

Introduction and Acknowledgements

Welcome to the second issue of *New Directions in Teaching and Learning English Discussion*. English Discussion Class (EDC) is in its fourth academic year at Rikkyo University. Although EDC is still a relatively new program, it has been well-received by students. This can be seen in the results of the student questionnaire that the program conducts at the end of every academic semester. Every semester, over 80 percent of the students who completed the questionnaire agree that their English discussion skills have improved by taking EDC and are satisfied with the education they receive in EDC. However, when creating the EDC curriculum, one of the biggest challenges the program faced is the fact that very little is known about teaching discussion skills in foreign language settings. Curriculum developers and EDC instructors continue to face this challenge in their efforts to maintain and improve the quality of the curriculum because while there is a great deal of research on second language development and interaction, the majority of this research has been conducted in ESL settings, where most students have many opportunities to use the target language on a daily basis. Because our students have fewer chances to use English outside of class, developing discussion skills is by no means an easy task.

EDC Program Managers believe that one way to combat this challenge is to document what happens in EDC classrooms through instructors' eyes. Like all language teachers, EDC instructors make a variety of on-the-spot decisions in classrooms, develop activities, and experiment with different instructional approaches, all in order to facilitate students' learning. The EDC program regards these ideas and experiences as valuable resources in ascertaining the effectiveness of teaching discussion skills in an EFL context. In many teaching settings, however, teachers' ideas and practices are not recorded, meaning valuable research into language teaching and learning is left unwritten. Therefore, every year, the program asks EDC instructors to complete a piece of writing as part of their professional development to share ideas about effective teaching and learning within the EDC teaching community. This journal is a collection of their contributions to this ongoing dialogue.

Section One contains instructors' informal observations of student behaviors in EDC classes based on weekly entries made in a teaching journal. Each instructor focuses on a specific aspect of student behavior, identifying any changes in behavior over time, reflecting on possible causes of change, and outlining future teaching and learning strategies. Section Two contains classroom activities based on instructional principles that EDC instructors felt to be especially relevant to the teaching of discussion skills. These activities were specifically designed to meet students' learning needs. These articles demonstrate the opportunities instructors have to be creative in lesson-planning within a unified curriculum. Section Three contains classroom research on how teaching practice may influence aspects of student behavior within EDC classes. These articles describe instructors' attempts to answer research questions or test hypotheses by collecting data to quantify student behavior.

As little is known about the teaching and learning of discussion skills, it is hoped that this journal can contribute to the literature on this under-researched yet important area of language teaching and learning.

Lastly, the editors would like to offer their sincere thanks to the first director of the program, Masaharu Hattori; the former director of the program, Yasushi Aoki; the current director, Ryo Hamano; the deputy director, Ichiro Takayama; the former EDC professors, Akiko Kawasaki and Junya Morooka; the current EDC professors, Satomi Takahashi and Yuko Kawai; the administration managers, Minoru Hashimoto, Naoki Matsuoka and Leiko Taguchi; and all the members of the EDC program for their understanding and support in launching this journal.

Editors

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