

Brainstorming for a Focus on Form

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ABSTRACT

Encouraging students to focus on the form of their speech while they engage in exchanges of meaning is one goal of the English Discussion Class (EDC) curriculum, but it is sometimes difficult to realize. This paper describes the development of brainstorming activities in response to this problem. These activities were designed to not only promote the creative generation of ideas but were also designed to promote students' noticing of and reflection on their use of language in discussions.

INTRODUCTION

Brainstorming is an activity typically associated with enhancing groups' creativity and has been used in workplaces for over 50 years (Nemeth, Personnaz, Personnaz, & Goncalo, 2004). It is difficult to say if workplaces using this activity are motivated more by the prospect of generating new ideas that can generate profit or solve problems, or if they are motivated more by the prospect of encouraging their staff to reflect on the ways they communicate and collaborate. From my perspective, however, I should admit that before developing the activities described in this paper, I had not thought much about brainstorming in terms that went beyond the role I assumed it played in creating new ideas and products.

This paper explains how a deeper consideration of the processes involved in brainstorming led me to consider that it might be useful in helping students to focus on the form of their discussions in EDC lessons. I attempted to do this in one variation of my activity by making the form of discussions themselves the subject of brainstorming sessions. In another variation of my activity, I organized brainstorming sessions that attempted to direct students towards content suitable for use with target functional language. This paper will explain these activities and the thought processes and principles that led to their development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A Focus on Form in EDC Lessons

Long (1998) described a situation in language pedagogy where there had been a movement away from courses designed to transfer mastery of preselected aspects of the L2 to students in a predetermined order. Long labelled such an approach as "focus on formS" or "focus on forms (with an s)" (p. 36) to emphasize the expectation that students would first master multiple linguistic forms before synthesizing their uses in communication. In an attempt to put the communicative needs and learning process of learners before mastery of forms, Long explained that many teachers had shifted to a focus on meaning. While Long portrayed this movement to student-centeredness as leading to improvements, particularly in students' comprehension of L2 input, he argued that courses with a focus on meaning still retained problems, particularly in students' production of L2 output.

Long argued that an ideal approach should take a position somewhere between a focus on forms (with an *s*) and a focus on meaning. He described this approach as a "*focus on form* (not forms)" (p. 40). This involves teaching that is predominantly concerned with encouraging students to exchange meaning, but also encourages or inspires students to pay attention to linguistic elements as they make this exchange. However, it is important to state here that, for Long, a focus on form was best represented by task-based teaching. He stated that courses should be organized around the completion of tasks and that the linguistic elements for attention should not be marked

in advance; instead, Long's focus on form comes from attention drawn to linguistic elements at the point of need. Long would probably interpret the EDC context, in which the curriculum directs teachers towards preselected language functions or communication skills before students start to exchange meaning, as exhibiting too much of a focus on forms (with an *s*).

Nevertheless, despite the EDC not being a fully task-based program, program managers and instructors have recently made efforts to trial more task-based activities (Singh, 2017); furthermore, an appreciation of a focus on form might also benefit teachers working in the program as it exists at the time of writing. EDC instructors should consider that Ellis (2005) (while also being a proponent of task-based approaches to learning and teaching) has given us a different definition of pedagogy focused on form. Ellis's definition shares with Long's the position that a focus on form involves attempts to induce attention to linguistic elements during students' exchanges of meaning. However, unlike Long, Ellis states that these attempts to induce attention do not only have to occur during or after exchanges of meaning. For Ellis, attempts to draw attention to linguistic forms can be planned in advance, and these forms can be preselected. This position is more compatible with the EDC curriculum and it retains the key principles that informed the creation of my activity. These principles were:

1. My activity should promote (or at least not interfere with) students' meaningful exchanges.
2. My activity should also encourage students to notice more of the linguistic form of these exchanges than they would otherwise notice without intervention.

Using the Noticing Hypothesis to Design an Activity with a Focus on Form

One important words in my principles above is "notice" as it provides clues about what teachers can do to promote a focus on form. It also makes a clear link between a focus on form and the Noticing Hypothesis. At its simplest, this hypothesis is summarized by Schmidt (2010) as, "people learn about the things that they pay attention to and do not learn much about the things they do not attend to" (p. 721). The Noticing Hypothesis has been a popular area for study in SLA and language pedagogy since it was articulated by Schmidt in response to 1980s language acquisition theories, which he believed placed too much emphasis on unconscious language learning. One factor that led to his rejection of these theories was that Schmidt suspected his acquaintance "Wes", an uninstructed, but fluent L2 user of English living in the U.S., may not have acquired the ability to use certain grammatical forms due to his overreliance on implicit learning (in other words due to his focus on meaning alone).

EDC assessment of accuracy is understood "in terms of comprehensibility rather than linguistic knowledge" (Hurling, 2012, p. 6); therefore, my activity does not focus on encouraging students to notice how their use of grammatical forms may differ from native speakers. Such a focus would also go against the principle of encouraging students to develop the capability to use English as a Lingua Franca (Seidlhofer, 2013), which, while not being the focus of this paper, may be a more desirable and realistic outcome for many EDC students than attaining native-like acquisition of English. Instead, the linguistic features I contemplated when designing my activity were those related to Hurling's (2012) goal that, discussions must be balanced, interactive and constructed by all participants, with the intended result that EDC students will be able to exchange opinions with others in order to share their culture and beliefs with both native and non-native speakers in English.

While contemplating this, I also made a prediction about students' needs at the start of the second semester of the 2017 academic year. This prediction was that although the majority of students, due to their experiences in the first semester, would have little trouble speaking for extended periods, there would still be a lot of scope for many of them to improve their pragmatic uses of English and their communication strategies. I hoped an activity designed to promote

noticing would help them with this.

It should also be mentioned that applications of the Noticing Hypothesis have not been unprecedented in the EDC context. Schaefer (2017) developed a dictogloss (a collaborative text reconstruction) activity that was designed to promote noticing of previously taught functional language. This activity was designed to promote noticing when the students compared their reconstructed output with a transcription of the video discussion they were asked to reproduce. The collaborative nature of this activity may also have promoted noticing as there is a possibility that different students had remembered different linguistic features more vividly than their peers were able to and subsequently helped their peers to become more aware of these forms. This interpretation leads to a third principle that I considered when developing my activity:

My activity should be collaborative and encourage students to notice aspects of their peers' use of language in addition to their own.

Can Brainstorming Encourage a Focus on Form?

A typical brainstorming activity, which usually involves groups generating as many ideas as possible and normally involves the tenet that ideas should not be criticized when they are expressed (Nemeth et al., 2004). This suggests, as stated in the introduction, that the activity promotes a focus on meaning not on form, and before starting this project, this was also my understanding of brainstorming. While I had used the activity before in the EDC context (mainly with students with higher levels of proficiency, at the start of class before the usual fluency activity), my rationale for doing so was related to motivation, not on promoting a focus on form. I felt that allowing the students more creativity by letting them generate their own ideas about the lesson topic, instead of giving them predetermined questions during the fluency, would show the students that I valued their ideas. I also thought it would be a motivating start to the lesson. At this time, I encouraged students to draw lines to connect different ideas and organize their ideas into categories, which can be seen as a rudimentary form of mind mapping. However, I did not think much about my rationale for doing so, and I did not give much consideration to the idea that mind mapping may provide students with a visual record of comprehension and cognition related to ideas generated by brainstorming, not only a record of the ideas themselves (Naqbi, 2011).

Brainstorming is not extensively mentioned in TESL or TEFL literature, and when it is mentioned it seems to have been used to develop writing skills not improve verbal communication. However, examining these studies, it seems that benefits attributed to this activity for writing may also be applicable to discussion. These claims include:

- Participants brainstorming in groups are encouraged to concentrate on making their newly generated ideas comprehensible to other group members (Rao, 2007).
- The process of organizing ideas generated in brainstorming may lead to improvements in participants cognition and their ability to structure their arguments (Naqbi, 2011; Rao, 2007).
- Brainstorming ideas and organizing them in a mind map may help participants remember the ideas and retrieve them when under pressure; for example, in examinations (Naqbi, 2011).
- Being exposed to others' ideas in brainstorming may not only provide participants with a shared resource to draw from later but may also help participants recognize imbalances in their contributions to the activity in comparison to the contributions of their peers. There is a possibility that this may push some participants towards attempting to improve their participation or the quality of their output (Rao, 2007).

Nevertheless, before uncritically accepting these claims it should be mentioned that the studies above are quite limited in their scope and are case studies not extensive trials. Naqbi also mentioned a disadvantage of her use of mind mapping that is quite pertinent to EDC lessons. This

was that brainstorming and mind mapping in her class sometimes required more time than she had planned for, particularly when the process was new to her students and before she had intervened to show them how their practice could be improved.

In addition to issues of classroom timing, it is also important to note that the assumption that brainstorming facilitates the creation of ideas and creativity is controversial. Nemeth et al. (2004) have described how it has been challenged because critics feel brainstorming can impede creativity if participants focus too much on building consensus and hold back ideas that could be controversial or upset the social order. However, Nemeth et al.'s psychological research suggests that this does not mean generating ideas individually is optimal for creativity; instead, they found that groups could generate more ideas than groups of people working individually or groups engaged in traditional brainstorming if they were encouraged to debate. Furthermore, EDC is a pedagogical context and not a context like Apple or Disney where producing a large quantity of creative ideas is of primary importance. As argued by Rao (2007), brainstorming in language classrooms should focus students more on the processes of creation, not only on the products themselves. In other words, it should have a focus on form. Extending this argument, it should also be noticed that the condition of feeling pressure to build consensus and to avoid upsetting the social order is by no means limited to brainstorming alone. An assumption could be made that the extended discussions that form the basis of EDC lessons and the professional and social discussions that occur all over the world share this condition to some degree. Rather than avoiding brainstorming (or discussions) for this reason, it is perhaps better for teachers facilitating this activity to convey a sense that while all ideas may not be of equal value, during a brainstorming session (or discussion), all participants should be given equal respect. Respect, however, does not mean avoiding natural disagreement. Tactful expression of disagreement is often beneficial and can be a desirable skill for participants to improve.

ACTIVITY AND MATERIALS

Why Did My Teaching Principles Lead Me to Brainstorming in EDC Lessons?

I must admit that I had not fully developed the principles and ideas for consideration exactly as expressed above when I initially began to implement my activity. My initial conception for the project was that, since it began in the second semester, I would encourage students to reflect on what they learnt about having “good discussions” in the first semester, make a record of these reflections and then return to them in feedback or when presenting new language functions. I hoped that this link between students' past observations and current performance would inspire noticing and encourage more of a focus on form. However, I was not quite sure about the format this preliminary discussion should take, so I presented my ideas to an EDC Program Manager. Initially, I had intended to give students a list of preselected features of a “good discussion” to rank and discuss, but the Program Manager suggested that the number of items was too large and could overwhelm students. In our subsequent discussion, the idea of brainstorming was mentioned, and I felt this would better accomplish my aims. I also thought it would have the advantage of starting from students' suggestions of what makes a “good discussion”, instead of a list of options reflecting my own biases. At that time, I was not sure how the students would respond to the activity, but after observing the reaction of all the classes taught to it, I began to feel the activity could be adapted, and variations of the activity could be used later in the semester to further promote a focus on form.

Materials

My initial task required large sheets of papers and markers (one sheet of paper for each class) and at least one marker per student. I provided the students with a variety of coloured markers because

I felt it would help the students organize their ideas and help them create more aesthetically pleasing posters. As will be explained below, I took the students' posters with me to subsequent lessons, which required storage and organization. I used my office locker for this purpose and this was probably not an ideal location. In addition, magnets were used to display the posters in the classroom. The brainstorming variations I used later in the semester did not use paper and markers; instead, I used the classroom whiteboards and blackboards. For these activities, I only needed to ensure I had enough whiteboard markers or chalk for each student (again, I preferred to provide students with a variety of colours).

PROCEDURE

Brainstorming and Mind Mapping “Good Discussions”

1. The activity starts in the introduction lesson to the second semester of EDC. After reviewing the course rules and procedures, the students are directed to a large sheet of paper at the back of the class.
2. The teacher instructs the students to write “Good Discussions” at the centre of this paper.
3. The teacher also asks the students to write their class number, lesson day and lesson period on the paper to avoid confusion with posters created by other classes.
4. The teacher asks the students to remember their experiences of English Discussion Class in the previous semester and asks, “What should you do to have good discussions?”
5. The teacher gives the students adequate time to remember and think of ideas. If the students struggle, the teacher can give an example, but should choose a vague concept to allow students to develop the idea. For example, “I think respect is important [writes ‘Respect’]. How can you show respect to other people in discussions? [draws lines emanating from ‘Respect’]”
6. As the students produce ideas, the teacher gives students confidence by pointing out interesting ideas and commenting on them.
7. When the teacher judges the students to have generated a sufficient quantity of ideas, the teacher encourages the students to draw connecting lines between their ideas if they have not done so already.
8. The next step is to instigate the 3/2/1 fluency activity commonly used in EDC lessons and described by Ogawa (2014). This activity is based on Nation’s (1989) 4/3/2 activity, which originates from Maurice’s (1984) fluency workshop.
9. Students are split into groups of speakers and listeners, and the speakers are told to say anything they want to about the topic of “good discussions”. The teacher explains that speakers can use ideas from the poster, if they like them, or they can say their own original ideas.
10. The speakers speak for three minutes and then change partners. They then try to repeat the same ideas in two minutes. The partners then change again, and the speakers try to express their ideas in one minute.
11. The speakers and listeners change and repeat the 3/2/1 process.
12. After the 3/2/1 activity, the students are asked, “Do you have anything to add to the poster?” and if required, time is given to allow them to add more ideas to the poster.
13. The activity does not finish here. The poster can be used for feedback in subsequent discussions and subsequent lessons as students can be asked, “Did you have a good discussion like you described in the poster?” The students can also add to the poster if the lessons provoke new ideas.
14. In the final lesson of the semester, the poster is presented to the students again, and the students are encouraged to make final additions to the poster before doing a final 3/2/1 fluency activity.

15. The final fluency activity uses two prompts:
 - a. In English discussions we should...
 - b. One thing I learnt in the EDC that I think will be useful in the future is... another thing is...

VARIATIONS

Brainstorming Uses of Target Language with “Mind Map Stems”

After coming to the conclusion that most students seemed to be comfortable with stages 1 to 13 of the activity above, I felt the activity could be adapted for other purposes. As will be discussed below, I felt one limitation of the “Good Discussions” activity was that it might not be sufficient to encourage all students to notice all the linguistic forms assessed in the EDC, and this variation is my response to this. One intended use of this activity is in review lessons. Another intended use is in presenting target language where students seem to have more difficulty in generating (or possibly in remembering to generate) ideas that can be appropriately expressed using this target language rather than in understanding how or why such language should be used. For example, one target in the second semester is for students to use information from various sources to support their arguments. My impression was that in more controlled practice many students had little trouble understanding and using phrases like “My teacher told me...”, “I saw a TV program where...” and “When I was a junior high school student...”. However, when presented with longer discussions or new topics, the same students would often neglect to give information from sources other than their own opinions.

The procedure is:

1. Before the lesson, the teacher draws a mind map stem on the board. For example, the word “The Internet” at the top of the board with “good points” and “bad points” as subcategories underneath it. See the *appendixes* for this and other examples.
2. The students are given markers or chalk, and the teacher encourages them to brainstorm ideas to add to the stem.
3. After the students have generated a sufficient number of ideas, they do the 3/2/1 activity as described above. They are told to talk about the title of the mind map. For example, “Please talk about the Internet.”
4. When the students have finished, the teacher comments on the ideas that the students generated in the brainstorming and fluency activities and relates them to the target language. For example, Many of you really like the Internet and I heard lots of people say it is good for getting information as (name) wrote here. However (name) also wrote that a disadvantage of the Internet is that there is “fake news” and we need to be careful. Today we are looking at “Balancing Opinions”. Even if we think something is good, there may be important disadvantages we need to talk about and even if we think something is bad, there may be important advantages we also need to talk about.
5. An optional stage is to compare students’ brainstorming and fluency output with the example discussions in the textbook. It might be preferable to include this stage as the brainstorming and fluency activities are unlikely to elicit the lesson’s target questions.
6. The completed mind map on the board is a resource that students can use in the practice and early discussion stages of the lesson. It can also be used by the teacher to instigate self or peer feedback.

DISCUSSION

Reflections on the “Good Discussions” Activity

As in Naqbi’s (2011) implementation of brainstorming, some classes were quite slow to generate ideas. However, other classes quickly took to the task and wrote many ideas on the paper in a short time. Nevertheless, even in the slower classes, after more confident students started to instigate idea generation, other students found it easier to participate and started to generate ideas more quickly themselves. I did not keep detailed records at this time, but I recall that I felt the need to model the activity by writing my own ideas in about 50% of the classes. The maximum time for a group to generate at least one idea per person was about 15 minutes. Most students could generate enough ideas to use in the 3/2/1 stage of the activity within 10 minutes.

Ideas generated in this activity often referred to target language introduced in the previous semester, especially language used to ask for and give examples. Students also referred to the communication skills assessed throughout both semesters of the EDC; these included, giving English reactions, agreeing and disagreeing, asking follow-up questions and checking understanding. Other popular topics included students’ preparation before lessons and their attitudes towards their peers. Although not directly related to discussions, many students wrote, “Do the homework”, and their justification for this was that it gave them more ideas to talk about. Other students also wrote their expectations that classroom discussions should have “Everyone talking” or “Balance” and that those discussions should use “100% English”. One surprising phrase posited in at three least classes and written on one poster was, “Be aggressive”; however, the students using the phrase did not appear to be sure if it was the most appropriate phrase to express their intended meaning. Asking the students to clarify and examining the context of the students’ use of the phrase revealed it to mean, “Not being passive or failing to make efforts to influence the course of discussions with new ideas or questions.”

I brought the posters to the classroom again for the next three lessons. At this time, it was quite easy to use the posters to refer to the students’ ideas about balanced participation when discussing students’ use of the scheduled target language. This language related to choosing topics, asking others to choose topics and asking others if they had any more ideas before ending the discussion of topics with a summary. It was also easy to refer to ideas related to the continuously assessed communication skills mentioned above. However, around five weeks into the semester, organizing both the posters and the materials required for the test scheduled at this time became difficult. Around the fifth week, I also became more confident about students’ awareness of the EDC communication skills and I felt it better to prioritize new target language, which many students seemed to have difficulty using consistently.

As mentioned in the activity procedure, the final stage of the “Good Discussions” activity was returning to the posters in the last review lesson, which was also the students’ final lesson in the EDC program. Most classes had little trouble adding additional ideas to the poster at this time. In some cases, this involved adding extra details or drawing extra connections between existing ideas. For example, giving more examples of useful questions or adding, “Use simple English” to “Don’t use Japanese”. In other cases, students wrote new ideas, usually based on the target language taught in the second semester, and “giving different viewpoints” was a popular choice. Students expressed the idea that their experience of imagining different viewpoints in English Discussion Class might help them remember to consider the possibility of encountering people in their future workplaces with viewpoints different to their own.

Reflections on the “Mind Map Stems” Activity

Since the students had been introduced to brainstorming before, the process of this activity was smoother than “Good Discussions.” My provision of categories to direct the brainstorming and

the focus on generating ideas for discussion, not metalinguistic reflection, may have also made the process smoother. In the “Good Discussions” activity, it was hard to observe if the students were referring to products of their brainstorming while participating in discussions, but with “Mind Map Stems” I could observe students repeating or adapting ideas from the board when their mind maps were available. Sometimes they repeated these ideas verbatim, but on other occasions they looked at the board and repeated only the functional target language, using it to facilitate the expression of their own ideas.

Another observation I made during the implementation of this activity was probably the clearest example of brainstorming promoting noticing during the course of my project. I often found that students would attempt to write ideas and then stop because they had noticed they were not sure about the English vocabulary they required to make their point. In these situations, they would usually approach their peers and sometimes asked me for the vocabulary required. Later, I often heard these students using this vocabulary during discussions, sometimes checking the board as they did so. This happened most frequently in the review lesson with the theme of “Crime and Punishment.” I felt that having all the students in each class become better aware of the usages and meanings of terms like “victim”, “criminal” and “life in prison” at the beginning of the lesson seemed to make the lesson run more smoothly than when I had taught the lesson with the same theme in the previous year. At that time, I had only introduced this vocabulary gradually, when introducing new discussion topics or in episodes of feedback when it seemed as though students’ discussions would have benefitted from this vocabulary.

CONCLUSION

The focus of this project was to design an activity with the following principles:

1. My activity should promote (or at least not interfere with) students’ meaningful exchanges.
2. My activity should also encourage students to notice more of the linguistic form of these exchanges than they would otherwise notice without intervention.
3. My activity should be collaborative and encourage students to notice aspects of their peers’ use of language in addition to their own.

My response to these principles was to create two variations of brainstorming activities designed to promote a focus on form. The discussion section above, however, reveals that my assessment of these activities has not yet gone past making limited observations of classroom events and the collection of a few anecdotes. Based on these anecdotes alone, it is particularly difficult to state if I have met my goals (particularly the second and third goals). Nevertheless, I did feel that the activities were not too difficult to implement in EDC lessons and did not distract from the overall goals for the course. Therefore, it would be appropriate to conduct more robust classroom research into the role of brainstorming and its relation to a focus on form in the classroom. This could involve comparing the performance of groups brainstorming with control groups or surveys asking students to describe their perceptions of the activity and their understandings of the cognitive processes involved.

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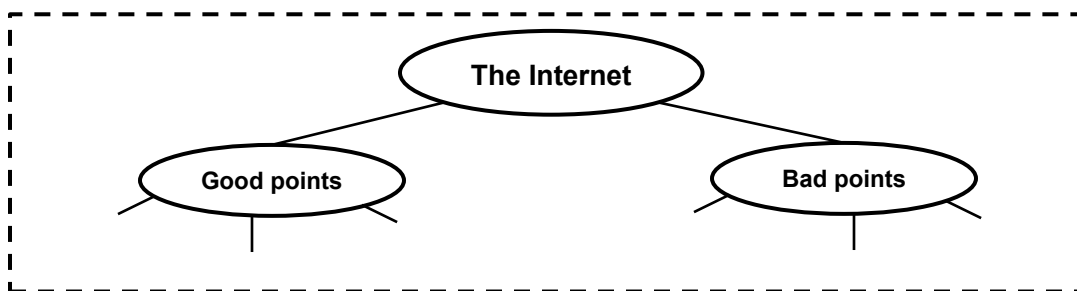
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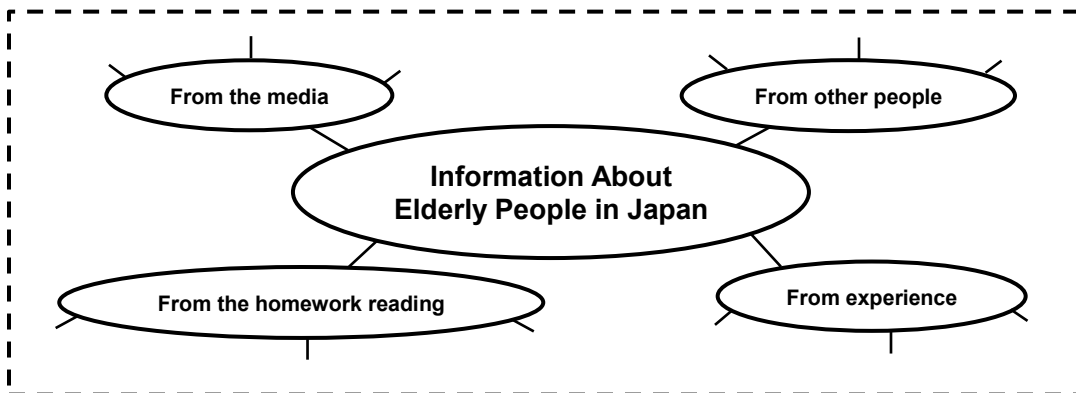
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APPENDIX A – Mind Map Stem for Lesson 6 “Traditional and New Media” With Target Language Related to “Balancing Opinions”



APPENDIX B – Mind Map Stem for Lesson 6 “Social Concerns” With Target Language Related to “Information”



APPENDIX C – Mind Map Stem for Lesson 12 “Crime and Punishment.” The Final Review Lesson

