



Applying Second Language Research Results in the Design of More Effective ESL Discussion Activities

Even for experienced ESL teachers, designing effective discussion activities and speaking-fluency tasks can be difficult. To write effective language activities—including discussion activities, materials developers need to take into account the learner's age, interests, motivation, cultural background, educational background, personality, and (limited) language proficiency (Ernst, 1994; Green, 1993; Lazaraton, 2001; Mulling, 1997; Oliver, 1998, 2000; Peirce, 1995; Perez, 1996; Williams, 2001). In addition to these student factors, teachers, materials writers, and curriculum planners should take into account results from relevant second language acquisition research (Courtney, 1996; Ernst, 1994; Long & Porter, 1985; Pica & Doughty, 1985a, 1985b) when designing discussion and speaking-fluency tasks.

For certain teachers, overseeing a speaking activity in class is easy. These teachers are good at drawing out each student's thoughts on even the most mundane topic. However, most teachers, especially novice teachers or those not familiar with ESL student needs, cultural backgrounds, or language limitations, are not nearly as comfortable with open-ended discussion tasks. Many ESL teachers have had extensive experience in generating original fill-in-the-blank exercises for a grammar point or traditional comprehension questions for reading passages, but these same teachers find that it is usually much more difficult to write successful speaking or discussion activities.

Coming up with the kind of speaking activity that will help lead to a successful discussion in which all students have to participate because of the nature of the design of the activity is challenging. In fact, *Material Writer's Guide* (Byrd, 1995), perhaps the best-known work on the writing of ESL materials, covers the writing of materials for culture, grammar, writing, reading, listening, pronunciation, and even English for academic purposes, but materials that practice speaking, conversation, or discussion are notably absent. The guidelines presented in this article can help teachers and materials writers in designing effective discussion activities for many types of classrooms and many levels of learners, including young learners and adults in K-12, adult education, and intensive English programs.

Although an obvious goal of an effective speaking activity is that it will allow students to discuss a certain topic, a less apparent and more important goal is that all participants stretch their *interlanguage*, a term used by Selinker (1972) to refer to the learner's current level of English proficiency. A mediocre speaking activity will allow students to use the language they already know; a well-designed speaking activity will encourage learners to go beyond their safety zone in the L2 and thereby stretch their interlanguage (Pica, 1996a, 1996b; Polio & Gass, 1998).

Krashen (1985) discussed the importance of a teacher's using language and activities at a level that is just beyond the learner's current proficiency level. In Krashen's formula of $i + 1$, the i represents the learner's current level and the $+1$ represents going just beyond the learner's current proficiency. Thus, an effective speaking activity should encourage learners to aim for the $+1$ in $i + 1$, for simply maintaining the student's i without the $+1$ is obviously insufficient for proficiency growth.

Another goal of an effective discussion activity is—ironically—that there be an element of confusion that causes breakdown in communication. When this confusion or miscommunication between nonnative speakers (NNS) arises, they must negotiate until meaning is clear. This repair is often referred to as *negotiation of meaning*,¹ which results in comprehensible input that can be beneficial in L2 acquisition (Dolly, 1990; Ellis & He, 1999; Lyster & Ranta, 1997). In other words, we want a communication problem to occur so that learners will have to speak to repair it. Thus, in ideal speaking activities, negotiation of meaning is necessary and pushes learners to practice the target language as much as possible, inevitably providing both positive and negative input (Mackey, 1999; Mackey & Philip, 1998). In addition, the learner's vocabulary, an especially important part of L2 proficiency, is reinforced (Nakahama, Tyler, & Van Lier, 2001) through the negotiation of meaning facilitated by well-constructed discussion activities.

Considerations in Creating Discussion Activities

Once the topic for the activity has been chosen, the actual design of the speaking activity can be constructed. Three questions can guide instructors when they are planning discussion tasks for their students: (1) Is the task a one-way task in which information exchange is optional, or is the task a two-way task in which information exchange is required? (2) Does the teacher introduce a topic for discussion and expect immediate discussion, or are learners given time to plan what they might say in the task? (3) Is the solution to the task open-ended, or is this a closed task, that is, with only one or a finite set of answers? The answers to these questions, many of which can be found in L2 research on the design of speaking or information-exchange tasks (Doughty & Pica, 1986; Long, 1989; Long & Porter, 1985; Pica, 1996a, 1996b), can play an important role in the successful design and implementation of speaking activities in ESL classes.

Selection of Topic

Perhaps the single most important design issue is the selection of the topic of the discussion activity. Clearly, the topic should be one that the particular learners are interested in because even the best-designed activity cannot be successful if the topic is of little or no interest to the students. Teaching and practice materials in a learner-centered syllabus should revolve around the needs of the learner (Brown, 2000; Nunan, 1996; Yorio, 1986). These needs are shaped by the learner's age, reason for learning English, current proficiency level, and cultural background (Barkhuisen, 1998; Mulling, 1997; Oliver, 1998, 2000; Perez, 1996).

One-Way Versus Two-Way Tasks

The first issue concerns the flow of information between the participants. In a one-way task, one student has all the information and the other student (or students) must get the information. In a one-way task, the information flows in one direction only. Student A has the facts; student B does not. If the first student passes enough of the information to the other(s), the task has been successfully completed. Student B does not have to share any information for the successful completion of this task; thus, the probability of equal negotiation of meaning is low.

An example of a one-way task is sharing a list of telephone numbers. Student A has a list with five people's names and their telephone numbers. Student B has only a list of the five people's names. Student A tells student B all the telephone numbers, which student B writes down. Another example is telling a real story. The teacher provides some limiting framework such as, "Tell your partner about the first trip you ever took on an airplane." One student tells her story to a second student. Even if the second student then tells his story to the first, the information flow is still one-way. No information exchange is required at all; in fact, there is no real reason for either student to listen carefully to the other because neither listener has to do anything specific with the information.

These same examples designed as two-way tasks would require all participants to both give and receive information for the task to be successful. In the telephone number example, both students would have some of the people's names and some of the telephone numbers. Student A might know the first person's name but not the telephone number. Student B might know the first student's telephone number but not the name. Thus, both participants would have to exchange information. In the second example, students would be required to write down three specific facts for their partner's story (e.g., the year of the trip, the purpose of the trip, the name of the airline, etc.). Since the listener is unlikely to get the information the first time he hears it, he will have to ask for repetition and modification of the input. This repetition results in modified negotiation or negotiation of meaning between the speak-

ers. The essential distinctions between a one-way task and a two-way task are in who holds the information and whether the information exchange is optional or required to complete the fluency task successfully.

Some believe that the labeling of a task as “one-way” or “two-way” is related to the number of participants. This is a common misconception. The one-way or two-way distinction refers to the direction of the flow of information, not the number of participants. In fact, both of the previously discussed tasks could be conducted with a pair of students or a group of students. Again, the differentiating feature here is the direction of the information, not the number of participants.

How does a two-way design affect negotiation of meaning? Pica and Doughty (1985a) found no difference in quantity of interactional adjustments in a one-way task performed in a lockstep setting and in small-group work. However, when they replicated this study using a two-way task, they found statistically significant differences (Pica & Doughty, 1985b). Thus, group work can result in more negotiation of meaning, but this is true only if the task is of the required information-exchange type.

A number of studies (Doughty & Pica, 1986; Long, 1989; Newton, 1991) have concluded that two-way tasks produce more negotiation of meaning. Long (1989) adds that two-way tasks produce not only more negotiation work but also more useful negotiation work than one-way tasks.

Planned Versus Unplanned Tasks

Sometimes novice and even experienced teachers present a topic to a group only to find that the weaker or more reticent students do not seem to have anything to say. The kind of speaking activity that depends on spontaneous, unplanned talking may work well with students who are outgoing or who have good speaking skills already, but these are the very students who least need this class. Planned tasks foster more successful student output. The mere act of requiring students to write out a response in a task leads learners to go beyond their existing level of L2 (Long, 1989). This is better because the teacher’s objective is to use discussion activities that will encourage and even require all students to speak.

Planned tasks are simply those tasks in which learners have some time to plan, or even write out, what they might say. This very important but too often overlooked aspect of a successful discussion activity is perhaps the easiest for the teacher to incorporate. For example, if the activity is to discuss capital punishment, students should be allowed time (in class or as homework) to write out their stance and an explanation of their reasoning behind this stance. Teachers should set minimum and maximum length requirements. A minimum length is important to make sure that everyone spends a certain amount of time thinking about the issue beforehand. A maximum length is also suggested because it will force more verbose students to concentrate on the points that they think are most salient. In both cases, a length requirement serves as a framework that can better help speakers organize their thoughts.

Teachers should remember that their goal is to set up a successful speaking activity, not writing (or reading). The purpose of this small writing component is to force students to organize their thoughts, and this process alone will also allow students time to decide what they think about an issue as well as what their supporting points are. Teachers should resist the urge to have students write out lengthy papers or essays. This activity is a planning component for a discussion activity; it is not a writing activity. Any discussion of paragraphs, formatting, or grammar will detract from the speaking focus of this type of assignment.

Planning is important as learners tend to produce language that is more complex and more targetlike when they have time to plan their output (Long, 1989). Planning allows learners time to find any language necessary to explain their ideas. Teachers should encourage students to incorporate recently studied vocabulary and grammar constructions in their output since research on second language vocabulary, for example, shows the value of repetition and recycling of vocabulary to acquisition (Elley, 1989; Folse, 1999; Hulstijn, Hollander, & Greidanus, 1996; Hulstijn & Laufer, 2001; Joe, 1998; Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986). In sum, including a planning aspect into a discussion activity can improve the language and clarity of meaning of a speaking activity. In addition, requiring students to incorporate recently studied grammar and vocabulary facilitates learning by facilitating multiple encounters with the new grammar and vocabulary. However, it is neither necessary nor desirable for all speaking activities to be planned ones, just as learners do more than complete fill-in-the-blank activities in a grammar class or copy model sentences in a composition class. Regardless of the type of class or the level of the student, a good curriculum includes a variety of activities.

Open Versus Closed Tasks

Another important factor in the design of an effective speaking activity involves the final answer or solution that the pair or group is to agree upon. Here speaking activities are labeled open or closed. In general, open tasks do not have a solution while closed tasks do. It is important to note that the word “closed,” which often has a negative connotation, is actually a positive in discussion activities.

In an open task, participants know ahead of time that there is not any single answer or even a limited set of solutions. Examples of open tasks include free discussion (e.g., what kind of pet do you think is best for a 5-year-old child?) and “what if” discussions (e.g., what would you do if you suddenly received a million dollars?).

In a closed task, participants must reach a single “correct” solution or one of a limited set of solutions. An example of a closed task would be giving students the facts surrounding a real court case and asking them to guess the judge’s actual decision. Later, they can compare their group answer with the judge’s decision.

A similar activity makes use of “Dear Abby” or other such advice-column letters. Students are given the particulars of a certain situation and then they discuss what advice they would give the letter writer if they were the advice columnist. Activities such as this tend to motivate students; not only are the students interested in supplying a piece of advice, they also want to know how their answer compares to that of the “expert.” Again, knowing that there is a single definitive answer to an activity is a strong motivator. In fact, newspaper readers rarely if ever read the problem letter without reading the subsequent expert reply to the problem.

Participants know from the onset that they are working on an activity that has a finite solution and that their aim is to discuss the situation in order to identify the solution or solutions. Research shows that this mindset affects participants’ interactions and language. Long (1989) found that student speech in closed tasks features more topic and language recycling, more feedback from the other participants, more incorporation of feedback, and more rephrasing of language. Clearly, closed tasks yield more negotiation work than open tasks do.

Examples of Effective Speaking Activities

An effective speaking activity is one that features two-way interaction, allows learners to plan what they might say, and has a closed solution. Many teachers have successful speaking classes because their activities already meet these three criteria. Other commonly used classroom activities can be easily adjusted to include these three criteria. Two commonly used classroom activities that can exemplify these criteria are problem-solution and strip stories.

Problem-Solution

In problem-solution, students are given a situation or problem that typically comes with a set of stipulations that makes solving the problem more complex and also limits the possible solutions. This is a primary characteristic of a closed-end task.

Ur (1987) offers an activity called “Zoo Plan.” Each student is given a map of the zoo that shows where each kind of animal is housed. Students are then given a list of developments that necessitate some changes. These include the facts that the giraffe is about to give birth, that the monkeys are very noisy animals, that the zoo has just received a new panda, and that harmless animals should not be put next to predators. Students should be allowed time to think about their decisions and then write out their reasons for any unique or interesting changes. Students then work in small groups and come up with one plan that best meets the needs of the zoo’s current layout as well as the recent developments.

Folse and Ivone (2002) have a unit called “You Can Be the Judge: Who Is the Real Owner?” Students read a brief description of a real-life court case and must then work together to decide what they would do if they were the judge in the case and why they have arrived at this decision. In this case, a

worker drank a soft drink that her coworker had left overnight in the office refrigerator. Upon opening the drink, the worker discovered that the bottle cap had a million-dollar prize as part of a promotion that the soft-drink manufacturer was conducting. The worker claimed as her right to the prize the “finders keepers, losers weepers” rationale and the lack of any owner’s name on the bottle. The coworker had no receipt for the soft-drink purchase but testified that the bottle was indeed hers. Students must write out in approximately 75 words what they would do if they were the judge and then offer two or three supporting reasons for their decision. Students then work in small groups to discuss their decisions and reasons and attempt to arrive at a group consensus on the question of the ownership of the million-dollar prize.

Solving problems such as these in small groups can lead to a great deal of speaking in English. Because all the members of the group (three to four members is good) must contribute their ideas to come up with the best decision, these activities are two-way tasks. They include a planning stage in which students are required to plan (and write out) their thoughts. This factor allows time for thinking and for searching for appropriate vocabulary. Finally, these are closed tasks because there is only a finite set of animal combinations that will satisfy all of the stipulations of the first task and there is only one judge’s decision in the second example. Activities that resemble these examples in that they require a two-way exchange of information, feature a writing and planning stage, and have a finite answer (i.e., closed task) are more likely to promote discussion by all group members and thereby promote speaking fluency.

Strip Stories

Another good format that works well as a discussion or speaking activity is a strip story. In a strip story, each student is given a small piece of a story, and the students have to put the story in order. One way to do this is to write a small part of the story on strips of paper and then give each student a strip of the story. Students are told to memorize or learn their part of the story. (A part usually consists of one or two sentences.) All students then stand up and take turns saying their part of the story. They are to line themselves up in the correct sequence. The teacher’s role is to monitor the task and avoid intervening. It is important to let the students discuss the information on the strips and negotiate meaning as needed.

If the story were a simple narrative, it would not be much of a challenge. It is therefore imperative that the story used in a strip story be one that has a surprise or ironic ending. In addition to the surprise ending, there should be very few chronological clues, as seen in these strips of this example strip story (Folse, 1994, p. 66):

- A man went to see his doctor because he was overweight.
- He said, “I’m worried about my weight.”
- The doctor listened and then gave the man a bottle of pills.

- The patient asked, “So how many of these do I take every day?”
- The doctor answered, “None.”
- The doctor then added, “Drop them on the floor and then pick them up.”
- “Do this three times a day.”
- “I guarantee that you will lose weight.”

This simple strip story has an unexpected twist. Once you have access to all of the information, the story seems quite simple. However, to learners who have only one piece of the story and who are concentrating on saying their own lines and listening to the other students' lines so they can line themselves up properly, it is not at all simple. It is the nature of this activity that students end up repeating their lines numerous times as they attempt to figure out where each student's line fits into the ordering. This simple activity produces an amazing amount of language output. When a student says something that is unclear, other students invariably ask for clarification (i.e., they negotiate meaning) because they need to know what the speaker has said since the speaker's utterance directly affects every other participant in this task.

This activity works because it is a two-way task, it has a small planning component, and it is a closed task. It is a two-way task since every member of the group must participate to solve this strip story. The members will not allow anyone to be silent because each piece of the story is necessary to figure out where the other students should be in sequence. Students are given a short time to read, study, and memorize their lines. Though brief, this planning stage in the strip story is an important feature of the activity. Finally, this strip story qualifies as a closed task as there is only one possible solution. What makes this activity challenging is the fact that the ending is ironic or unexpected. When designing a strip story, teachers must use stories that have a surprise twist at the end. If it does not, the story is merely a chronological tale that can easily be reconstructed through time clues and will therefore not foster negotiation of meaning or fluency growth.

Conclusion

Designing effective ESL speaking activities that promote speaking fluency is not easy. Gone are the days when conversation or discussion classes consisted merely of the teacher's tossing out a topic to the class for “group discussion.” Findings from both recent and not-so-recent relevant research in second language acquisition can certainly help teachers and materials developers design better discussion activities that offer more potential for enthusiastic practice and second language growth. According to these findings, the type of activities that are more likely to promote discussion by all dyad or group members and at the same time stretch learners' interlanguage are those that require a two-way exchange of information, feature a writing and planning stage, and have a finite answer (i.e., closed task). Careful attention to these three factors in any speaking-fluency activity can increase the potential for a successful speaking activity.

Author

Keith Folse is assistant professor of TESOL and coordinator of the MA TESOL program at the University of Central Florida. He is the author of numerous textbooks on ESL grammar, composition, reading, and discussion courses, including Discussion Starters (University of Michigan Press, 1999) and Great Essays (Houghton Mifflin, 2003). He has taught in the US as well as in Saudi Arabia, Japan, and Malaysia.

Endnote

¹ An example of negotiation of meaning:

A: What you buy at the mall?

B: Choose.

A: Choose? What? You mean select? Like select something? Take something?

B: No, choose. I buy white tennis choose.

A: Oh, you mean shoes. O.K. Now I see. You have new shoes.

B: Sorry, my pronunciation is not good. My choose are very good price.

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