Noticing Discussion Skill Use and Self-Assessment: Two Simple Token Activities

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces two activities that were designed to help students in English Discussion Class (EDC) lessons focus on improving their target discussion skill and assessing self-performance. Based on principles found within Dörnyei's Principled Communicative Approach (2009), Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis (1990, 2010), and information processing theory, this activity utilizes physical tokens in communicative discussion activities to guide student attention and reduce cognitive burden. After describing how the activity is to be best utilized, the author concludes by offering variations of the activity, and offers possible areas of development and improvement.

INTRODUCTION

The overall purpose of the EDC program is "to develop students who have the ability to discuss contemporary topics with peers using English" (Hurling, 2012 p. 1-2), with the cognitive aims being to provide students with opportunities to practice and incorporate target functional discussion skills in a meaningful and interactional way with their group members. There are twelve discussion skills that are taught in total during the year-long course, delivered as a set of six skills per semester. These discussion skills cover functions ranging from sharing opinions and supporting them clearly with reasons and examples, to considering possible pros and cons of ideas generated by students, especially from the perspectives of people outside of the discussion group. These discussion skills primarily aid students in eliciting content from group members, as well as clearly communicating their own ideas during their speaking turns. To reflect this, each skill is presented to students as having a 'listener side' and a 'speaker side'. The target discussion skill is presented along with some example phrases for students to use to elicit ideas as 'listeners' and clearly mark their own ideas as 'speakers'. Students are then given both controlled and semi-controlled practice activities interlaced with appropriate feedback from the instructor, after which they have the opportunity to utilize the target skill in extended discussions with a group of their peers. It is important during each lesson that instructors aim to help students understand not only how and why they are using this functional language as individuals (e.g. how to state and elicit general opinions and support them clearly), but also how to do so in a balanced way with their group members. In order for students to receive full marks for each lesson, they must use the target discussion skill actively in discussions as both a 'listener' and 'speaker'.

Previously, I described an activity (Hasstedt, 2019) that was designed to help students reflect on whether or not they were able to practice each target discussion skill as part of a balanced discussion group, meaning a discussion group in which "each of the members in the discussion had an equal opportunity to express their own ideas." (Kellas, 2012 p. 2-27). Despite this activity finding success in achieving its purpose of helping students have a more balanced discussion, there were students, especially in lower-level classes, who found it mentally taxing to focus on balanced group interaction while simultaneously working through how to incorporate the target language skills when communicating their ideas. The cognitive burden placed on such students might be minimized if each course aim is attended to in turn. Rather than have these students focus on improving their interactional skills, it would seem that they would first benefit from more scaffolding of, and more dedicated practice time with, their discussion skill use.

In this paper I will describe two activities that were designed to meet such student needs. The principles that informed the present activities have some overlap with those of the previous one – in particular, those of Dörnyei's (2009) Principled Communicative Approach (PCA) and Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis – but also those related to information processing theory and self-assessment.

DISCUSSION

It is important to give EDC students the scaffolding and practice they need in order for them to automatize the use of the course's target discussion skills, while simultaneously providing them with opportunities to utilize such skills in a genuinely communicative way. Within PCA, Dörnyei's *focus-on-form principle* describes such an approach (Dörnyei, 2009). Dörnyei explains that it is important to "pay attention to the formal/structural aspects of the L2 that determine accuracy and appropriateness at the linguistic, discourse and pragmatic levels," (p. 41) and that good teaching utilizes a balanced combination of activities that are meaning-based and form-focused. Ellis (2014) echoes this, saying "only when learners are engaged in understanding and producing messages in the context of actual acts of communication are the conditions created for acquisition to take place" (p. 34), but that a focus-on-form as it relates to grammar and structure is important for helping students notice how specific linguistic items are occurring in the language they are being exposed to (p. 35).

In the case of EDC lessons, discussion skills are presented to students by having them focus on the 'how' and the 'why' of using each skill. The 'how' part of the presentation introduces pre-determined discussion skill phrases that students incorporate into their discussions. A focus on form during this presentation stage, and subsequently the practice stage, is invaluable as it focuses students' attention on how to adapt and synthesize the skill with their own ideas both in practice and extended discussions. The 'why' part of the presentation guides students to see the benefits of utilizing the skill to aid the communication and exchange of ideas in discussion situations. Following the presentation stage, students are given time to practice short discussions with a partner, during which time they are guided to adapt the discussion skill phrases to the communicative needs of each pair. The repeated practice of the discussion skill's form is essential during this stage, as "some structures may not be mastered without the opportunity for repeated practice" (Ellis, 2014 p. 35).

How exactly the skill is transferred from explicit to implicit knowledge is still theoretically debated (Ellis, 2014). According to Skill-Acquisition Theory (DeKeyser, 1998), as students practice consciously using the discussion skills during this practice stage and throughout future discussions, their explicit knowledge of the skill becomes automatized as implicit knowledge. According to other researchers, it is believed that learners develop implicit knowledge through consciousness-raising tasks which guide them to discovering underlying rules (Ellis, 2014 p. 37). Regardless of one's position on this topic, however, it is generally accepted that the development of both implicit and explicit knowledge is important, and for the purposes of EDC discussion skill practice, students are engaging in genuine L2 interaction. In fact, Dörnyei's *focused interaction principle* found within PCA states exactly this (Dörnyei, 2009), that there should be "ample opportunities" for such interaction, and that communicative practice should also include target phrases to practice (p. 41). After EDC students conclude the pair practice stage, they are guided to continue using the target language in two group discussions, with each group being made up of three or four members. The opportunities for genuine, extended practice increase, and ideally the discussion skill use becomes somewhat automatized and the cognitive focus can then shift to the interactional skill of carrying out a balanced discussion.

However, while many students are able to manage this shift of focus to group dynamics, there are some students who find the transition difficult. In particular, it is difficult for some students to manage the cognitive burden of trying to focus on two aims simultaneously – using discussion skills and functioning as part of a balanced discussion group – a problem that can be explained using information processing theory. Huitt (2003) describes the principle that there is a limit on how much information a person can process, whether it be input or output, and working memory can only hold so much information before it begins to prioritize which aspects of language to focus on. Ellis (2014) explains that our central executive system, which controls our working memory and long-term memory, is "limited in capacity, and thus the extent to which language learners are able to attend to a specific system will depend on the extent to which other systems are automatized" (p. 8). For those students who have not yet begun to automatize the target discussion skill, their limited working memory capacity prevents them from shifting their focus without consequence.

The activities that I describe in this paper can help such students focus on practicing and automatizing the target language by reducing the burden on their working memory, helping them notice aspects of their performance, and guiding them through self-assessment. The present activities incorporate elements of Schmidt's (1990, 2010) Noticing Hypothesis and relevant theory, namely the hypothesis that conscious attention is essential for language acquisition, as well as the concept that learners must "notice the gap" between their output and target language input. Each activity utilizes physical tokens to help students visualize and track their use of the target discussion skills. The physical tokens act as a visual cue to help students notice if and when they used a skill, as well as tracking the activity of their peers. While the first activity has students focus on using a single target skill, the second allows students to track their effectiveness in using two or more skills by using a visual check-sheet that utilizes physical tokens in lieu of writing instruments. Self-assessment activities such as check-sheets have many documented benefits (Mahmoodi-Shahrebabaki, 2014), but I chose physical tokens to emphasize the exact moments that students accomplished their task of using a discussion skill. Both the visual and aural senses are activated when using colored, plastic poker chips on a desk, for example, which only help in guiding students to "notice the gap" in their performance.

PROCEDURE
Activity #1: Chip in a Box (Single Discussion Skill)
The primary purpose of this activity is to help students notice if and when they have used the target discussion skill, and the secondary purpose is to remind students to ask their peers questions using the target discussion skill. Encouraging learners to both provide and elicit content can help guide them toward balanced group discussions. This activity can be carried out during the discussion skill practice stage or during a group discussion as needed.

This activity requires a single physical object for each participating student, as well as a small box or receptacle for each physical grouping of students. The physical object needs to be able to be placed in the box, so something small such as a poker chip, a coin, or flat *ohajiki* marble will suffice. I personally prefer using plastic colored poker chips, so I will refer to this object as such. The box's singular purpose is to serve as a centralized container for students to discard their poker chips into during the activity. I prefer to use a clear container, which conveniently functions as the clear lid of my set of poker chips, so that students can easily see how many poker chips have been discarded at any given point.

Place the box in the center of each grouping of students and distribute one poker chip to each participating student. For example, in a typical EDC classroom, each group of four students will have one box that is placed within reach of each group member, and all eight students will

have one poker chip. Instruct students to carry out a discussion as they normally would for that stage of the lesson, but to add their poker chip to the box once they have used the target discussion skill as a 'listener' for the first time. In other words, once a student has used the target discussion skill to either elicit content from a peer or ask peers to participate in the discussion, they place their token into the box. Explain to students that their goal by the end of the activity is to have placed their poker chip into the box, but that they are still expected to not only continue using the discussion skill as a 'listener', but to also continue actively participating as 'speakers' as appropriate. Set a time limit for the discussion as desired. Keep an eye on students to make sure that they are discarding their poker chips appropriately, and assist groups that forget to do so as necessary.

Following the conclusion of the discussion, have students check whether or not they were able to discard their poker chip before the end of the discussion time. Having a clear container allows students to see the contents, and this quick reflective action serves as a simple way to track whether or not they successfully used the target language. If necessary, continue the activity into the next round of discussions by returning the discarded poker chips to their owners, or by distributing an extra poker chip to each student to challenge them further.

Activity #2: *Ohajiki* Check-Sheet (Multiple Discussion Skills)
The primary purpose of this activity is to help students notice which of the previously learned discussion skills they are using either as a 'listener' to ask questions or as a 'speaker' to give clear ideas. The secondary purpose is to guide students to identify which discussion skills they need to improve, as well as how to use them more actively in a communicative context. This activity can be carried out during the discussion skill practice stage or during a group discussion as needed.

This activity requires a self-check sheet for each participating student that includes spaces that represent discussion skill use as desired, ideally both for the 'listener' and 'speaker' sides of each skill. In addition, you will need to provide each grouping of students with at least one small container of physical tokens, which needs to be placed within reach of all participating students in the group. The same poker chips can be used in this activity, but the large size of a poker chip potentially restricts the number of tokens that can be used on a given card's space, so I recommend using smaller objects. I find that Japanese flat *ohajiki* marbles are a good size, about the size of a small coin, and are easy to acquire, so I will refer to such tokens as *ohajiki* for the purpose of explaining this activity.

The check-sheet will function in almost exactly the same way that a written check-sheet might, the difference being that students will place one *ohajiki* in its corresponding place rather than make a written tally mark with a pen. Instruct students to carry out a discussion as they normally would for that stage of the lesson, but to place one *ohajiki* on the appropriate space of their check-sheet the first time that the discussion skill is used. Within the context of EDC, that means that each of the discussion skills will have its own row of phrases, but that each set of discussion skill phrases is divided into the 'listener' side and the 'speaker' side, which is represented by having two distinct columns. In other words, each discussion skill has a 'listener' side space, as well as a 'speaker' side space, and students will place one *ohajiki* in a space once a corresponding phrase has been used.

Explain to students that their goal by the end of the activity is to have placed one *ohajiki* in each space, such that each discussion skill was used as both a 'listener' and 'speaker'. This allows them to focus on trying to find opportunities to use each skill in a communicative setting, and allows them to track their progress. Set a time limit for the discussion as desired. Keep an eye on students to make sure that they are appropriately placing the *ohajiki*, and assist groups that forget to do so as necessary.

Following the conclusion of the discussion, instruct students not to move any of the *ohajiki* currently on their cards, as some students may begin clearing their check-sheets. At this point you can decide what type of feedback questions would be most useful for your particular group of students. In my classes, I tend to ask students to reflect on the following points:

1. *Which discussion skills did they use the best/most? Were they more active as 'listeners' or as 'speakers'?*
2. *Which discussion skill is the most difficult to use? Why?*

These questions allow students to reflect not only on the positive aspects of their discussion skill use, but also on any aspects of their performance that they can improve. The first question praises students for using the discussion skills, and guides them toward thinking about how to use them in a group context. The second question aims to help students notice which skills they are neglecting, and to help them identify any obstacles that make it difficult to use these discussion skills. I like to follow up on the second question by asking students to brainstorm ways that they might overcome such obstacles in future discussions. After sharing potential difficulties in using the skills in a discussion setting, I offer examples from their discussions of how other students have navigated around potential obstacles, while also highlighting missed opportunities from the activity.

VARIATIONS

Activity #1: Chip in a Box

The simplistic design of this activity allows for several types of variations, depending on the needs of the lesson or available materials. This activity instructs students to track a single instance of using the target discussion skill by distributing a single poker chip to each participant, but more chips can be distributed if the instructor decides to make the activity more challenging. In fact, providing each student with a stack of several poker chips might allow students to measure the exact quantity of utterances, although this might lead to a higher degree of cognitive burden for individual students, not to mention the risk of possibly encouraging inappropriate overuse of the target discussion skills.

If poker chips, or any other variant physical token, are unavailable, instruct students to take any object in their pencil case or bag, such as an eraser or a pen, and hold it in their hand. Students proceed with the activity as usual, but can only release their object from their hand once they have used the target language at least once.

This activity can also be adjusted to focus on whichever skills are most pertinent to the needs of the lesson. I designed the activity to focus on asking group members questions using the discussion skills as a 'listener', but you can shift the focus to using the discussion skills to give clear ideas as a 'speaker'. In the context of an EDC lesson, this activity could allow students to focus on developing Communication Skills to encourage negotiation of meaning, such as Checking for Understanding or Paraphrasing a group member's ideas. This activity could also be used to encourage students to ask general follow-up questions to each other within a discussion.

Activity #2: *Ohajiki* Check-Sheet

The necessity for including some form of check-sheet makes it difficult to carry out this activity with minimal materials. However, students can create their own check-sheets on a blank piece of paper if no materials are prepared beforehand. One added benefit of customized check-sheets is that the focus of the practice activity can be on any number of target skills and phrases, and therefore caters more to the needs of each particular student. However, if students have their textbooks, or any other printed material that already includes the target language, you can have them use the discussion skill phrases located there as the check-sheet. For example, the back of

the EDC textbook contains a reference page that includes all of the discussion skills and corresponding phrases, so it can easily function as a quick check-sheet. Ideally *ohajiki*, or some other kind of physical token, will be used to help students visualize and subsequently notice when skills are being used in the group, but pens can be used if materials are scarce.

As designed, check-sheets include more than one skill, as well as phrases that represent the 'listener' and 'speaker' sides of each skill. Variant check-sheets can add or omit any number of these skills and phrases, depending on class needs. In addition, the activity has students place one *ohajiki* per skill in order to reduce the cognitive burden of tracking several skills at once, but one variation of this activity releases the limitation of how many *ohajiki* can be placed in a given space, in order to help students see if they are overusing individual discussion skills, or are dominating the group by being the exclusive user of certain skills.

One clear advantage that written check-sheets have over this *ohajiki* check-sheet is that the results of a student's performance are recorded, allowing students to review their performance at any point in the future. To anticipate this, an appropriate follow-up activity to the *ohajiki* check-sheet could have students record their goals for future discussion, such as recording which skill they would like to focus on next, or writing down their strategy for overcoming any perceived obstacles to using their desired skill.

CONCLUSION

Both activities have been well received by students in my classes. The simplified foci of each activity, combined with the attention-grabbing power of physical tokens and objects, have made it easier for students to meet the cognitive aims of the course. I noticed that students are using discussion skills more actively, they are more aware of how to navigate difficult situations in group discussions, and students began asking each other more follow-up questions.

Despite the benefits of using poker chips and *ohajiki* to guide students' attention, there are some potential drawbacks. Instructors should be cautious in classes of easily distractible students who might find playing with the activity objects tempting, as well as students who accidentally drop objects in the classroom. In addition, poker chips and *ohajiki* don't replace principled instruction and feedback, so instructors should be mindful of how exactly these activities might tend to the needs of each student population.

Some points of possible improvement can be found in asking students to evaluate different aspects of each activity, as no survey was provided. Listening to how students view the activities, the physical tokens, and/or whether any other personal learning needs and desires in the discussion class were addressed could influence the possible application of these activities in the future. In addition, as noted previously, it may also benefit this activity to pair it with some form of written goal-setting activity to connect lessons each week. As they currently exist, however, the present activities have consistently produced satisfying results in the context of my discussion classes; results which I hope can be replicated and improved upon in the classes of others.

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