

Teaching Perspective-Taking Skills in EDC

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ABSTRACT

Although a lot of studies have shared activities that include an element of critical thinking development, there are few practical activities that I am aware of that focus on perspective-taking skills. This paper attempts to introduce one way to incorporate perspective-taking practice into an English discussion class. Decision-based discussion questions and realistic discussion set-up are created in order to encourage students to look at questions from multiple perspectives. Students' discussions are recorded and transcribed to investigate what kind of interactions unfold while engaging in the discussion questions. The transcripts suggest that the task is helpful to promote students' perspective-taking skills, but it also shed light on one problematic aspect of pushing perspective-taking practices in class.

INTRODUCTION

Studies have suggested that the main purpose of learning English amongst the majority of university students is not to master the language itself, but to develop practical language skills, and to use English to attain their particular goals. It has been found that university students think English learning is especially crucial to broaden their horizons, enjoy foreign travels, find a job and get course credits (Brown, 2004; O'Donnell, 2003). Although it would not be sensible to consider all the goals and needs of all learners, it is important to equip students with the necessary skills that society requires (Kumaravadivelu, 1994, 2001, 2003). Kumaravadivelu claims that a meaningful pedagogy has to be catered to specific learners' linguistic, social and cultural needs and has to incorporate the larger societal needs, such as learning skills, collaboration skills, and critical thinking skills into language teaching contexts.

In order to explore the skills that students need to acquire, so as to succeed in education and the workplace, several conceptualizations of the so-called 21st century skills are reviewed. While there is no consensus on what skill sets are needed in the 21st century, it is notable that various skills that are proposed by professionals and organizations considerably overlap. One of the largest research institutions in this field is the Assessment and Teaching of 21st Century Skills (ATC21S), and "it attempts to empower students with the right skills to succeed in the 21st-century workplace" (ATC21S, 2014). Following an extensive review, they provide a model that categorizes ten significant 21st Century Skills into four broad categories: (1) Ways of Thinking, (2) Ways of Working, (3) Tools for Working, and (4) Living in the World.

Although the term "21st Century Skills" is not widespread in Japan, there exists the Japanese version of 21st Century Skills called "*Ikiru-Chikara*" (Shiramizu, 2014). The Japanese version of the 21st century skills set, similarly, emphasizes the importance of critical-thinking, problem-solving, metacognition, collaboration, and self-direction skills. Although the Japanese definition does not include ICT literacy, this is largely consistent with the model of 21st Century Skills proposed by the various organizations from different countries (ATC21S, 2014).

Critical thinking is a well-established field, and the term is a buzzword in Japanese society (Iwasaki, 2002; Davidson, 1996). Due to the advancement in technologies and rapidly changing societies, 21st century citizens need to assess, analyze, and create information (Ledward & Hirata, 2011). They need to be able to articulate their ideas while paying attention to others' ideas (Suzuki, 2006), in a fundamentally different way than before. Another important reason to incorporate a critical thinking approach into English classes is that it is often said that Japanese society often

discourages independent and logical thinking. This creates a cultural handicap for the Japanese people in competing with English speakers coming from societies, which tolerate or encourage controversy and free discussion (Takemae, 2006). It has been recognized and problematized that Japanese people often lack not only English language proficiency, but also the critical thinking ability to successfully collaborate, and engage in constructive discussions with people from different cultural backgrounds (Suzuki, 2006). Warschauer (2001) states that English language educators in an information technology society have to develop activities that learners will encounter in the future. Considering the Japanese culture, and the type of education imparted to students across the Japanese country, it becomes evident that critical thinking skills to Japanese students is essential.

Numerous studies have explored how critical thinking skills can be integrated in EFL classes, providing a list of the various activities and techniques for fostering the 21st century skills (Davidson, 1996; Masduqui, 2011; Stroupe, 2006). Umehara (2015) states that one of the most serious hindrances to critical discussions is the students' tendency to regurgitate ideas from a textbook or from their peers. He finds that the students tend to accept their classmates' ideas or information of the textbook too easily without carefully analyzing, evaluating, or judging the credibility of information. To find a way to infuse critical thinking elements into discussion classes, this study introduces an activity to help students realize and reflect on how they form their ideas, engage with tasks, and be responsible for developing their ideas.

First, Umehara (2015) creates an imaginary but realistic situation for university students so that they feel discussion questions are relevant and realistic. The author sometimes feels that original discussion questions are not realistic for university students, and this allows them to engage in lackluster discussions. Therefore, a seemingly realistic and imaginable question set-up is introduced to explain why discussion questions are important and relevant for the students.

Second, a critical thinking check-sheet is designed to provide the opportunity to investigate students' thinking paths after discussions. The check-sheet poses six questions that should help students to realize and internalize five aspects of critical thinking skills: functions, purpose, clarity, breadth, information, and depth. The aspects were derived from the definitions of Ennis (1993). In this study, the students discuss a variety of issues in small groups (between three and four members) for 16 minutes and after the discussion, they discuss the questions on the check-sheet in pairs. The author reports some utility of the activity. However, he also finds that the study attempts to introduce too many different elements of critical thinking skills; thus, the students got confused and could not fully grasp the concept of critical thinking skills.

Following Umehara (2015), this current study decides to focus on only one aspect of critical thinking skills, namely perspective-taking skills. Perspective-taking skills are one of the fundamental critical thinking skills (Beyer, 1985). Perspective-taking requires "getting beyond one's own literal or psychological point of view to consider the perspective of another person who is likely to have a very different psychological point of view." (Epley and Caruso, 2008). There are two reasons why perspective-taking skills are chosen as a focal skill for this study. First, there are numerous studies that show advantages of perspective-taking skills (e.g., Galinsky, Maddux, Gilin, & White, 2008), and frequently these are the skills that Japanese society often praises when it comes to critical thinking skills. Second, the skills are already incorporated into the English Discussion Class curriculum that the author teaches. The curriculum and required textbook has a section teaching the importance of considering different perspectives. This point seems significant because by not introducing any new concepts of critical thinking skills, this study does not have to make the English learning experience much more challenging for students who have to engage in discussions in their non-native language.

Although the skills to consider another person's mental state, thoughts, and viewpoints are required to function in social life, not all people make use of the skills all the time. Epley and Caruso (2008) suggest barriers to accurate perspective-taking, such as activating the perspective-taking ability and adjusting an egocentric default. First, activating the perspective-taking ability requires people to purposefully use perspective-taking skills. In many cases people do not have to actively think about another person's perspectives. This is because it is much easier and faster for people to access to their own perspectives than others, and consequently their own thoughts serve as automatic and default. Second barrier is adjusting an egocentric default. Even when people are directed to see things from another person's perspectives, people still use their intuitions to imagine what other people would see. To overcome the default egocentric mode requires careful reasoning because without clear cues that other people would interpret the world differently, people tend not to adjust their own perspectives. The focus of this study will be upon these two barriers, activating the perspective-taking ability and adjusting an egocentric default. The current study evaluates the effectiveness of task-based and decisions-based discussion questions on students' abilities to discuss a variety of perspectives on a given topic.

Research Question

What effect, if any, does making the discussion practice more task-based and decision-based have on students' abilities to discuss a variety of perspectives on a given topic, beyond their own personal opinions?

METHOD

Context

The class that was the setting for this paper was an English discussion class at a private university in Tokyo. This discussion class was one of the compulsory English courses that all first-year students have to take for the duration of one year. The class has one 90-minute lesson every week, and all the classes are conducted following a unified syllabus, which aims to develop the students' language fluency. In this class, fluency development is referred to as the "development of students' abilities to use English to communicate meaningfully in real time" (Hurling, 2012). In this discussion class, students have two opportunities to discuss a variety of issues for 10 minutes (Discussion 1) and 16 minutes (Discussion 2). With the emphasis on language fluency, the class size is kept small; each class has only seven to nine students. In conducting the class, explicit feedback on language form is only acceptable when it is employed to repair communication breakdowns. Teachers are encouraged to maximize students' English talking time so that they can get as many chances to use English as possible. In each class, students learn various types of discussion skills, such as how to give their opinions, paraphrase other's ideas, and check their classmates' understanding. In the first semester, students learn basic functions and communication skills, such as opinions, examples, possibilities, and joining a discussion, and in the second semester, they learn more advanced skills, such as changing topic, different viewpoints and comparing ideas. Use of the functions are highly encouraged in class because they provide practical and realistic ways for students to learn how to start and navigate English discussions without the help of teachers. All first-year university students are separated into four levels. The students are grouped by faculty and then placed into one of four class levels (Level I to Level IV) according to pre-course placement tests for TOEIC listening and reading. The focal level of this study is Level II (higher-intermediate level). The class was comprised of seven students: three male students and four female students. The participants' TOEIC score ranged from 630 to 695. All the students are from the college of business, and the students' motivations for using English

is very high because many of them will study abroad in the future as one of their major's requirements.

Task

In order to encourage students to engage with tasks and think beyond their own perspectives, Discussion 2 questions in the textbook are adapted to create more active conditions for active participation and meaningful interactions among students and with materials (Garside, 1996). Questions are revised in a way that sounds more realistic and meaningful to university students in Japan. Revised discussion questions were introduced in Lessons 7, 10, and 11; not in all lessons due to several reasons. First, some discussion questions seemed already engaging enough and they were set up in a way that require students to consider alternative viewpoints (Lessons 4 and 8). Second, it was not allowed by the English discussion program policy to change discussion test questions (Lessons 5, 9, and 13). Finally, it seemed worth trying to observe whether the students actively consider alternative ideas even when they discuss unrevised regular discussion questions in Lesson 12.

Table 1. Revised Discussion Questions

<i>Lesson</i>	<i>Function</i>	<i>Original Questions</i>	<i>Revised Questions</i>
7	Different viewpoints	1: Is advertising good or bad? 2: Is there too much advertising in Japan?	You are a member of JARO (Japan Advertising Review Organization: 日本広告審査機構) which handles complaints and inquiries from people from different groups, such as consumers, salespersons, schools and companies. Work in groups to decide (a) the fairest, (b) the most truthful, and (c) the least harmful advertising strategies to use.
10	Information	1: Are men and women equal in Japan? Discuss: - at work - at home - in society 2: Should men and women be more equal in Japan?	You are a member of a student council and want to bring more conversations on gender equality to campus. Many people believe that universities play an important role in achieving a society with equal participation from both men and women. Work in groups to decide (a) what event to hold, and (b) how this event will help achieve greater gender equality.
11	Comparing Ideas	1: How can governments help end poverty? 2: What is the best way to end poverty?	You are the president of a NPO fighting poverty in Japan. Your organization attempts to raise public awareness and work with political leaders to end poverty in Japan. You are trying to find ways to cooperate with governments and get more ordinary people involved in taking actions to end poverty. Work in groups to decide (a) what action can government take to help end poverty, (b) what action can ordinary people take to help end poverty, and

(c) a recommendation for the best action.

DISCUSSION

In order to observe the students' perspective-taking practices, the students' discussions were recorded in Lessons 10, 11, and 12, and detailed observation notes were kept in all the lessons. The interaction between the students was transcribed verbatim following the CA transcription conventions appearing in Wong and Zhang Waring (2010). The transcripts were reviewed looking for any instances of perspective-taking practices. This study focuses on the different viewpoints phrases that the students learned in Lesson 7 or similar phrases that serve the same function. It was noticed that the students sometimes used similar phrases or questions to give or ask for alternative viewpoints even before Lesson 7. This suggested that the students already possessed the capabilities of considering another's perspective.

Table 2. Lesson 7 function phrases: Different Viewpoints

<i>Asking for different viewpoints</i>	<i>Giving different viewpoints</i>
How about from {X}'s point of view?	From {X}'s point of view,...
How about from {X}'s perspective?	From {X}'s perspective,...

For example, in Lesson 4, the following interactions were noted.

Lesson 4, Discussion 2.

Q1: Do these people need to study English?

-young children -university students -office workers -old people

Excerpt 1

A: ah (0.5) I think. University students like [me]

B: [yes]

A: need to study English. Yes.

C: Hmm. How about people who hate English, such as math people?

A: For people. Ah don't like English, it' hard

B: me [hahaha]

A: [but they still need English skills. I think.]

In this excerpt, student C clearly attempts to ask for an idea from an alternative viewpoint even though he does not use the exact phrases in the textbook. Many other similar instances were observed before Lesson 7, so it appeared that the students at least knew how to introduce alternative viewpoints. However, there were many more interactions where they should have taken alternative ideas into consideration to see the big picture of the questions they were discussing.

In Lesson 7, useful perspective-taking phrases were introduced, accompanied with the explanation of why perspective-taking skills are important for them. In this lesson, the students used the phrases a lot as was expected. They discussed different aspects of TV and SNS advertisements from different viewpoints. However, it has always been the case that

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students employ the newly learned phrases in the lesson, as they know they are graded on the use of the phrases. Therefore, the use of the function and phrases in the following lessons are more closely monitored and recorded, because there are fewer incentives for students to use the previous phrases.

In Lesson 8, the high use of perspective-taking skills were observed. In lesson 8, the students learned new communication skill, follow-up questions.

Lesson 8, Discussion 2

Q1: What personality traits are important for...

-university students? -business people? -romantic partners?

Excerpt 2

A: Can I start?

B: No (0.6). Yes. Of course

C: hh

A: hh. From university student's perspective, being funny is most important. Because ahh you can make friends easily.

B: Yes. I agree.

C: aaa aaa I partly. From shy people's point of view, they don't like to be with funny people.

A: Really? [Why?

C: [because they are noisy... Yes?

B: I see. I cannot trust funny people maybe....

Student C's utterance about shy people allows student B to reconsider his original thought about if being funny is the most important quality for university students. Lesson 8 is a review lesson for discussion test, which occurs in Lesson 9. Students generally practice all the learned functions to prepare for the test in the next week, so the motivation to practice all the phrases might be one reason of the high usage of the perspective-taking phrases in Lesson 8.

Students learn new functions in Lessons 10 and 11, so they tend to forget the old functions by focusing on the new ones. They learned "Information" and "Comparing Ideas" functions in Lessons 10 and 11 respectively. In Lesson 10, the revised questions asked the students to come up with possible event ideas that they would like to organize in order to achieve greater gender equality. This revision seemed to work well because a lot of unique perspectives were recorded that were not observed in many other discussion classes in this year or previous years.

Lesson 10, Discussion 2

You are a member of a student council and want to bring more conversations on gender equality to campus. Many people believe that universities play an important role in achieving a society with equal participation from both men and women. Work in groups to decide (a) what event to hold, (b) how this event will help achieve greater gender equality?

Excerpt 3

A: hmmm (1.2) really difficult. Event. Event.

B: yes. Difficult.. hh. What do you think, C ?

C: ahhh. I don't know about event... So who do you think feel gender inequality in Japan?

D: nice. (1.3)

B: women, [girls, (0.6) LGBT people...]

A: [yes]

D: How about from men's viewpoint? A?

A: hh. Me? Men are maybe okay.

C: really? I disagree with you. From men's point of view, not having *otohime* in men's bathroom is unfair.

A: aaaa. But do you use *otohime*?

C: no. I don't use it. (0.3) but idea that it is not necessary for men is already not equal.

D: I agree with you. Another inequality is drinking.

B: okay. For example?

D: For example, from a serious circle member point of view, it is not equal that men have to drink more than women.

The interactions kept going and they considered many other perspectives, such as “single mother,” “single father,” “not athletic men,” “men whose club seniors are scary,” and so on. They did not have much time to decide what events to organize, but they were successful in considering many different viewpoints in order to brainstorm ideas for possible events.

In Lesson 12, the students discussed two questions related to death penalty. The questions were not revised in order to see if the students sustained the perspective-taking skills from the previous lessons.

Lesson 12, Discussion 2

Q1: Is the death penalty a good way to punish murders?

Q2: What are some other ways to punish murders?

The transcript shows that the students approached the questions from many different perspectives, and interestingly there were few “I think...” utterances. When students in other discussion classes talk about the same questions, they tend to share their opinions, such as “I think death penalty is...” and “In my opinion, death penalty is...” These are usually the case because the very first phrases they learn in this course are “Personally speaking, I think,...” and “In my opinion,...” so they are so used to using these default phrases. However, the students in the focal class considered “victim's perspective,” “murderer's family's perspective,” “local community's perspective,” “lay judge's perspective” and “children's perspective” instead of just focusing on their own views at the moment.

Although numerous instances of perspective-taking practices were observed in Lessons 8, 9, 10, and 12, the discussion in Lesson 11 was very different in terms of perspective-taking practices. The discussion topic was poverty, and the revised questions encouraged them to think about what government and ordinary people can do to end poverty.

Lesson 11, Discussion 2

You are the president of a NPO fighting poverty in Japan. Your organization attempts to raise public awareness and work with political leaders to end poverty in Japan. You are trying to find ways to cooperate with governments and get more ordinary people involved in taking actions to end poverty. Work in groups to decide (a) what action can government take to help end poverty, (b) what action can ordinary people take to help end poverty, and (c) a recommendation for the best action.

The expected use of target phrases were “From student's perspectives,...” “From children's

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perspectives,...” “From tax payer’s perspectives,...” and so on. However, the students were unable to generate many ideas from different perspectives. This was probably not because of the barriers that Epley and Caruso (2008) raised. The students indeed actively tried to think about another person’s point of view, but they did not have information to make inferences about their life. This was very clear from the very beginning of the discussion.

Excerpt 4

A: So. Does anyone want to comment?

B: hh. To end. Poverty. Who are ordinary people?

C: aa like everyone. All people.

D: oh. okay (1.0) [so we can do volunteer?]

B: [maybe]

Also Give money.

C: I see. We can do.... Money.

A: money. Give money? I don’t know.

D: Do you do anything? How about not students people, like children?

B: children don’t have money... (1.2)

A: hmmm. How about homeless people? Can they do something?

C: I have no idea...

Similar interactions continued, and unfortunately they could not answer any of the discussion questions and seemed frustrated. After the class, these students were informally interviewed about how they felt about their Discussion 2. All students mentioned that the topic was difficult because they do not have much first-hand experience of poverty, so they could not think of actions that people can take. One student said that because she did not want to say ordinary things, such as “From student’s point of view, donating money at convenience stores or doing volunteer work is a possible way to end poverty,” she could not share many ideas. Another student also mentioned that he felt like he should share unique ideas in the class. Even though the author did not explicitly tell the students to share profound and interesting ideas in discussions, the ways questions have been set up and the feedback provided in the class would have hinted what types of interactions are preferred in the class, and this discouraged the students to have open discussions. This is not necessary a bad thing, because in order to practice perspective-taking skills, the students need to actively overcome their initial thought (Epley and Caruso, 2008). It has been found that without instructions to attend to different perspectives, people tend to just use their own perspectives because they come to mind more rapidly and reliably (Epley and Caruso, 2008). Thus, repeated and frequent practice of perspectives-taking is necessary to learn the skills. (Davis, Conklin, Smith, & Luce, 1996).

However, this does not mean students have to think about other’s perspectives by using just their imagination. They need to have sufficient information to discuss questions from different perspectives.

Excerpt 5

C: Do you know what kind of help poor people want to get? B?

B: I don’t know. Maybe money?

D: Aah yes, homeless people want to get (0.6) money.

C: Really. What makes you think that?

C: My image. Yes. Because they are poor?

D: Yes yes. I think they need money.

In this excerpt, students C and D do not seem to have much information about “What kind of help poor people want to get?” Student C said “My image,” which implies the student is just sharing her stereotypical idea about poor people. This utterance suggests that if students do not have sufficient information, they might rely on stereotypes or biased ideas and this can lead to systematically mistaken inferences about other people’s thoughts. This was something that the author did not expect before the commencement of this study. Ames (2004) says that if people cannot rely on their own perspectives, they tend to use stored knowledge, including stereotypes. This seems very significant to consider if perspective-taking skills have to be taught in the classroom. Without instructions, students tend to use egocentric perspectives, but with instruction, students might use erroneous or misleading information.

CONCLUSION

Given the emphasis on critical thinking skills in professional and personal life, this paper suggests one way to incorporate perspective-taking skills as one of the most important critical thinking skills in English discussion lesson plans. This paper illustrates why perspective-taking skills have to be more emphasized in current Japanese society and especially for university students in Japan. In order to give opportunities of perspective-taking practices, students read engaging question setups, which illustrate why the questions are relevant to them and then discuss decision-based discussion questions. The students’ discussions were recorded and transcribed to analyze if the questions encourage the students to actively think about another’s point of view. The transcript shows numerous instances where the students think beyond their own perspectives and raise questions from a lot of different viewpoints. However, there were also some instances that suggest pitfalls of this type of question. There were some instances where even when the students attempt to step beyond their own ideas, they do not have the resources or information to accurately consider another’s ideas, and they make recourse to stereotypes or other misleading information. If students engage in discussions full of inaccurate or biased information for the sake of perspective-taking practices, it does not foster any critical thinking skills. This study suggests that one critical thinking skill is interconnected with other critical thinking skills, so they have to be considered and taught holistically. This indicates that students have to learn the habits of perspective-taking skills and how they can diagnose information, which is a different critical thinking skill.

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