

# Introduction and Acknowledgements

Welcome to the inaugural issue of *New Directions in Teaching and Learning English Discussion*. English Discussion Class (EDC) is in its fourth academic year of implementation including the 2009 pilot year at Rikkyo University. Although EDC is still a 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.

Curriculum developers believe that one way to combat this challenge is to document what happens in EDC classrooms through its 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 semester, the program asks EDC instructors to complete a piece of writing, called the Semester Project, 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 Semester Projects: Section one provides the rationale for the EDC curriculum and assessment methods, and is especially recommended to readers unfamiliar with EDC lessons. Section two contains classroom activities based on instructional principles that instructors felt to be especially relevant to the teaching of discussion skills. Section three contains instructors' reactions to peer observation activities, outlining the benefits of collaborating with colleagues in order to further improve teaching skills and knowledge. Finally, Section four contains action research projects conducted by instructors to learn more about how classroom time can be used to optimize student mastery of goals and objectives. 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, editors would like to offer 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

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Editors

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