Using discussion skills to enhance speaking in the classroom

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Abstract

In this study, the team investigates the effect of the discussion process on the students' speaking performance. Earlier observations on group work pointed to how discussions were monopolised by more vocal students, leaving the rest disengaged and unmotivated. Thus, much of curriculum time was wasted and little impact was seen on the students' ability to speak and present their views. With the introduction of a structured approach to discussion and situating speaking tasks in a more flexible curriculum, all students in the intervention groups have been given the opportunity to speak within an open learning environment that focusses on the process instead of the product.

Introduction

The English language syllabus, 2010 (Curriculum Planning & Development Division, 2008, p. 6) stipulates the important role of schools in preparing our students for the increasingly competitive international environment. While assessing, processing and keeping abreast of information, future citizens must also be able to engage with the wide diversity of the other communities. English, being the global lingua franca, must therefore be taught to the students well enough for them to possess the confidence to present their ideas and be viewed as relevant and current.

In order to achieve real-world success, we need to engage with others to learn, create and produce in the hope of generating new thinking and learning (Novak & Slattery, 2017). In order to achieve this outcome, our classrooms need to be filled with curious and innovative minds. Unfortunately, in their zeal to prepare their students for the national exams and produce commendable results, a great majority of teachers in Singapore choose to focus on teaching to the test. A greater catastrophe is the overemphasis on the teaching of reading, writing and grammar and the neglect of two important skills students need to have in order to be confident users of the language – speaking and listening.

Our students need to talk! This has prompted the need for this study to ensure that we are giving our students the opportunity to speak and are not simply preparing them for the oral examinations. With the challenging curriculum, the need to balance the acquisition of the various language skills with the preparing of students to competently manage the examinations, we realised the need to adopt and adapt an approach that will be able to meet all these needs. As group work is a pedagogy most teachers choose, we decided to observe what happened during group interactions. Based on class observations and discussions with the upper level language teachers, we concluded that while there are a lot of learning opportunities in this approach, the majority of the students have been mainly

looking busy rather than having real discussions. We thus decided to explore various strategies to teach speaking and apply appropriate structures in group work in order to encourage students to speak effectively and meaningfully during discussions.

Literature Review

There has been a general consensus amongst English Language (EL) teachers that reading and listening are important skills for the acquisition of the language. Hence, in most Singapore classes that we walk into, speaking, another important skill for language acquisition, is dominated by the teachers, with the exception of intermittent interjections of students' responses to the questions that have been posed.

While reading and listening are undoubtedly crucial in providing input for the learning of the language, research studies show that the students' output is equally crucial in helping them achieve proficiency in the language (Goh & Burns, 2012). This cannot be achieved unless EL teachers create the opportunities that encourage them to speak in the target language. Such opportunities nevertheless cannot be limited to the question-answer routines that are currently pervasive in the classrooms. Goh and Burns (2012) emphasize the importance of students using the language in order to express and interpret the meaning of utterances they hear, and, for learning to take place, EL teachers must not assume that the students will pick up these utterances without the teachers explicitly teaching them to the students. It is important that we do not leave the acquisition of these utterances to chance thus necessitating careful planning of the curriculum. Conversation strategies such as modelling, reformulation, contingent speech, clarification requests and confirmation checks ought to be woven into the lessons such that the students are learning from the expert – their EL teacher.

The large class size that is typical of the majority of Singapore's classrooms poses a challenge to a huge majority of the EL teachers in creating a meaningful learning space for the students to speak, let alone be engaged in discourse. In order to achieve a certain level of fluency and accuracy for the majority, if not all, of the students, and in view of the constraints of class size and a tight curriculum plan, group discussions are seen as an approach that can work in providing our students with enough exposure in speaking the target language. However, according to Goh (2008), these can only work when the experience is engineered such that students understand what it means to discuss, and are aware of the learning objectives and teacher's expectations. Furthermore, they must not be limited by their own abilities and knowledge, and the teacher must be clear in his/her instructions. Corden (2000) stresses the importance of the role the teacher plays in creating an open learning context for the discussion to take place. Here, the teacher actively communicates the importance of the engagement or process and not the outcome of the discussion.

A greater challenge exists in the primary school classrooms as the learners there are more reliant on scaffolding and modelling by the teacher. As the teacher works on fluency building and accuracy, the discussions have to take on a certain structure that both the teacher and students can work towards in producing the desired outcomes. In this, the study falls back on Goh's (2008) approach based on the work of Barnes and Todd (1977), Corden (2000) and Mercer (2000) on the types of utterances in group discourse. In the intervention lessons, we applied a strategy that we felt would promote exploratory talk where group thinking and discussion skills were explored. The highly structured nature of this approach was able to give each child a chance to express his/her view without interruptions from the other three members of the group. This was made possible with prior training of the expected norms during discussions, the teacher's planning of the question to pose for the discussion and in factoring time for students to plan their initial thoughts on the issue to be discussed, and after establishing a safe and non-judgemental environment where perspectives could be shared rather openly.

This study aims to answer the following research question:

How does the quality of discussions correlate with students' speaking performance?

Methodology

At the start of the study, a pilot run was carried out with two Primary 5 classes by their respective EL teachers. For this pre-research study, the teachers carried out a lesson which included a group discussion. Students were placed in groups of four and given a task which required them to carry out a discussion.

Based on the findings from the pre-research study, intervention lessons were designed and carried out to teach students the focus areas that were identified as necessary to develop their speaking competencies. Lesson plans were designed to teach the students the target discussion skills. The teachers adopted a principled pedagogical model and systematic approach to teach speaking using three types of utterances stipulated by Barnes and Todd (1977), Corden (2000) and Mercer (2000), namely; i) the hypothetical/exploratory, ii) reasoned, and iii) evaluative. These were chosen by the team in view of their essential features that are able to ensure effective discussion taking place if they are carried out effectively. The explicit teaching also included the demonstration of the metacognitive processes involved in a discussion. Formulaic expressions and discourse markers for acknowledging, agreeing, disagreeing, modifying, negotiating and summarising were also demonstrated and taught to the students. The use of discourse markers, awareness of syntax and semantics, behavioural patterns, both disruptive as well as reinforcing, and the participants' metacognitive processes were monitored when assessing students' competencies in both the pre- and post-research studies.

A longitudinal study was carried out over the period of 2017 to 2018. The students involved will be taking their PSLE at the end of 2018. All lessons were audio and video recorded. During each lesson under study, recorders were placed on the tables to record the discussion of randomly-selected groups. The video recording was done two ways – with the use of swivl for the teachers, and of video cameras to also capture the students when they were at work.

The Participant Sample

A total of 75 upper primary students were involved in the research; they were in Primary 5 in 2017 and in Primary 6 in 2018. For the discussion tasks, students were grouped randomly in small groups of four to ensure that every student had a chance to speak during the discussion.

Findings and Discussion

Key areas observed

Based on the analysis of the transcribed lessons, video footage, teachers' observations and students' feedback, the following observations (Tables 1 and 2 below) have been gathered by the investigating team.

Planning

During the planning of the lessons, investigators found that it was quite difficult to look at developing the students' speaking skills without linking those skills to listening. Thus, in selecting the speaking learning outcomes (LO) from the syllabus, Skills, Strategies, Attitudes and Behaviours (SSAB), it was necessary that we looked into the listening LOs as well and match them as best as possible. What the team also discovered was that the students' entry point for the two skills varied. There was a greater

disparity between the students' listening competencies as listed in the SSAB. As a result, there was a need to conduct intervention lessons in listening to ensure that the investigation was able to focus on speaking skills.

Table 1

Observations of student behaviour before and after the intervention

Behaviour Patterns	Observations (Pre-study)	Observations (Post-study)
Acknowledging Showing agreement/ disagreement	Students provided their opinions but did not reiterate earlier points made by their group members. This resulted in some confusion and members sometimes found it difficult to stick to the focussed areas in their discussion.	Following the sequence and instructions given, students started off by acknowledging and reiterating what was shared earlier by their peers. After which, they voiced their opinions by stating their agreement or disagreement. Most students managed to express their opinions clearly. They also provided reasons for their opinions and offered new perspectives based on the role they had been assigned.
Turn-taking	Comments were given in between friends' responses (e.g. speak louder; talk; say something). There were displays of slight impatience with their peers at this point which resulted in some unhappiness amongst group members. As a result, discussions became rather disorderly. A few members then decided to become silent observers, making very few useful contributions.	Students were clear of their roles and the instructions as well as the sequence for the discussion. There was hardly any prompting from other members. Students took turns to speak. Every member had to contribute their ideas and opinions when it was their turn to speak. Students did not attempt to correct one another and allowed each member to express their own opinions. Better team work and greater group synergy could be observed. Students were able to complete tasks given more efficiently.

Behaviour Patterns	Observations (Pre-study)	Observations (Post-study)
Reasoning Providing rational reasoning and elaboration of thoughts	Students did not relate much of their personal experiences and largely made reference to the context of the texts given to them instead.	Students were able to relate their personal experiences and cite references to videos and articles shared earlier at the same time. They provided varied opinions and were more assertive when relating their opinions. There were instances when group members sought clarification and students were able to elaborate almost instantaneously.
Negotiations Reaching consensus	Not all students were able to articulate their thoughts promptly; resulting in awkward pauses. A few needed more time to think through their responses before being able to respond. Although the discussion was focussed on the topic given and students did not stray much, there was still a certain degree of non-involvement and disinterest.	Students were able to provide alternative opinions politely. (e.g. "I do agree that students should clean their classrooms but I don't think that they should clean the toilets as the toilets could be slippery…") (e.g. "I do agree with you on this point. However, ….) In-depth discussions were carried out by some groups. They showed a higher level of maturity and took up their assigned roles seriously. They were more receptive to the different perspectives and opinions given. They also helped to clarify doubts or questions which other members had. The consensus reached was endorsed by peers without much argument.
Disruptive behaviour (e.g. giggling, interferences, digression)	There were quite a number of disruptions made (interjections made by friends). Some were giggling during the sharing and were not very serious when presenting the different thoughts based on the roles assigned Unrelated comments were given in between friends' responses (such as "speak louder"; "talk"; "say something"). Some showed a degree of impatience with friends at times.	Members were encouraging each other. They provided time for respondents to think and did not interrupt their thoughts or offer solutions/ answers immediately. There were a few interruptions but with the intent to correct or clarify. They also provided their peers with the opportunity to repeat their sentences or provide clearer explanations.

Table 2

Observations of students' use of language structures before and after the intervention

Language Structures	Observations (Pre-study)	Observations (Post-study)
Making links Application of understanding of semantics and lexical structure in making links Miscues – making slips during conversations (natural for such miscues in conversations)	A few responses did not start off well using model expressions (e.g. "But right…"; "So I guess nowadays…") A few students were still not speaking in complete sentences with noticeable grammatical errors in sentences (e.g. "I guess right…")	Students were more cognizant of appropriate model expressions and conjunctions to express their views and reasons. (e.g. "I think…", "What if…", "Suppose…", "In my opinion …", "I definitely agree that…", "on the other hand…", "however"). Sentence structures displayed better understanding of correctness. However, some used an "informal" style of speaking (e.g. "you know"; "for all you know") Some students were rather oblivious to the grammatical mistakes made during conversation. There was a tendency to use long sentences with incorrect structures.
Coherence Pauses	Some students were not speaking in complete sentences (e.g. "like you know we are so old right?"; "stuff like that"; "like we can…"). This affected the clarity of their thoughts. Few were able to think on their feet and articulate their thoughts almost instantly. There were awkward pauses as a result of this.	Attempts were made to express themselves in proper sentences, using formulaic expressions to start their responses.
Use of discourse markers	While speaking, students used expressions such as "hmmm"; "like…like", "if…if", "the…the". They showed some difficulty in articulating their thoughts smoothly.	Although most students were more aware of their grammatical structures, they also tended to use "and" and "because" too often to state one opinion/view after another or to connect ideas. Students still need to break down ideas or express their ideas simply in order to put their idea across succinctly.

Regulating students' behaviour

In order to ensure that every child in the class was given the opportunity to contribute to the group discussions, a few things had to be looked into prior to the intervention.

a) Ensuring a safe environment

When asked for the reasons for their reluctance to speak up during discussions, students cited the insecurity they felt at being judged and assessed by both the teachers and peers as the main factor. There was therefore a need to establish a safe zone for respectful and tolerant discussion. The teachers had to create this atmosphere through many mini-interactions and the use of strategies in formative assessment to bring about participation from all the students in the two classrooms under study. It was a little awkward, more in one class than the other, and slowed down lessons, but the team felt that this was necessary in order to create the necessary environment for positive classroom interactions.

b) Strategies in regulating students' behaviour

For successful discussions to take place in the classrooms, there must be a clarity of instructions and a clear understanding of the expectations and outcomes of the tasks. All instructions need to be explicitly outlined and cannot be left to chance.

As the structure of the discussions was designed using Goh's (2007) approach of exploratory and cumulative talk, it was imperative that the students abide by the procedure of the talks. This protocol had to be established by the teachers through a few practice rounds before the students were able to execute this at a success rate that resulted in a healthy participation rate. Although awkward and unnatural initially, students became less conscious of the steps and more intuitive as they got more exposed to the routine.

Goh (2007) suggested a 12-step approach in which students formed groups of four and numbered themselves one to four. Once given a topic, two of the students had to adopt a 'for' stance while the other two adopted an 'against' position. The four individual students were then given some time to think about their positions and make notes. The discussion started with one of the 'for' students giving an argument for the topic. The next student had to then argue against the topic by first answering the points made by the first student and then introducing their own points. In this way, the discussion circled the group at least twice. The students could then summarize their individual positions or the group could prepare a summary together. During the group discussion, it was important to remind the students to strictly follow the sequence, not to interrupt the person whose turn it was, and to listen carefully and take notes in order to later respond to what the other students said.

In this approach, students had to take turns presenting their views and, while one was presenting, the other team members had to resist the temptation to inject their views or opinions until they were given their time to do so. The teachers found this extremely effective in ensuring that turn-taking was seriously enforced. As the teachers made it clear that the subsequent speaker needed to build on or reject the idea(s) previously shared, the students had to also listen intently, make relevant notes, and not be fixated on the ideas they had already penned down before the discussion started.

What the teachers found to have a significant effect was the students' ability to provide their perspective on the topic of discussion. The students were able to apply the strategies taught earlier in giving their perspectives on an issue, and more importantly, in listening and responding to the perspectives of others and possibly reflecting on their own perspective after listening to the views of others. Inevitably, with the teachers' guidance, the students were developing critical thinking skills.

c) Scaffolding and modelling

Students were unable to speak unless they had something to talk about. There was therefore a need to position the task meaningfully in the students' overall learning. Thus, this usually took the form of pre-writing tasks. Prior to this activity, the students had already been exposed to the idea through reading, video watching with discussions relating to the texts or video used. Discussion questions were carefully crafted by the teachers at the planning stage to ensure that there would be enough materials for the class to fall back on during the discussion task.

At the beginning of the intervention, the teachers had to model the thinking aloud for the students to hear and take note of. The steps were also heavily scaffolded and links had to be explicitly made for the students. They were also encouraged to take notes and make reference to them. Teachers modelled these steps during classroom discussions by frequently making references, linking present ideas and building on new perspectives. In time, the majority of the students became more independent while some relied on their peers to help them along. In this too, students were able to learn from one another and develop group camaraderie.

d) Random grouping of students

The investigating team had decided to depend on the random grouping of students during the discussion tasks to find out if the strategy would work irrespective of the members within a group.

We discovered that after the class had developed an environment where every view mattered, this approach allowed the students to establish some degree of group dynamics no matter who their team members were. The teachers observed that students were more affirming of each other's views and they were more cordial and respectful even if they did not agree with one another's views.

Fluency and accuracy building

By using the exploratory talk approach, the students' fluency was enhanced as they were given a guided sequence that they could follow. The sequence helped them to quite an extent in managing the interaction during the discussion. The provision of the stimuli for discussions through exposure to the various materials, the scaffolding with the use of guiding questions, and the role-taking to encourage the taking of alternative perspectives all contributed to promoting fluency in the discussions.

Fluency alone is not enough for meaning to come through. Accuracy must also be built up for the effective communication of ideas. In the pre-study, the students were generally confused with the messaging as the majority of the students were not able to construct well-constructed sentences that conveyed their thoughts. They were both weak in the grammatical structures as well as the lexical aspect.

During the pre-writing lessons therefore, the teachers walked through both form and meaning with the students. The teachers captured a few of the inconsistent sentences the students had earlier used as teaching points before they started off the discussion activity. The teachers also walked around to listen to the discussions and picked up inconsistencies in grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation which they later used as target teaching materials.

The introduction of formulaic expressions to the students enhanced both fluency and accuracy and helped students string ideas together cohesively. Although their use was initially unnatural as they sounded rehearsed, the students subsequently became less self-conscious and they applied these expressions more naturally when presenting their ideas or opinions. They were also heard using them in their daily conversations and these expressions were useful when they presented their views during

other classroom discussions and during the oral examinations. Such expressions are useful to learners of the language as they help facilitate the production of spoken language (Goh & Burns, 2012). Discussions happen in real time; hence these expressions can help alleviate the pressure in producing the oral language that can deliver the idea across (Pawley & Syder, 2013).

Conclusion and implication

English Language teachers in the Singapore classrooms are finding it increasingly more challenging to balance the expectations of the curriculum as well as the need to produce results for the school. However, it is crucial that every EL teacher at every level of school sees language learning as an important platform to prepare the students to be future citizens who are able to function well in a future that is uncertain and volatile.

It is not enough for us to just prepare our students so that they are competent enough to tackle the exam questions and requirements. There is an urgent need for EL teachers specially to look beyond the exams and results. One of the big areas that we have neglected is the building of the students' oracy skills. This realisation has become quite a topic of discussion amongst English Heads of Departments and so school programmes have been started to ensure that students are equipped with the ability to speak. Many teachers have turned to group discussions. However, on closer examination, most of these discussions have not benefitted all the students; in some classes, discussions have been dominated by a handful of vocal ones, and in most, these group discussions have turned into sessions where students just look busy

Introducing a researched structure for use during discussions, teachers will be better able to enable the students by using a platform that will help them build both fluency and accuracy in the speaking skills. Canale and Swain (1980) correctly pointed out that apart from being grammatically competent, effective speakers must also be able to make connections to produce coherence, be aware of other speakers and the context they are in, and be able to react efficiently by using both verbal and non-verbal cues to prevent breakdowns in communication.

While a structured and guided approach provides the students with security and helps prevent breakdowns in communication, Green, Christopher & Lam (2002) also caution that this can result in little direct student involvement in the discussion process. In turn, when students lack empowerment in the task, their cognitive engagement and motivation to participate will be poor. For this reason, during the lessons, the teachers made it explicitly clear to the students that they needed to listen to the views presented and then build on or provide another perspective to the viewpoint. Involvement and engagement during the intervention lessons were thus reasonably high as students were expected to listen to their team members' input before presenting their own perspective on the issue. They had to also select from the various perspectives that were shared to help them in their individual writing later in the writing task.

The team feels that building students' competency in speaking cannot be effective if teachers compartmentalise the teaching and learning of the language skills. As it involves a far bigger area than fluency and accuracy, and because discussions can be conducted in any subject or language, the approach presented here should be extended to the mother tongue languages as well as the other subjects, particularly the humanities.

Looking at how the students' speaking competence has been enhanced through the use of discussion, the team plans to look into fine-tuning the steps within the discussion and also at how student-led discussions can help add more value to the students' speaking competencies as well as critical thinking ability.

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