideas” as questioning “truth, value, or authority.” Providing a definition with examples to students of all EDC levels would be advantageous because they can judge for themselves whether they, or their classmates, are using Unit 3 discussion skills for the purpose of questioning.

Evaluating Ideas

Using Unit 3 discussion skills also does not necessarily equate to fulfilling the goal of evaluating ideas because students can use the discussion skills without weighing or judging the merits of the ideas. For example, discussing advantages and disadvantages does not necessarily mean that students are weighing advantages and disadvantages. Likewise, asking for sources of information during discussion does not mean that students are determining which source is most trustworthy. The step of students revisiting their initial opinions is necessary because the goal is to reassess information in light of discussion skill use. The 2022 Handbook does note that students should give their “opinion + assess” the ideas, but the goal of this paper is to be more specific than the current textbook and handbook on what assess means in terms of the Unit 3 discussion skills, and when also students should give their assessment during the discussion.

EDC students might struggle to provide a definition of evaluating on their own, so providing one can help them gain a better understanding of what they should be doing during the discussion. Evaluating can be defined as follows:

- “...the making of a judgement about the amount, number, or value of something after thinking about it carefully” (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 2022)
- “...the systematic determination and assessment of a subject’s merit, worth, significance, using criteria governed by a set of standards” (Wikipedia Contributors, 2022)

The second definition includes the use of criteria as the means by which the evaluation is systematic, and doing so, more clearly differentiates it from simply giving opinions. Kita et al.’s (2022) textbook explanations do not define discussion skills in terms of making a judgment, and therefore, they do not provide a set of standards by which students can evaluate a belief. They also do not specify where exactly, within the discussion, students should be revisiting their initial opinions to make a judgement.

In addition to not defining the terms for Levels 1-3, the textbook writers do not relate the terms to each other so that students understand their connection. A high-quality evaluation requires the challenging of the “truth, value, or authority” of different beliefs of the same issue. Therefore, it might be important for students to know that they are to challenge ideas for the purpose of properly evaluating them.

1 The translation is on the table of contents section on pages 3-4 of Level 4 textbook (See Kita et al., 2022).

Textbook Explanations of Unit 3 Discussion Skills

Table 2 shows the textbook explanations of Unit 3's discussion skills from the EDC textbook, "What's Your Opinion?" (Kita et al., 2022):

Table 2

Unit 3 Textbook Explanations from Kita et al. (2022)

Goals of Challenging and Evaluating	Discussion Skills	Textbook Explanations
Different Viewpoints	Asking for Different Viewpoints	"...it helps you discuss different opinions on a topic."
	Giving Different Viewpoints	"...it helps you discuss more than just your own opinions."
Balancing Opinions	Asking Others to Balance Opinions	"...it helps everyone understand different sides of an idea or topic."
	Balancing Your Opinions	"...it helps you talk about the advantages and disadvantages of different ideas."
Sources of Information	Asking about Information	"...it helps you find out more about other people's opinions and where their information came from."
	Giving Information	"...it helps you support your opinions with evidence and facts from TV, the internet, books, magazines, newspapers, other people, and personal experiences."

Note. Information from What's Your Opinion? 2nd Edition (Kita et al., 2022)

These textbook explanations are not so clear insofar as how the discussion skills relate to challenging and evaluating ideas. For example, the explanation for giving different viewpoints is that "it helps you discuss more than just your own opinions." Even if students know the definitions of challenging and evaluating ideas, this explanation might still be difficult for students to understand how discussing more than just your own opinions relates to challenging and evaluating ideas. As there is no further explanation than the one presented in the textbook, students and instructors must determine for themselves how to use these skills to fulfill the goals of challenge and evaluate ideas.

The textbook writers provide dialogues of the discussion skills to contextualize their use, but there are no activities to help students identify when discussion skills are being used for the purpose of challenging and for the purpose of evaluating ideas. Explanations in the textbook and the handbook are also unclear regarding whether all of the Unit 3 discussion skills can be used for both challenging ideas and evaluating ideas. Therefore, instructors or students must also determine whether each skill presented in Unit 3 can be used for either challenging or evaluating, or for both. This point is important because the meaning of challenging ideas is different from evaluating ideas, and thus, the way that we would use the discussion skills changes. This problem is explained in more detail in the next section.

New Unit 3 Discussion Skill Explanations

To make the relationship between the discussion skills and the Unit 3 goal clearer than the previous textbook explanations, Table 3 below shows new explanations with examples for each. They are as follows:

Table 3*New Discussion Skill Explanations for Unit 3 Goals*

Discussion Skills	Challenging ideas	Evaluating ideas
Viewpoints	To challenge ideas using viewpoints, ask for or give the opinions of people who disagree. Doing so uncovers potential weaknesses of the idea.	To evaluate ideas using viewpoints, after discussing the views of people who disagree with each other, decide whose viewpoint is the most convincing.
	Example: "You said that emergency service workers should speak English, but how about from an ambulance drivers' viewpoint? From their point of view, paramedics, who are also in the ambulance, must speak English so learning English is not necessary for drivers. What do you think about that?"	Example: "We discussed five viewpoints, and, in my opinion, the most convincing views are from emergency drivers and doctors. They think that emergency service workers do not need to speak English, so I agree with their opinion."
Balancing Opinions	To challenge ideas using balancing, ask for or give support for an opposing opinion. Doing so expresses doubt about the idea.	To evaluate ideas using balancing, determine whether the good points outweigh the bad points or vice versa.
	Example: "You said that all emergency service workers should speak English. Yet, what is a disadvantage of all emergency service workers speaking English?" Example: "You said that all emergency service workers should not speak English. However, one advantage is... What do you think about that?"	Example: "We discussed the advantages and disadvantages and found two advantages and three disadvantages. Even though there are some advantages, the disadvantages are more convincing, so all emergency service workers should speak English."
Sources of Information	To challenge using sources of information, ask where students have learned about idea. Doing so questions the idea's truthfulness.	To evaluate using sources of information, decide which source is the most trustworthy.
	Example: "You said that all emergency service workers should speak English, but how do you know about that?"	Example: "We discussed the sources of information and I think that the strongest sources of information are from NHK and BBC because those news organizations are more trustworthy than social media."

In Table 3, I separate challenging ideas from evaluating ideas because the different purposes change the way that the discussion skills are used. For example, when students use balancing opinions to challenge ideas, students ask for or give the opposite (e.g., if a student agrees with the idea, then students ask about its disadvantages and vice versa). When students use balancing opinions for the purpose of evaluation, they first weigh the advantages and disadvantages. Thereafter, they judge whether overall, there are more convincing advantages for the idea than disadvantages. The same idea holds true for viewpoints and sources. They are used differently depending on their purpose. Table 3 might help students understand the meaning of challenging and evaluating more than Table 2 because Table 3 explicitly connects the use of discussion skill to the unit goals. It also answers the question whether discussion skills can be used for both challenging ideas and evaluating ideas.

To help students with evaluating ideas, instructors can ask students to use the following prompts, which are based on the Unit 3 discussion skills, during the summary section of the discussion:

- In my opinion, the most important stakeholders and experts are... and so I agree with them

that...

- I believe that the advantages/disadvantages of... outweigh its disadvantages/advantages.
- I think that there are more reliable sources of information for the idea than against it.

For example, if students are discussing the idea that all emergency service workers should speak English, then after they use viewpoints, balance, and sources, they can revisit their initial opinion at the end of the discussion using the prompts above as a standard by which to evaluate ideas. One disadvantage of having students openly evaluate at the end of their discussion is that students do not cover as many topics as they do without evaluation because revisiting their initial beliefs is more time-consuming. Evaluating might also be too cognitively challenging for low-proficiency students because they must recall what other students have said. Therefore, they might need to take notes during the discussion and have more scaffolding for the summary section (See Appendix for an example worksheet for Unit 3 discussion). Lastly, the new explanations are divided into the categories of “challenging” and “evaluating,” and not divided into the categories of “asking for” and “giving” as is the case with Units 1 and 2, so there is a lack of consistency. Instructors must decide whether the advantages of presenting these new explanations outweigh the disadvantages of presenting them.

Unit 3 Activities

In this section, I explain activities to help students use viewpoints, sources of information, and balancing to challenge and evaluate ideas.

Using Viewpoints to Challenge and Evaluate Ideas

On page 34 of the EDC Handbook (2022), writers recommend giving students time to think of various viewpoints before the discussion to decrease their cognitive load. I recommend this activity for the additional reason that instructors can ensure that students list relevant viewpoints of stakeholders or experts. If not, students make a mistake of using any viewpoints. They might often ask, regardless of the topic, “How about from the viewpoint of university students?” The problem with this is, typically, stakeholders and experts have more convincing views than outsiders or laypersons, so for the purpose of fulfilling the goal of evaluating ideas, students can spend time researching ideas of stakeholders and experts during discussion preparation. Another problem is that if the viewpoint is not from a stakeholder or expert, it is difficult to claim that that constitutes a challenge to ideas because it might lack relevance.

I also ask students to use contrasting words to clearly show that they are challenging ideas. Instead of students asking “How about from ambulance drivers’ point of view?” they ask “*But* how about from ambulance drivers’ point of view?” Instead of, “From the ambulance drivers’ point of view...” They say, “*However*, from ambulance drivers’ point of view, they believe...” Using contrasting words makes discussion assessment for instructors easier as using them signals that students are intending to use viewpoints for challenging ideas. The 2022 Handbook writers state that students can also use viewpoints to support their opinions (i.e., one of the goals for Unit 1). Supporting opinions with viewpoints helps students to better evaluate ideas. They might need to know not to use contrasting words (e.g., however, yet) when they use viewpoints to support their own opinions.

Using Balancing Opinions to Challenge and Evaluate Ideas

Students can evaluate ideas using balancing opinions by thinking of the most compelling advantages and disadvantages, and then deciding whether the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. Instructors can write a list of advantages and disadvantages of an idea, and then have students judge whether the advantages are more convincing than the disadvantages. Next, students can explain their rationale for their decision. In addition to helping students to evaluate, the rationale helps students to think deeply about the idea because their reasoning usually is based on their values or principles of abstract ideas. For example, students might think that the advantages of studying abroad for a year outweigh the disadvantages because they value new experiences more than they value familiarity.

Using Sources of Information to Challenge and Evaluate Ideas

The EDC Handbook writers (2022) state that students can ask for sources of information to challenge ideas using the phrase, “How do you know about that?” To use sources of information for the purpose evaluating ideas, students must judge sources of information based on their trustworthiness. Without doing any research, students might overuse the phrase, “It’s from my experience” to support their opinions. For discussion preparation, students can spend 5 minutes researching one to two sources of information. In another activity, instructors can present a few sources of information and have students discuss to what extent the sources are trustworthy. Students have a required debate course next semester, and they spend time considering the reliability of their sources, but I still think that if the Unit 3 goal is to evaluate ideas, then discussion preparation for researching sources of information is justifiable.

Conclusion

To conclude, EDC students might need more assistance to realize the Unit 3 goals of challenging and evaluating ideas. Revising some of the textbook explanations can add clarity. Students also benefit from certain activities such as researching sources of information, using viewpoints to think of challenges, and providing a set of standards for evaluating ideas. Although these revisions to the textbook explanations are not without issues, by providing an explicit connection between the Unit 3 goals and discussion skills, students might gain a deeper understanding of how to use these skills for the stated purpose.

References

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Appendix

Example Worksheet for Unit 3 Discussion

EXAMPLE

NAME:

Yamada Taro

1. IDEA:

All emergency workers in Japan should learn English.

2. LIST:

Viewpoints	Advantages	Disadvantages	Sources
<p style="font-size: 0.8em; font-weight: bold;">For the idea</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ① doctors ② nurses ⑤ foreigners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ① Foreigners can't speak Japanese ② Outside - Japan can help 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ② Rural places do not have foreigners ① Time-consuming and boring 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ① NHK ③ BBC ② The Q
<p style="font-size: 0.8em; font-weight: bold;">Against the idea</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ④ drivers ③ police 			

3. RANK:

(Order the lists above from the most convincing to least convincing)

4. SUMMARY:

In my opinion, they should learn English.

The most convincing viewpoints are from doctors.

The advantages/disadvantages outweigh the disadvantages/advantages.

The most trustworthy source of information is NHK.

The exception is if emergency workers live in the countryside and don't travel.