Balancing Production and Reflection in an Advanced Language Course

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a framework for an intermediate to advanced language class curriculum centered on discussions for which learners plan the focus and conduct background research. The framework has two groups, termed "partner teams," each with a different discussion focus, working together such that each participant has a peer adviser on the partner team who observes him or her during the discussion and provides specific feedback afterwards. The curriculum also features papers in which learners reflect on their performance in the discussion, identifying effective areas, points to improve and traits or behaviors they admired in other participants.

INTRODUCTION

I will begin by describing a challenge I faced as a language educator and then move on to explain the solution that unfolded, the development of an interrelated series of language tasks featuring a high degree of learner autonomy. The challenge: I was asked to teach an elective English language course entitled "Discussion and Debate," which was open to only third and fourth year university students who had studied abroad as second-year students.

Being asked to design and teach a demanding course for eager students was a pleasant situation to find myself in, but a challenge nonetheless; I wanted to strike the right balance of rigor and enjoyment as well as language production and reflection for the students. I wanted to design a curriculum that would allow me to initiate it and then step aside, moving as fully into the role of a facilitator as possible. In fact, in some ways, this was an experiment about the extent to which I could—within certain fixed parameters—turn over responsibility to the learners. The result was a semester-long course that I was able to teach twice. I was pleased with the results, as were the students who participated. In this paper, I will present the curriculum, describe the rationale behind its design, identify some potential problem areas, suggest improvements and share the resulting framework in the hope that it may be of use to other educators.

BACKGROUND

Learners enrolled in the course described here were third- and fourth-year students at a four-year private university in Tokyo, Japan. All were students in a department focusing on intercultural communication. Teaching several of the students in their first and second years gave me some sense of their proficiency in English. Furthermore, I was quite familiar with the required English language courses they had all taken. Most significant to me, however, in considering the kind of curriculum that would best suit this group of learners was the fact that they had all studied abroad as second-year students. McKeown (2009) writes of the changes evident but difficult to pin down in students returning from studying abroad:

> When asked, study abroad professionals often give anecdotal motivations for their students' decisions to study abroad, such as to gain a broader perspective or to learn something that they cannot learn at home. Similarly... study abroad professionals describe their returning students often in anecdotal ways, such as that they are changed people, more mature and worldly. These attempts at understanding students' motivations and outcomes, while often not rigorously researched, are based on a reserve of knowledge built from our collective action. (p. 118)

Learners had all had, to some degree, life-changing experiences, and I hoped to give them a chance to ride that wave just a bit further after returning to their home country. For this reason, I wanted to put few restraints on them while at the same time ensuring an academically rigorous experience.

Eighteen students enrolled for the course in each of the two sections described here. Having this particular number was fortuitous in that it suggested activities for groups of three and six, which turned out to be the essential groupings for the curriculum on which I finally settled: a series of three formal group discussions with planning sessions, peer observations, and opportunities for skill building.

THE CYCLE: AN OVERVIEW

What follows is an overview of the three-day cycle, which culminates in a pair of formal discussions on the third day. During the semester, learners in the courses described here went through this cycle three times.

Day 1	● Learners are randomly grouped into teams of three. ● Team meets to determine the focus of their discussion on day 3.
Day 2	● Each team exchanges preparation sheets with its partner team. ● Each team confirms understanding of partner team's preparation sheet, asking for clarification if needed. ● Learners participate in skill building activities.
Day 3	● Each team has its formal discussion on the topic selected on day 1. ● Each team observes its partner team's discussion. ● Each learner meets with his or her peer advisor for an exchange of feedback.

Day 1 Randomly assigned teams of three meet to determine the focus of their formal discussions, which will take place on day 3. During these meetings, groups of students would decide upon a topic they would focus on for research and subsequent discussion sessions. Given that students were able to conduct these meetings in English they did so, leading to a nearly complete English-speaking environment. These planning meetings were rather unstructured, and I was able to circulate, responding to questions and offering any advice that I could.

Homework: After this session students created preparation sheets for their partner team (see Appendix). The preparation sheets allowed partner teams to come to the discussion session knowing what to expect in terms of content and being familiar with some of the varying positions on the issue. In addition, each team provided a link to some background reading that would help their partner team understand the issue. This assignment required some groups to meet or at least communicate outside of class.

Day 2 Partner teams exchange preparation sheets, each having brought enough copies for the three members of the partner team as well as the instructor. Each team reads over the preparation sheets to ensure they understand the contents. Partner teams are encouraged to ask questions of each other at this point if any clarification is necessary.

There was a great deal of potential in this day of the cycle. Days one and three followed a rather rigid schedule. Day two, in contrast, was flexible. Once learners had read over the preparation sheets given them by their partner teams, the only essential work of the day was complete, leaving time for whatever the instructor and learners felt would be of most benefit as they moved toward the formal discussion in the following session. Some of the activities from my class included having discussions about and doing practical exercises in critical thinking, or watching and discussing video conversations in authentic English. This was also a time when it was possible to cover points brought up in learners' reflection assignments and/or observed in formal discussions. In my class, this often involved working with a collection of English expressions, organized by function, such as giving opinions, asking for opinions, clarifying meaning, and providing examples, among others. Finally, in my classes, students chose in some of these class meetings—day two of the cycle—to have sharing sessions about study abroad experiences, which, as light and lively as they were, provided a pleasant contrast to the more rigorous discussions to come.

Homework: Learners were to prepare opinions and conduct basic research for their team's discussion topic. In addition, students were to read the article suggested by their partner team.

Day 3 On this day, learners focused on two formal discussions: their own and on that of their partner team. Each student was paired with someone from the partner team. These pairs met before and after the discussion sessions.

Homework: Learners were to write a reflection paper in which they would identify areas where they felt they were successful in contributing to the group discussion as well as points they would like to improve upon for future discussion in English. In addition, students were to identify points they admired in other students, either on their own team or their partner team.

THE FORMAL DISCUSSION SESSION

First peer session (8 minutes)

After a short final team meeting (8 minutes) to ensure that everyone was prepared for the formal discussion, each student met with his or her peer advisor on the partner team (see figure 1). During this session (8 minutes), each student talked about personal goals for the formal discussion. If this was the second or third formal discussion of the semester, students would have already written one or two reflection papers, respectively, and so would have identified some areas for improvement. At this point, each student will ask his or her peer advisor to observe a particular aspect of the discussion and to provide a certain kind of feedback. A student may have a goal of using an item from a the collection of expressions mentioned earlier—clarifying phrases, for example, such as "in other words" or questions like "so are you saying…?". The observing peer in such a situation would watch not only for her peer on the partner team to use these target phrases but would also provide, if her partner had been successful, feedback on the impact of these usages on the overall discussion.

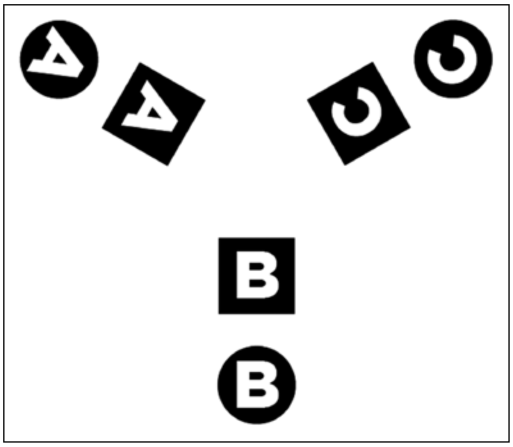

figure 1: pairings for first peer session

First formal discussion

***Phase 1** (15 minutes)*

For the initial phase of the formal discussion, the first group of three arranged themselves into a tight but comfortable triangle (see the squares marked “A,” “B,” and “C” in figure 2a). The classroom I used in conducting these courses was furnished with chairs that had flip-up desks. Easily moved, these were ideal for the activities described in this paper.

Members of the partner team sat in a larger triangle around the first group so that peer advisors were sitting directly across from each other (see the circles marked “A,” “B,” and “C” in figure 3a). This arrangement allowed the members of the outer group to observe his or her peer advisor.

Learners in the center triangle discussed their topic for fifteen minutes while those in the outer triangle remained silent, each observing the discussion in general while also attending specifically to his peer advisor’s requests.

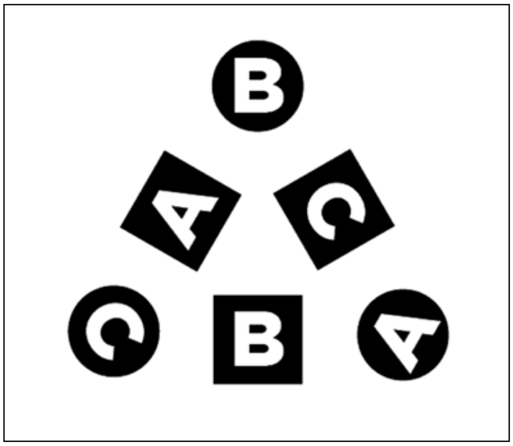

figure 2a: first discussion

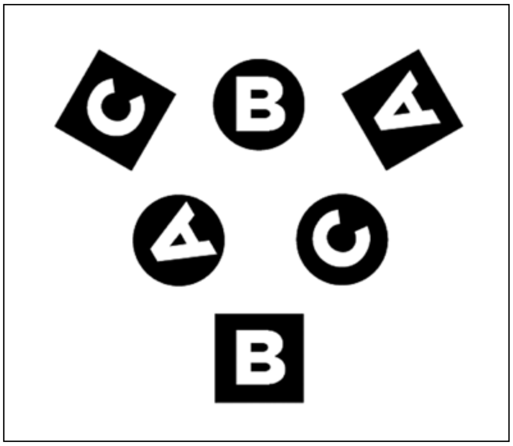

figure 2b: second discussion

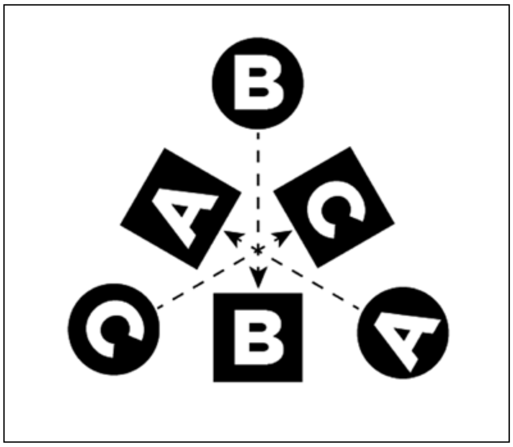

figure 3a: peer advisor positioning, first discussion

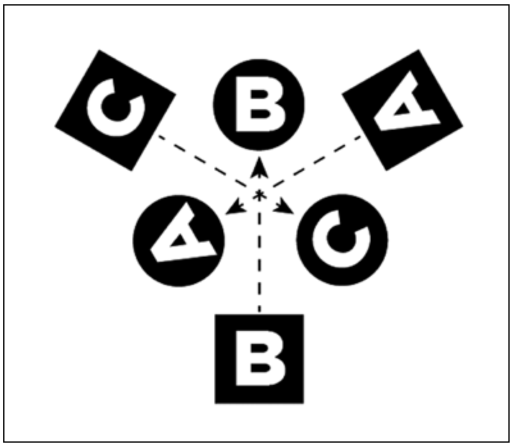

figure 3b: peer advisor positioning, second discussion

Phase 2 *(10 minutes)*

After the fifteen-minute discussion session, the two teams quickly reconfigured their seats to form a circle (figure 4). The discussion continued, with the members of the partner team, represented by the circles, now participating. Members of this group were now able to participate in any way they liked, provided the focus was on the topic rather than any member's performance in the discussion; there would be time for feedback, assessment, and reflection in the final peer advisor session. Members of the outer group were free to ask for clarification on a point they did not fully understand, offer an opinion on the issues being discussed, or ask a question as a means of moving the discussion forward.

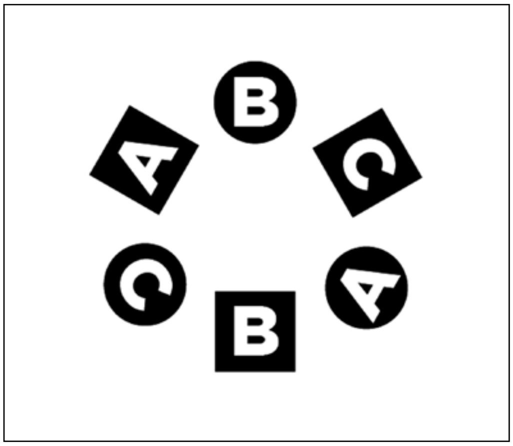

figure 4: positioning for joint sessions one and two

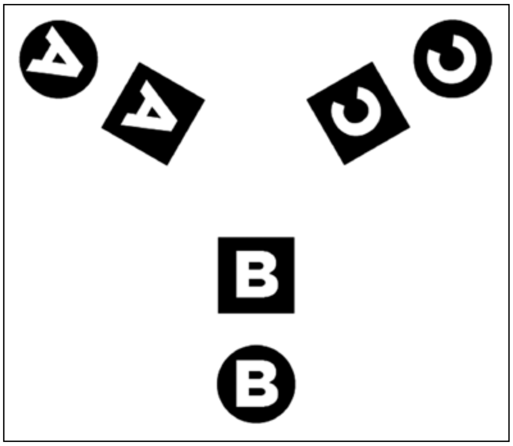

figure 5: pairings for second peer session

Second formal discussion

Members of the outer triangle now moved to the center (figure 2b), with peer advisors sitting opposite one another (figure 3b), and the cycle repeated: a fifteen-minute session with the outer group observing silently followed by a joint ten-minute session (figure 4).

Peer debrief session *(10 minutes)*

Peer advisers met again (figure 5) as they had before the discussions. In this session, peers provided feedback on the areas agreed upon in their first session.

COURSE DESIGN

Earlier in this paper, I wrote of the challenge of designing a new course, one that would be suited for advanced learners who had returned from studying abroad, more sophisticated and eager to maintain and build upon the language and critical thinking skills they had developed while living and studying in other countries. The concerns of experiential learning, as exemplified by Kohonen (as cited in Nunan, 2009) below, capture the kind of classroom experience I wanted to cultivate I set about preparing to teach Discussion & Debate.

> Experiential learning theory provides the basic philosophical view of learning as part of personal growth. The goal is to enable the learner to become increasingly self-directed and responsible for his or her own learning this process means a gradual shift of the initiative to the learner, encouraging him or her to bring in personal contributions and experiences. Instead of the teacher setting the tasks and standards of acceptable performance, the learner is increasingly in charge of his or her own learning. (p. 37)

While I did set the basic tasks, learners were free to select their own research and discussion topics and, to a large extent, determined their own standards of acceptable performance. More than any other factor, I wanted with the learners to create an environment in which we would all experience "learning as part of personal growth," as Kohonen put it. With this in mind, I will identify the collection of features that I considered indispensible, those design elements that I would consciously incorporate into the curriculum. Each heading below is followed by a description of how this feature manifested in the classroom.

1. Maximum speaking time

I approached this from two directions. First, I designed a curriculum that would, once established, allow me to remove myself from the front of the classroom. As Benson (2001) writes, "Transfer of control [...] often involves an increase in student-student interaction and increased opportunities to use and process the target language in group work" (p. 154). Generally, I would address the class at the beginning of each ninety-minute period, describe the plan for the day, ask students to start on their tasks, and then shift into a support role, moving from group to group, observing and responding to questions.

Second, I set up a variety of opportunities for learners to use English, each having a clear aim so they always knew what they were doing and why they were talking with a particular person or group. As a rule, learners conducted themselves in English. Thus, with the instructor out of the way, and a series of goal-driven tasks to complete, learners had a great deal of time to use English available to them and a purpose for doing so.

2. Students choose discussion topics

Allowing students to choose their own discussion topics served two important purposes: first, relating to the point above, maximizing speaking time, incorporating a planning session, during which students would talk about the focus of their upcoming formal discussions provided a natural, goal-oriented opportunity to use English.

In describing learner-centered teaching, Nunan (2009) writes, "...information about learners and, where feasible, from learners will be built into all stages in the curriculum process, from initial planning, through implementation, to assessment and evaluation" (p. 15). This relates to the second purpose for having students select the focus of their formal discussions. I asked learners to choose topics they were truly interested in, topics they wanted to wrestle with, explore or understand better. I hoped that this opportunity would motivate students and help them to take strides in what they were capable of expressing in English. As one student wrote in her final report, "...we could discuss what we were interested in, so it was a good time to share our ideas or opinions."

3. Preparation

Providing ample time for students to prepare their opinions and conduct some basic research prior to the formal discussion was essential to ensure they were performing to their potential and that discussions were as dynamic as possible. Preparation began during the planning session, and then students had two weeks during which they could choose the amount of time they would devote to readying themselves.

On the topic of preparation and ownership of the process, a learner writes:

> It was not my first time to have a discussion in English; however, what was different from other discussions I have had was that it was totally our original [plan]. We had to choose the topic and theme, viewpoints, and the discussion goal. That made it challenging for me, but made me re-realize the importance of teamwork. We needed to talk a lot in order to make our points clear. What I learned the most was that to make a good discussion needs a lot of discussions as preparation.

This learner is highlighting the need for good teamwork and preparation when building a discussion theme from the ground up ("totally our original [plan]"). In other words, the topic was not predetermined, and the only way to ensure success on the day of the formal discussion was through teamwork and individual preparation.

This freedom to determine how much time to spend on preparation also levels the playing field to an extent in that learners of lower levels were able to invest more time engaged in activities such as taking notes on their opinions, consulting dictionaries, and predicting counter-arguments, while those of higher levels, relying on their ability to think and speak in the moment, might opt for less preparation.

4. Learners determine where to focus efforts to improve

I wanted a course in which each student would choose the areas in which she or he would like to make improvements. For some, simply speaking up and offering an opinion in a fast moving group discussion was a main goal. For others, it was asking good questions that moved the discussion forward. The point was to allow for all of this by means of self-reflection and peer feedback sessions. Again, the Kohonen quotation at the beginning of this section is relevant. He writes that, according to the philosophy of experiential learning, "the learner is increasingly in charge of his or her own learning," and this can include, as it did in the course described here, "setting the [...] standards of acceptable behavior."

5. Self reflection

After each formal discussion, students wrote a reflection paper in which they identify areas where they feel they were successful in contributing to the formal discussion as well as points they would like to improve upon for the upcoming discussions or English usage outside the classroom or after the conclusion of the course.

In addition to writing about their own performance, learners were to identify points they admired in other students, either on their own team or their partner team. Including this component was one additional step toward maximizing the benefit of the experience for learners. Bandura (1997) states, “Seeing or visualizing people similar to oneself perform successfully typically raises efficacy beliefs in observers that they themselves possess the capabilities to master comparable activities” (as cited in Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003, p. 128). In short, students create a record of what they did well, how they want to improve and points they admired, and may themselves emulate, in a peer.

For the curriculum described here, learners, in a manner similar to that outlined by Cram (1995), assessed themselves as users of English from one formal discussion to the next, comparing each performance to the others.

> The major purpose of self-assessment is to provide the opportunity for learners to develop an understanding of their own level of skill, knowledge or personal readiness for a task in relation to their goals. This level will often be compared with the previously determined level and incorporated either into a summative report of gains made during the course or into a cumulative record of learner achievement. (p. 282)

Then, in a final writing assignment, learners look at the larger picture of their development of skill in using English and reflect on the ways in which studying abroad and participating in the course they were just completing contributed to that development.

6. Peer feedback sessions

Each formal discussion was preceded and followed by a meeting with a peer. It was here that learners talked about improvements they wanted to make and the kind of feedback they wanted to receive after the formal discussions had taken place. On the second and third formal discussion days, learners were able to refer to previous reflections papers for areas on which they wanted to receive feedback from a peer. In this way, peer advising sessions served to link together the formal discussion days and to provide a place for learners to use perceived shortcomings from the past as opportunities for growth in the present.

Luoma (2004) states, “[Peer evaluation] can help learners become more aware of their learning goals, learn through the evaluation, and learn from each other” (p. 189). This three-part statement succinctly captures the function of the two peer advising sessions. In the first session, each learner must identify her own learning goals, stating them in clear terms so that her partner knows what to look for while he is observing. This corresponds to the first part of Luoma's statement. Note that stating learning goals informs the type of feedback each person will receive. In the second peer session, which takes place after the formal discussion, each learner receives feedback from his partner, which corresponds to the second part of Luoma's statement. Finally, aligning with the third part of the statement, peer advisers learn by observing one another as well as by verbalizing what they have observed.

Referencing a peer session, a learner writes:

> I tried to lead the conversation in order to make sure that it worked well, as my post-discussion partner [...] herself pointed out afterwards. Not only did I express my ideas, but I also asked questions to the others and tried to sum up their answers in as clear as possible a way.

Here we see the peer advising session, in conjunction with the reflection assignment, helping the learner identify his effective behavior in the formal discussion; the writer's peer adviser has reflected what she observed ("as my post-discussion partner herself pointed out afterwards") in her partner so that he was able to see it clearly.

CAVEATS & SUGGESTIONS

Implementing the plan proposed here requires a class size that is a multiple of six. For each of the two terms that comprise the focus of this paper, there were eighteen students. This seemed ideal for a number of reasons. There were enough students so that completely new groupings could be made for each of the three formal discussion teams. In addition, it was easy, with a class size of eighteen, to provide assistance to individuals and small groups with questions. Though students had a great deal of autonomy, they knew that I, the instructor, was available if needed. In short, any class size from six on up, in multiples of six would work.

While on the topic of class size, it is important to note that absences, particularly on the day of a formal discussion, will have a significant impact. The students taking the courses described here were committed—not only to their own learning but to one another as team members. Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) stress the importance of explicitly discussing group norms to the point "that they become part of the group's total value system" (p. 36). Fostering a shared understanding and acceptance of expectations for the course, particularly around attendance is essential for a task involving a team of three people.

Still, some absences are inevitable, and it is necessary to have a plan in place so that the formal discussion day goes smoothly; there is very little time to spare. Instead of a group of three, a pair can participate in the formal discussion. This is a more intense experience, of course, but it is possible. For peer advising, arrange students so that there is one pair (e.g., circle A and square A) and one group of three (if square C is absent: circle B, square B, and circle C).

The formal discussion task with its planning session and relationship with a partner team, requires a considerable amount of explanation in the beginning. Once students understand the system, things tend to go smoothly. Teaching this course over two semesters has highlighted a point of potential confusion: which topic will be discussed by which team. In the planning sessions, each team chooses the topic they themselves will discuss on the day of the formal discussion. Each team makes a preparation sheet for their partner team so that the partner team is familiar with the topic they will hear about when observing and so that they can participate effectively during the ten-minute joint session. If instructors do not explain this effectively and confirm that students understand, it is likely that some students will assume they are to discuss the issue selected by their partner team on the day of the formal discussion. This is not the case.

As the activity is presented here, students are assessed primarily through their written work, reflection papers after each formal discussion and longer paper at the end of the semester. Those instructors wishing to assess students' speaking directly may choose to have students, using audio recorders or video cameras, record their discussions. Both students and the instructor could then put these records to use in a number of ways.

CONCLUSION

The framework described here allows learners to work in small groups to determine what they would like to learn about and discuss; it allows learners to work in pairs to determine what aspects of using the English language are most important to them; and it allows learners to reflect as individuals on how they are developing as English speakers. The framework allows the instructor to move into the role of a facilitator, responding to questions, giving suggestions and presenting mini-lessons on language usage as needed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I extend my gratitude to Tim Shaw for creating the diagrams used in this paper.

APPENDIX

Research Team Preparation Sheet

Follow this model when creating preparation sheets for your research team discussions.

TOPIC	Single-sex schools vs. co-ed schools
SUMMARY	Some experts believe that boys and girls would benefit from single-sex classrooms due to fundamental differences in male and female brains and learning styles. Other experts believe, in contrast, that co-ed classrooms provide a valuable opportunity for boys and girls to cooperate and learn from one another in a way that prepares them for the reality of life after school.
VIEWPOINT 1	Single-sex schools benefit all learners.
VIEWPOINT 2	Co-ed schools benefit all learners.
VIEWPOINT 3	Both options may work well; it depends on the quality of the teachers and of the educational program.
VIEWPOINT 4	There is no universally correct answer; it depends on the culture of the students.
DISCUSSION GOAL	We plan to discuss which option – single-sex or co-ed – would work best in a Japanese cultural context. Our goal is to reach a consensus on this issue.

READING PREP	*Are co-ed or single-sex lessons best?*
URL	http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2009/dec/02/co-eds-or-single-sex

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