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Imagined Communities in an Oral Discussion Classroom

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I. Introduction

For some time, identity negotiation has been treated as a key component of language learning both from a sociological perspective (Peirce Norton, 1995; Norton, 1997; Norton & Toohey, 2001; Block, 2007) and from a social psychological perspective (Dornyei & Ushioda, 2009). In fact, identity negotiation is seen as key to sustaining participation in communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Kanno and Norton (2003) and Norton (2001) refer to Wenger's idea that imagination about future possibilities is an important part of belonging to a community. Furthermore, Block (2007) suggested that one of the most fruitful avenues for identity negotiation in a foreign language context might be through "student engagement with international communities of practice" (p.165). An example of an imagined community was operationalized by Yashima (2009) in a study of Japanese high school students who took part in a Model United Nations role play. The learners represented different countries and had to research and discuss global issues from the perspectives of their countries. Crucially, feedback from the students in Yashima's study indicated that their participation could have been further enhanced through more focus on basic language features such as vocabulary and pronunciation. In other words, learner agency in the imagined community could be facilitated by language focused tasks.

It was on this premise that the design of a curriculum was approached to engage science undergraduates in a Japanese university in learning within an imagined community. Learners in this context are traditionally portrayed as demotivated and having poor classroom experiences (Hill, Falout & Apple, 2012). However, informal chats with students revealed that they have ambitions related to learning English, which range from travelling abroad, making foreign friends, getting to know other cultures and traditions, and working within an international context. There was

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surely plenty of room to bring this to life for students and dispel their poor classroom experiences.

II. The imagined community and formative assessment

A modification of the Model United Nations was chosen for the imagined community in this curriculum. In this modification, students played the role of scientists who had to represent various countries. As scientists they were required to argue for an investment plan in particular technologies that would solve certain problems their country was facing. The rationale for this design was based on the department's curriculum mandate that students engage critically with global issues related to science. Furthermore, this design allows students to take on a number of alternative roles, such as being investigators of other cultures, scientists researching technologies, and diplomats who have to negotiate their ideas.

A number of potentially demotivating aspects of this curriculum were anticipated using Dornyei's (2001) recommendations for best teaching practice. The first anticipated factor was raised anxiety levels. Students' lack of experience with discussion activities and being expected to play unfamiliar roles potentially leads to anxiety. The second factor was social comparison. Students are not streamed for proficiency, so there was greater potential for weaker students to measure their performance in comparison to stronger students.

These issues were dealt with by embedding formative assessment into the curriculum. Wiliam (2011) has described formative assessment as the bridge between teaching and learning, and crucially identifies it as a process of using evidence to make decisions about teaching and learning. Wiliam (ibid.) summarizes formative assessment practice as five strategies:

1. Clarifying, sharing, and understanding learning intentions and criteria for success
2. Engineering effective classroom discussions, activities, and learning tasks that elicit evidence of learning
3. Providing feedback that moves learning forward
4. Activating learners as instructional resources for one another
5. Activating learners as owners of their own learning

(p.46)

Relating learning with identity construction, Pryor and Crossouard (2008) note that "formative assessment involves the educator as a significant narrator exploiting the different power relations that inhere in various identities possible in the setting and the student responding in reciprocal ways" (p.10). Together, these imply that

one role of the teacher in oral discussion classes is to design both discursive and material resources that facilitate students' agency towards discursive practices which reflect the formative assessment strategies.

Building the agency resources

The first resource integrated into the curriculum was called "Leadership and Collaboration Skills". Some of these were based on strategies recommended by Wong and Waring (2010) and were essentially a set of discursive resources that students could deploy during discussion tasks. Examples included "initiate a discussion", "get thinking time", "change the topic", "summarize some ideas" and "make an argument" (see Appendix 1). Students were exposed to a number of different ways they could perform these skills by studying sample discussions. We recorded sample discussions and used them for warm up listening exercises, while written versions were used for language analysis. From a formative assessment perspective, these skills were presented to students as the language learning goals of the course, but the students were free to focus on and build up a repertoire of skills that suited them. Their final assessment would be based on their own choices. This allowed for lower proficiency students to focus on less linguistically complex skills and higher proficiency students to focus on more demanding argumentation skills.

The second resource was a "linguaging tool" which was called the Pit Stop. Linguaging, or the negotiation of linguistic forms during a task (Swain, 2006), is seen as a crucial part of language acquisition during peer interaction. Philp, Adams and Iwashita (2014) review thirty years of research into the effects of peer interaction on language acquisition, examining the role of key discourse practices such as peer corrective feedback (pp.37-55), experimentation with language through language-related-episodes (LREs), including learner discussion of morphology or word choice (pp.17-36), and promoting fluency and automaticity (pp.56-67). These discourse practices implement the fourth formative assessment strategy. Therefore, the Pit Stop was designed to promote this kind of discourse practice during discussions. The expectation was that students would use L2 primarily for the discussion, but that there would be occasions when their L2 knowledge would fail them. During these moments, the students could call a Pit Stop and revert to L1 to collaboratively discuss the language issue, resolve it, and then move on again in L2. An example of the Pit Stop is provided in Appendix 2.

The third and fourth resources were a combination of recording devices to capture the discussions, and an electronic language journal in which to transcribe parts of the discussion and reflect on aspects of their performance. They were utilized as the second, third and fifth strategies of formative assessment. Recordings can help overcome the transience of spoken language and afford learners the opportunity to

notice both their spoken errors and leadership skills performances, cross reference with their learning goals and generally monitor their own improvements over time. The journal encouraged students to engage with their recordings and discuss strategies to overcome any communication difficulties. The recordings were made with microphones in the language laboratory, and the journals were written on the university's learning management system.

The fifth resource was self-assessment. Students, after choosing which leadership and collaboration skills to focus on during a particular discussion, would rate their performance immediately after a discussion. To avoid arbitrary attribution of scores, students also had to provide evidence from their recordings to explain why they deserved the score. These scores were counted towards their final score (15%) for the course. This was designed as part of the fifth strategy of formative assessment.

Task Sequencing

The syllabus was divided into two parts. The sequence of tasks in the first half of the semester was designed to facilitate students' control over discussions and to grow in confidence with exercising their agency through the formative assessment resources. Having gained control and confidence, the second half of the semester implemented extended preparation and regular rehearsals. The goal of this stage was to provide deeper engagement with the imagined community.

The first part, 8 weeks in length, served as an introduction to discussion activities, beginning with information gap activities involving descriptions, before moving on to more complex ranking activities (Willis & Willis, 2007) which involved evaluating ideas. Students were introduced to leadership and collaboration skills in the first week, to self-assessment in the second and third weeks, and to the Pit Stop in the fourth week. The language journal was used for homework from the third week. In this stage, the tasks transitioned from a simple descriptive to a more complex evaluative level of processing, but the tasks were always set at the complex verbal end of modality (Duran & Ramaut, 2006).

The second part, 7 weeks in length, consisted of introducing the imagined community task. Students were introduced to the United Nations through YouTube clips in the ninth week. They chose and began to research their countries using internet resources. Students were required to start their research with basic country information based on data available at the CIA World Factbook. However, they were expected to expand on issues related to problems faced by their countries. From the twelfth week, students started to research a number of possible technologies in which their country could invest to solve their problems. A constraint that any country could only invest in one technology at a time was imposed. This required stu-

dents to make arguments and evaluate the best order of investment as part of their preparation. This preparation was designed to simplify the linguistic context, provide more concrete descriptions and greater visual support (Duran & Remaut, 2006) towards the final MUN meeting.

Between the ninth and fourteenth weeks, discussion rehearsals were designed to reflect the progress of students' research. For example, in week 11, most students had completed researching their country and so a discussion with the theme of "Problems and Solutions" allowed students to practice articulating their countries' problems and to listen to suggestions for solutions from their classmates.

Having made an investment plan for their country, students took part in the United Nations Meeting, a final discussion in which groups of countries suggested their ideas. Among all their ideas, they had to agree on an investment plan which would be best for all the countries in their group. The discussions were video recorded to allow for assessment.

III. Evaluation

The students were asked to rate both their positive and negative experiences with various aspects of the course, under the assumption that students would have had times when something felt positive and times when something felt negative. The first question asked them to rate on a scale of 1-5 how positive their experiences had been, with 5 being a strongly positive experience and 1 meaning no positive experience. The second question asked them to rate on a scale of 1-5 how negative their experiences had been, with 5 being a strongly negative experience and 1 meaning no negative experience. The items which students were asked to rate are presented in Table 1, along with their average positive and negative scores. There were 20 students in the class. The full table, including percentage values for each level is reproduced in Appendix 4.

Table 1 shows that students generally had stronger positive experiences using the pit stop and no negative experiences at all. This suggests that students felt able to successfully utilize this resource. Leadership skills shows a similar pattern. However, in the case of specific leadership skills, such as making arguments, supporting ideas and active listening, there was some variation. More students reported strongly positive experiences with active listening. Some students also reported slightly more negative experiences with making arguments, with less students reporting strongly positive experiences. These variations probably reflect the linguistic complexity of the skills. While holding discussions with friendship groups showed generally strong positive experiences, there seemed to be more ambivalence about discussion activities with random partners in the classroom. Similarly, language journals were also

Table 1 Survey Data

	Positive Experiences 1=No particular positive experience 5=strong positive experience	Negative Experiences 1=No particular negative experience 5=strong negative experience
Using the Pit Stop	4.4	1
Using the leadership skills	4.4	1.25
Using the language journals	2.84	1.33
Having discussions with a random partner	3.3	2.25
Having discussions with friendship groups	4.65	1.1
Making arguments	3.95	1.45
Supporting ideas	4.05	1.3
Active listening	4.55	1.1

viewed with ambivalence. Both of these could be attributed to student preferences regarding friendship groups and homework.

The second source of evaluation was a reflection discussion which the students completed as the final task of the semester. They were given five questions to discuss in 15 minutes. Their discussions, in English, were transcribed and a content analysis was performed to uncover what students placed importance on. The questions were as follows:

1. What did this class help you to improve?
2. Some people say discussions can be like a conflict. What do you think about this?
3. Which is more important for you, communication skills or a high TOEIC score?
4. Some people say that if Japanese people practice English with other Japanese people, then their English communication skills will not improve. What do you think about this?
5. How was this class different from your experiences learning English at high school and junior high school?

In discussing their improvements, students tended to focus on language for communication (e.g. “I improved thinking sentences this course”; “I can communicate my friends with only short word”), personal growth (e.g. “I am shy girl, so I can get confidence”) and interpersonal relationships (e.g. “I talking . . . I can talk . . . my friends who I don’t know”). These contrasted with their discussions about

question 5, in which they tended to focus on describing their high school and junior high school environment: “I only write wrote a book what teacher say and write on blackboard”; “We look to the blackboard and write board”; “Write only, there are not communication with English”. This reflects a teacher centred approach, and reveals what they perceived as different in this discussion course in which peer interaction was central. In their school years, they no doubt focused on language, and this was a feature of this discussion course, too. However, acknowledgement of personal growth and interpersonal relationships also reveals that some identity work was taking place through English. In their discussions, none of the students referred to the imagined community, possibly suggesting that the roles involved are not pertinent to their future ambitions, or were not necessarily salient to them within the tasks.

In fact, question 4 reveals a little more about this aspect of identity negotiation. Most students agreed that their communication skills would not improve by only speaking with Japanese people. They talked about language knowledge: “Communication with Japanese people in English does not lead to improvement because it doesn’t lead to know how to use the English word”. For some students, this was construed as anxiety in an imagined community: “and when we speak with foreign country people, I don’t know our speaking is understood”. In contrast, speaking with real foreign people is construed as an achievement by one student who had studied abroad: “I went to England last year so I spoke to another country’s people, so my English skill is improved, but only at that time. At that time I felt wow! I’ve done it! But, I came back to Japan and . . .” her facial expression showed disappointment. Students did not report this sense of achievement towards the imagined-communities activities. This feedback all suggests that building an imagined community requires overcoming the reality of the classroom situation, and that this course might not have achieved that.

One of the successes of this course can be seen in how students discussed question 2. All groups started by defining what a conflict was: “A different opinion is a conflict”; “So conflict nearly means fighting”; “Each other’s opinion, say say again again, it is similar to war”. Following this, students would search for a positive meaning: “Saying your opinion is good”; “Fighting is not good, but conflict is . . . maybe . . . okay”; “I think conflict is nice not to develop quarrel”. Finally, students resolved the positive and negative connotations: “So, fighting is so bad but conflict is a nice thing about discussion”; “Discussion is exciting is similar conflict, but discussion’s purpose is to make opinion”; “Discussion has both sides, conflict and cooperation”; “I respect both opinions”. Reaching decisions through group discussions was one of the goals of this course, and the negotiation of meaning and evaluative thinking which students undertook by answering this question demon-

strates progress in their control at higher levels of abstraction. Given their lack of experience with discussion activities prior to this class, it is possible to claim that this class provided them affordances to develop this approach to discussions.

After reading question 3, all students let out a exasperated sigh, which seems to me to demonstrate the internal struggle they feel over learning for communication and learning for practical purposes. Students' opinions varied, but most students framed communication skills in terms of talking with foreigners, and TOEIC in terms of getting a good job. Only one student was able to indirectly overcome the assumption in the question that TOEIC and communication skills are mutually exclusive, saying "If we have communication skills, it lead to get a job".

IV. Conclusion

Students generally had positive experiences with most aspects of the course, although they showed ambivalence towards the language journals and having discussions with random partners. The positive experiences towards the resources implies that they were used as part of personal growth and developing their relationships with friends. In other words, the formative assessment tools did help provide students with the agency to negotiate their identities. However, this was probably not done with respect to the imagined community. Students expressed anxiety about possible future performances with real foreign communities and did not express a sense of achievement through interaction in the imagined community.

In sum, the design of the course was successful in promoting L2 mediated identity negotiation; however, it is unlikely that the course was successful at targeting identity negotiation through an imagined community. Block (2015) points out that agency in identity work has been strongly advocated among theorists at the expense of structures, such as the structures imposed by institutions on learners. Pryor and Crossouard (2008) also mention that identities are shaped by the institutions of our societies and that these institutions are "especially powerful in sustaining the value and recognition accorded to particular forms of literacy and identity" (p.10). The learners in this study have a history of classroom experiences which have emphasized rote learning of grammar and no doubt have ingrained a number of expectations about what language communication is for, and how best to learn it for that purpose. Only by understanding the students' histories and the expectations that have been inculcated into them, will it be possible to design an imagined community that starts to draw them into new ways of learning.

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Appendix 1: Leadership and Collaboration Skills Extract

EXAMPLE DISCUSSION

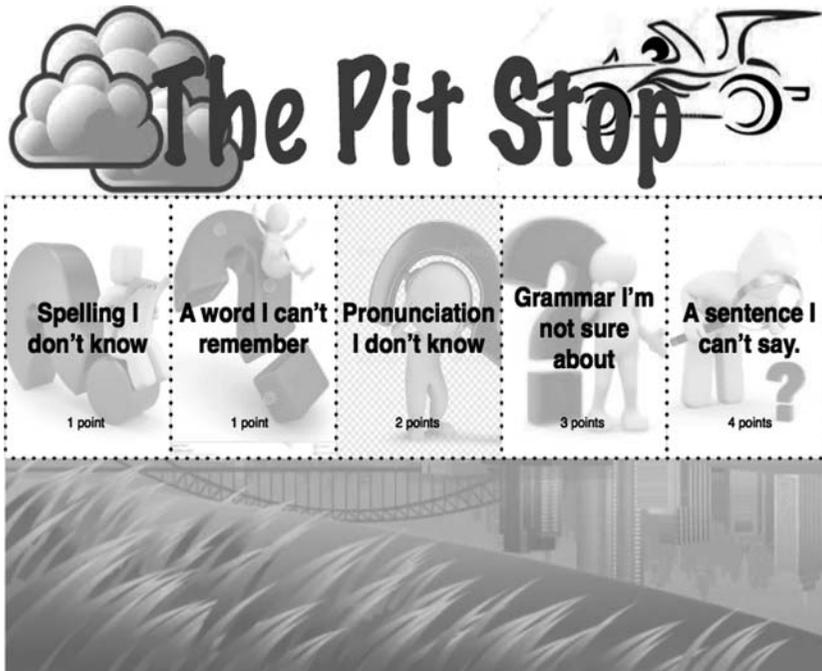
LEADERSHIP / COLLABORATION

<p>A: Genetic engineering can cure many diseases. So, I think it has had a positive influence on our lives.</p>	
<p>B: Oh, yes, I agree. C-san, what do you think?</p>	
<p>C: Hmm, err.... well... Just a second!</p>	
<p>B: Okay!</p>	
<p>...</p>	
<p>C: Scientists have cloned animals, and they might clone people, too. So, I think it could have a negative influence on our lives.</p>	
<p>...</p>	
<p>...</p>	
<p>D: Okay, let's sum up. One positive point is that we can cure diseases but one negative point is people might be cloned. We need TWO reasons. B-san, what do you think?</p>	
<p></p>	

Read the example discussion and decide which leadership/collaboration skill below belongs in the empty boxes above.

- A) Reason + Opinion (2 times) B) Summarize C) Get thinking time D) Remind everyone about the rules.

Appendix 2: Pit Stop



Appendix 3: Syllabus Outline

Lesson	Content	Discussion Task Themes
1	Introduction to the course. Introduction to Leadership and Collaboration Skills	Spot the Difference (at home)
2	Skill: Initiate a discussion Skill: Change the topic Introduction to Self-Assessment	Spot the Difference (in the science lab)
3	Skill: Demonstrate active listening Introduction to Self-Assessment	Discussion: Design the science lab
4	Skill: Clarify Skill: Suggest an idea Introduction to the Pit Stop	Discussion 1: Decide a list of the best sightseeing places in Japan. Discussion 2: Rank the top three places.
5	Skill: Support an idea Skill: Make a decision (get consensus) Review the Pit Stop	Discussion 1: Decide a list of improvements to the campus. Discussion 2: Rank the top three most urgent improvements.
6	Skill: Ask for reasons Skill: Get thinking time	Discussions: Decide which anti-social behaviours on the beach should be fined and the level of fine.
7	Skill: Summarzse some ideas	Discussions: Decide which three charities you would donate money to and how much money.
8	Skill: Make an argument	Mid Term Discussion Test: One of the themes above was chosen at random.

Lesson	Content	Discussion Task Themes
9	Skill: Make an argument Introduction to the United Nations Choose your country.	All class discussions: What is the role of the UN? Could you see yourself taking part in UN activities?
10	Skill: Make a counter argument Research your country	Discussion: What are the biggest problems that Japan faces now?
11	Skill: Make a counter argument Research your country	Discussion (show and tell style): Tell your group about the problems your country faces; listen to ideas for solutions.
12	Skill: Organise your discussion Begin researching technologies to solve your problems.	Discussion: Decide which three technologies have had the biggest impact on students' lives.
13	Skill: Review Continue researching technologies.	Discussion (show and tell style): Tell your group about the technologies you have researched.
14	Prepare for the Model United Nations Discussion	
15	Model United Nations Discussion	Model United Nations Discussion (Assessed) Reflection Discussion

Appendix 4: Positive and Negative Experiences Results Table

	Positive Experiences	Negative Experiences
Using the Pit Stop	1: 5% 2: 0% 3: 5% 4: 30% 5: 60% AVERAGE: 4.4	1: 100% 2: 0% 3: 0% 4: 0% 5: 0% AVERAGE: 1
Using the leadership skills	1: 5% 2: 0% 3: 5% 4: 30% 5: 60% AVERAGE: 4.4	1: 80% 2: 15% 3: 5% 4: 0% 5: 0% AVERAGE: 1.25
Using the language journal	1: 10% 2: 0% 3: 30% 4: 35% 5: 25% AVERAGE: 2.84	1: 50% 2: 40% 3: 10% 4: 0% 5: 0% AVERAGE: 1.33
Having discussions with random partners	1: 5% 2: 35% 3: 15% 4: 15% 5: 30% AVERAGE: 3.3	1: 40% 2: 25% 3: 15% 4: 10% 5: 10% AVERAGE: 2.25

Having discussions with friendship groups	1: 5% 2: 0% 3: 0% 4: 15% 5: 80% AVERAGE: 4.65	1: 90% 2: 10% 3: 0% 4: 0% 5: 0% AVERAGE: 1.1
Making arguments	1: 5% 2: 5% 3: 25% 4: 20% 5: 45% AVERAGE: 3.95	1: 60% 2: 35% 3: 5% 4: 0% 5: 0% AVERAGE: 1.45
Supporting ideas	1: 5% 2: 0% 3: 15% 4: 45% 5: 35% AVERAGE: 4.05	1: 75% 2: 20% 3: 5% 4: 0% 5: 0% AVERAGE: 1.3
Active listening	1: 5% 2: 0% 3: 0% 4: 25% 5: 70% AVERAGE: 4.55	1: 90% 2: 10% 3: 0% 4: 0% 5: 0% AVERAGE: 1.1