Risk-taking with Roles: An Activity Designed to Reduce Social Reticence in L2 English Discussion Groups
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ABSTRACT
When students have shown the ability to automatize and use L2 learned language in one communicative context, but fail to do so in another, the teacher must consider socio-affective factors that could produce pressures capable of inhibiting the students' Willingness to Communicate (WTC). This paper introduces an activity designed to help students take risks and perform communicative roles during discussions in groups of three to five students with the same level of confidence that they have shown in pair work. The focus was on providing repeat exposure to the roles in the hope that social barriers to language production would be gradually broken down. Check-sheets were used to compare the frequency of target language production between study groups and controls. It was found that on average some of the roles were used by more of the students in the groups undergoing the treatment, and that there were a greater number of students in the control groups who rarely or never performed some of the roles.

INTRODUCTION
MacIntyre defines WTC as "the intention to initiate communication, given a choice" (MacIntyre et al., 2001, p.369). The principle looks at students' self-confidence and willingness to take risks. There are various factors deemed to influence whether the choice is made to accept the risk and successfully transition from intention to action. Consequently, teachers should be mindful that certain conditions are met to ensure that a student's willingness and ability to communicate results in actual communication. One such obstacle to students' completion of a communicative act is the social pressure felt not to follow through on their intentions. This seemed to be a contributing factor in the present case, as the students generally had no trouble performing the roles in pair discussions. This problem was particularly pronounced in groups that lacked inherently outgoing individuals. In these groups, silence became a palpable barrier to communication; that is, a pressure that the students could feel acting against their desire to speak (Aldrich, 2013). Ajzen (1991) labels pressure due to the perceived acceptance or disapproval of one's actions by others as the 'subjective norm', which forms part of his 'Theory of Planned Behavior'. In the current study, the author assumed on the basis of past observations that this pressure originated from class members as a result of their doing group work.

The activity focused on giving students repeat practice of the following roles in group discussion; giving the first opinion, challenging ideas with disagreement, asking questions to develop the topic, and reacting to support the speaker. Each of these roles contains an element of risk that will be further discussed later. In line with ideas on WTC, it was hoped that the activity would help students to "recognize their own ego-fragility and develop the firm belief that, yes, they can indeed do it… (and) take those necessary risks." (Brown, 2007 p.73) In essence, that they would find the strength to overcome the pressure of group silence. And furthermore, that repetition of the activity might enable them to be sufficiently at ease when tasked with initiating and maintaining discussion with a group of strangers in the future. The question that this study intended to answer was as follows: To what extent does repeat practice of discussion roles help break down social barriers to WTC?

CONTEXT

It is important to note that the idea of preparing students for future communicative environments had hitherto been undervalued because the author focused more on creating an atmosphere in class where students could relax, be themselves, and bond to form a tight, social group. Such an approach builds a harmonious group through the sum of unaltered individual parts, but does little to work on the limitations of a group in which certain communicative roles are predominantly performed by one particular student. This is no good if we believe that effective discussion depends on the participation of a group of individuals capable of playing more than one role[i]. Indeed, an approach that focuses on existing strengths can leave individual students ill-equipped to deal with different dynamics. For example, in cases when students who would normally initiate discussion are absent, or when enough students are missing to result in the teacher monitoring a single group for a whole discussion, the consequences of not encouraging individual communicative risk-taking become apparent. In such cases, there are often longer pauses at the start of discussions because students are unwilling to self-select and give the first opinion. Similarly, students tend to ask fewer follow-up questions, react less frequently, and seem to avoid disagreement. It is therefore believed that a change in dynamic, just like a wholesale change in group members, can lead to a variation in the degree of risk associated with making certain communicative moves and this risk contributes to the perceived pressure not to speak. As a result, without focusing on risk-taking the teacher may not facilitate any learning that could be seen to have practical value beyond the constraints of a member-specific and temporally-limited discourse community.

ACTIVITY FOCUS: ROLES AND RISKS

With the preceding ideas in mind, the aim of the activity was to give students time to practice performing a variety of roles central to the production of effective discussion (i.e. a discussion where ideas are raised, followed, questioned, and challenged). As mentioned above, these roles may be seen to contain an element of risk, which if common to the group might serve to enforce the subjective norm and dissuade a student from performing them. In other words, if a number of students in the group avoid using a particular role, individuals may perceive performance of this role as unfavorable behavior, and as a consequence, not use the role themselves. Following are the roles, what they bring to the discussion, and the particular risk(s) believed to be inherent in each:

Table 1 *Roles and Risks*

Role	What they bring	Risk
Starter	Reduces silence and cuts anxiety by giving the first opinion.	Risks failure to predict consensus Risks highlighting difference
Challenger	Takes the discussion into new areas by challenging with disagreement	Risks highlighting difference
Questioner	Moves the discussion forward with follow-up questions	Risks failure to be appropriate/accurate
Supporter	Encourages production of ideas by reacting and responding to speaker	Risks exposure of nascent L2 self

Going through these roles one by one, by giving the first opinion on a topic and thereby initiating the discussion, the **Starter** runs the risk of committing a cultural faux pas. The communicative culture of Japanese speakers is said to be consensus driven, for this reason, hierarchy often decides who should take the lead. If a speaker of higher status goes first, they risk losing face through failing to predict the status quo; hence an individual of lower status who has less to risk will often lead (Kramsch, 1998 p.46). Naturally, this situation gets messy when

you add the confusion of a foreign language and the accompanying variant levels of ability, comprehension, and confidence within the group.

Moving on to the **Challenger**, the risk associated with challenging the accepted view on a given topic is present in all communities. To do this among one's peers is no simple undertaking, particularly if you come from a culture like Japan's where consensus is so highly valued. For students to become comfortable with this level of risk, disagreement must become a more frequent element of their L2 discussion. Consistent exposure to the positive consequences of disagreement is essential for the gradual acceptance of the value contained in smooth execution of this communicative move. It was hoped that this, and the benefits of performing the other three roles, would become clear to students through repeated experience of the activity.

Next the **Questioner**, the risk involved here is one more traditionally associated with language learning; the risk of looking foolish through making a mistake. Before asking a question, a student must feel sure of two things; that the question is appropriate in terms of it being based on correct comprehension of the idea expressed, and in that it will not offend by overstepping the bounds of what can reasonably be inquired about. And second, that the question is accurate in terms of form so to avoid misunderstanding. If there is doubt in the mind of the questioner on either of these points, then there is a greater chance that the question will be abandoned.

Finally, here are the risks for the **Supporter**. After an opinion has been voiced, comprehension and attention should be signaled by supportive listeners. The risk in providing this kind of encouragement to the speaker in L2 is that the verbal manifestation of an intrinsically emotional and personal quality must come in an as yet unassimilated form. While comfortable with the drive to express support, the listener is not fully at ease with whether the 'I see' or 'Yeah' selected to show it is an accurate representation of their still juvenile L2 identity. Reactions, through the immediacy of their expression are perhaps a more visceral element of language production than longer, more complex forms. For this reason, the author believes that they are far more difficult for some students to automatize than seemingly more complex examples of language. This may be why some students can be observed either whispering their reactions, or hamming them up to cover embarrassment. For Japanese students of English, some might also argue that an L1 habit of silent listening may also have to be altered in order for active listening to occur.

PROCEDURE

To avoid the additional pressure of having to use newly taught language, it was decided that the activity should be done at the start of the class. It would take the 10-12 minutes usually allotted to a fluency exercise that was partly designed to provide an introduction to the lesson themes, wherein students can start to form ideas to be used in later discussions. Not wishing to deprive the students of this valuable creative time, the risk-taking activity also made use of two topic-themed questions that the students were to discuss in groups of four, rather than in the pairs commonly used for the fluency exercise. For example, in week 4 of the semester when the activity was first done, the questions focused on the lesson theme of 'Fashion' (appendix 1.1). After reading the discussion questions, each of the four students was given a role card stating their discussion task in simple language. For instance, the student who would take the role of 'Starter' had a card that read 'Give the <u>first opinion</u> for each topic e.g. Can I start?'(appendix 1.2). In the first week of the activity, cards were given to students who had previously shown a degree of comfort with that particular role. This was done to ensure that the first experience of the activity would be favorable for all of the students.

Once the information on the cards had been processed and students had confirmed that they understood what was required of them, the discussion commenced. The students discussed the two questions for a total of eight minutes, during which time the author took notes regarding students' performance of the roles. This information was not to be used as feedback, as the author wanted to avoid the impression that this new activity was meant to single-out individual student weaknesses.

After discussing the questions, the students were given a handout clarifying the roles (appendix 1.3). The teacher then talked the students through each of the roles, highlighting the significance of each to an effective discussion. After that, the students were given just one minute to discuss the question on the handout and identify the roles that their classmates had played. Once again, the teacher did not remark on any students who had failed to complete the task.

Finally, the teacher told the students that the purpose of the activity was to allow them the opportunity to become comfortable playing a variety of roles in discussion. The point was made that up until now their discussions had contained all of the necessary roles, but that the same individuals usually performed particular roles. The question was posed; 'What happens if the Starter is absent? Who will begin the discussion?' And by way of an answer, they were informed of how this activity would help them all to maintain discussion in the future, and that we would repeat the activity. For the remainder of the semester, role cards were rotated to achieve the above. In addition, the author recorded the balance of participation and performance of roles in regular in-class discussions (i.e. those except for the activity). A total of twelve classes were monitored, six were randomly selected to use the activity (Egroups) and the remaining six served as controls (Cgroups).

VARIATIONS

As the course progressed and the students became more comfortable with their classmates and teacher, the following variation was implemented. The students were informed as usual that they should keep their role secret, but that now the teacher would monitor the discussion and try to guess which role each student had performed at the end. This had the effect of re-focusing some students who were starting to grow tired of the activity and not make sufficient effort to perform their role.

RESULTS

The author ticked the appropriate box on the check-sheet each time a student used one of the roles. However, as the study focused on group use of roles, in a single lesson (comprising two discussions; one of 12 minutes, and one of 16) just one tick per student for each role was counted towards the class total. Subsequent use of the role during the lesson by the same individual was not included in the total. For example, if Student A disagreed four times in Lesson 4, just one instance was included in the class total for seven weeks. In this way, the author was able to see how many students in the class had the confidence to regularly perform the roles during group discussion throughout the study period, rather than the frequency of individual use. The average number of different students performing a particular role in each lesson over the seven-week period (APL) was also calculated.

Table 2 *Number of different students performing roles over seven classes*

Class	E1	E2	E3	E4	E5	E6	Totals	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	Totals
#Students	7	7	8	7	6	6	**41**	7	8	8	7	6	9	**45**
Starters	20	28	37	30	22	28	**165**	19	26	25	34	30	30	**164**
APL	2.9	4	5.3	4.3	3.1	4	**3.9**	2.7	3.7	3.6	4.9	4.3	4.3	**3.9**
Challengers	16	7	31	11	9	20	**94**	13	7	4	8	6	12	**50**
APL	2.3	1	4.4	1.6	1.3	2.9	**2.3**	1.9	1	0.6	1.1	0.9	1.7	**1.2**
Questioners	34	36	26	29	29	25	**179**	25	19	32	22	21	35	**154**
APL	4.9	5.1	3.7	4.1	4.1	3.6	**4.3**	3.6	2.7	4.6	3.1	3	3	**3.7**
Supporters	12	30	20	25	19	30	**136**	9	11	15	31	18	22	**106**
APL	1.7	4.3	2.9	3.6	2.7	4.3	**3.3**	1.3	1.6	2.1	4.4	2.6	3.1	**2.5**

The results showed a higher number of Egroup students per class performing all of the target roles, with the exception of Starter, which was identical to the controls. There were an average of 2.3 different students challenging with disagreement, compared to 1.2 in the Cgroups, 4.3 different questioners, compared to 3.7, and 3.3 supporters, compared to 2.5. In addition, these three roles showed greater variance between Egroups and controls with regard to the number of individual students whose use of the role was zero to minimal (never recorded, or recorded just once over seven weeks). While there were only two more students in the Cgroups who rarely or never started the discussion, there were ten, six, and eight more who shied away from challenging, questioning, and supporting, respectively (appendix 1.4).

REFLECTIONS
The results suggest that the effect of the activity was twofold. Firstly, more Egroup students were encouraged to regularly perform the roles during discussions, Secondly, a greater number of students who were less inclined/too shy to perform the roles were able to overcome such obstacles. Perhaps because the regular practice helped more students to use the roles, there was less social pressure on these individuals, assisting their WTC and allowing them to feel more comfortable when disagreeing, asking questions, or reacting to their classmates. While this was not the case for starting the discussion, in-class notes showed that there continued to be longer pauses at the start of discussion in some of the Cgroups. This suggests that without practice of this role, students in these classes remained less confident about self-selecting themselves to give the first opinion. Of course, after just one semester of use, it cannot be stated categorically that all of these results are directly attributable to the activity. However, they do seem to point to the possibility that practice of roles goes some way towards breaking down social barriers to WTC. One further suggestion that the impact of the activity was positive was found in that use of the role names (e.g. Starter) unconsciously became a feature of regular teacher–fronted discussion feedback. The author caught himself giving praise like, "Very balanced discussions today; there were six different Starters." Perhaps this feedback also served to provide a further opportunity for consciousness-raising among the students, as they may have considered the value of varied participation in regard to what roles they had played to contribute to an effective and enjoyable discussion.

It is important to note that the activity was introduced in the second semester of a unified course of study, meaning that the students had no exposure to this kind of practice in the first, and perhaps most formative part of the course. For this reason, there may have been some resistance to the activity, as it deviated from the fixed lesson plan that they had become

accustomed to. Also, the students may have formed communicative habits during this time that could have become sufficiently entrenched as to make breaking them more difficult in Semester 2. With this in mind, it could be posited that better results would be seen if the activity were done from the beginning of the first semester. This way, the importance of building the ability to comfortably play all of the roles necessary for good discussion would be recognized as a key study goal from the start. If the students were able to do this, and carry the performance through into the second semester, it would be an excellent opportunity for habit formation with potentially long-term benefits.

Consideration of this issue led the author to recall reading of dysfunctional groups in the business world (Robbins & Judge, 2007), wherein, the effectiveness of teams was dependent upon the various roles that individuals were able to play.

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APPENDIX

1.1 Questions

1. Do you spend a lot of money on clothes?

2. Are there any clothes that you think people shouldn't wear?

1.2 Role Cards

give the <u>first opinion</u> for each topic e.g. 'Can I start?'	disagree <u>two</u> times e.g. 'I'm sorry, but I disagree'
ask <u>two</u> follow-up questions e.g. Do you have a part-time job?	react <u>every time</u> your classmates speak e.g. 'I see`

1.3 Post-discussion Handout

Discuss this question with the group: What roles did your classmates play in the discussion?

Role A	Role B
The Starter Gets the discussion started by sharing opinions	**The Challenger** Makes the discussion deeper by disagreeing
Role C	Role D
The Questioner Moves the discussion forward with follow-up questions	**The Supporter** Helps the speaker by reacting e.g. 'I see'

1.4

#Ss with zero to minimal role use

Roles	Egroups (41 Students)	Cgroups (45 Students)
Starter	4	6
Challenger	14	24
Questioner	1	7
Supporter	7	15
Total	**26**	**52**