

Discussion Forums for ESL Learning

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The following report outlines a 10-week discussion forum, held during the summer of 1997, in which members of the public were invited to Asahikawa National College of Technology to practice their English skills in a discussion format. The program was designed to provide a means for students to break away from the usual teacher-centered, textbook-dominated environment reminiscent of many ESL classrooms (including my own) and move into one whereby the teacher takes on the role of a moderator who guides the initiatives taken by the students, from here on known as 'participants'. Although the event didn't proceed without problems, it fulfilled the goal of motivating participants to take on more responsibility for acquiring information by themselves and sharing it with others.

Program

The idea of my college holding a series of discussions in English which are open to the public and sponsored by the Japanese Ministry of Education was quite appealing to me. I've always believed that universities and colleges, at least in Japan, tend to lack sufficient connection to the citizens who financially support them. With the encouragement of a Japanese colleague, I presented a plan to the Ministry of Education to conduct a discussion forum in which local people could participate in English in discussions on a variety of topics.

The overall purpose of the project was to provide an opportunity for Japanese people to use their English skills in a more natural way than they might get in an ESL classroom. Through this experience, it was hoped that the participants could further their communicative competence in English in preparation for the times when they discuss similar topics with native-English speakers in the future. One had to always keep in mind, however, the main risk in this approach - namely, the prospect of the participant's perception of his/her failure to communicate and therefore a desire to drop out of the program as a result.

Preparation

The plan we had drawn up was approved and limited to 20 hours of lesson time. We proceeded to choose 10 topics to be discussed for 2 hours each week. My Japanese colleague and I wanted topics which were closely associated to international themes, partly due to our personal interests and partly to justify a discussion in English. After all, if the issue is so localised, what's the point of discussing it in English?

We set out to advertise for approximately 20 participants, focusing on those who had the confidence to express their opinions and feelings in English, and in public. Relevant articles were taken from English-language newspapers in Japan as well as those from abroad to provide some background information to help participants to prepare for each meeting. Participants were not required to read them or use them during the forum as they could have an obstructive influence on the discussion.

We were delighted to see the program oversubscribed (22 people finally selected) in spite of the nominal fee required, although we anticipated problems that would likely arise with such a large group. Wouldn't the atmosphere be inhibiting? Wouldn't participants feel unable to say all the things they want to say? On the other hand, such forums are rarely held in this part of Japan and one could imagine a large group is needed in order to simply have enough people who are willing to speak spontaneously. Indeed, helping participants to adapt to our format was no easy task.

Roles

In the first meeting, our roles (mine as distinguished from the participants') were orally clarified. My role was not that of a teacher, but somewhat of a moderator who coordinates discussion by calling on people to speak, clarifying comments at my discretion and

intercepting occasionally with questions as if 'throwing logs on the fire'. The role sounds pretty heavy-handed but along with some corny jokes, I tried to encourage attendees to imagine themselves not as passive students but active participants who have at least as much knowledge of the topics as the moderator, if not more. They would have to be conscious of the desires of others to speak -- and at the same time be spontaneous in the initiation of questions or comments on the points being raised.

Topics

Here is a list of the weekly topics:

1. Does the presence of increasing numbers of foreign residents have an overall positive or negative impact on Japanese society?
2. Has Japan done enough to make up for its war-time deeds?
3. Does the educational system adequately encourage Japanese young people to take an interest in international affairs?
4. Is Japan a 'unique' society in relation to other countries?
5. Does Japan do enough to help less fortunate countries?
6. Can Japan maintain its economic competitiveness?
7. Do Japanese people have enough interest in environmental issues at home or abroad?
8. Does the Japanese Constitution article #9 help or hinder Japan's relationship with other countries?
Article #9 of the Japanese Constitution states that the Japanese people renounce "the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes." To achieve this goal, "land, sea and air forces, as well as other war potential will never be maintained."
9. How is tourism beneficial for Japanese who want to acquire international understanding?
10. Does the teaching of English in elementary school further children's internationalisation?

Format

As the moderator, I introduced the topic in the beginning of the discussions. Often I would rephrase the question or make some clarification with concrete examples of what aspects would be touched on as the meeting proceeded in order to prevent misunderstandings from early on.

Each participant was allowed approximately a minute to summarise his/her views, often based on personal experiences. To many, this approach might appear to foster a series of mini-speeches and not discussion. This is true. However, it was deemed necessary in order to help some of the reluctant speakers to 'break the ice' and become accustomed to public speaking. It was presumed that the more often they did this successfully, the more confident they'd become at making comments more spontaneously during the meeting. This proved to be true according to the participant feedback. At the end (about 20 minutes later), anyone was free to make comments on what was previously said.

When the comments started to dry up, I introduced a series of sub-questions. For example, in the first topic on the list, I asked participants if they could comment on any positive or negative personal experiences with foreigners they had encountered. Those with something to say either to answer my question or respond to the comments of others, would raise their hands. I would then call on them to speak until I thought it was a good idea to offer another question relating to the topic. This, of course, would be unnecessary if the participants would initiate their own sub-topics and, in a sense, take control of the meeting. As for the raising of hands, it was regarded as appropriate by the moderator because it allowed language learners who are still not totally confident in their oral English to organise their thoughts without the pressure of being prematurely interrupted. Subsequently, domination of the event by more confident speakers was prevented.

In the last 20 minutes, everyone was given a chance to make a brief final comment. Throughout the meeting, one was conscious of the fact that some people speak out more than others. This may appear unfair to an observer, but for 80 minutes opportunities to speak

anytime were encouraged. Forty minutes were allocated to guarantee everyone the chance to make at least two brief comments during the meeting. Otherwise, it was feared that many participants would resort to only a listening role.

Success or Failure?

As everyone has their own standards as to what constitutes a vibrant discussion, I decided to distribute a questionnaire at the end of the series of meetings to help me determine the successes and failures of the project (see appendix for a sample in both English and Japanese). The questions and a general summary of responses are as follows:

Did you enjoy the discussion forum? Please state why or why not?

The overwhelming majority of the 18 participants who stayed until the end of the program (4 had dropped out previously) stated that they enjoyed it very much. Here are some reasons given:

- 'We had plenty of opportunity to express our opinions.'
- We 'could gain knowledge from listening to others.'
- We 'could speak freely without worrying about grammatical errors.'
- We 'could take part in a meaningful discussion which is so rare.'

There were several problems raised by some members, most of which I had already discovered after conducting the first few meetings. One participant, who stated that he didn't enjoy the forum so much, felt that the sub-topics ('logs on a fire') introduced by the moderator changed too quickly which exacerbated his difficulty in concentrating. I suspect that some others had the same feeling and, as the moderator, I now realise that I should have relaxed and allowed the discussion to be carried out at a slower pace.

Which topics did you enjoy the most? Please state reasons for your choice(s).

The most popular topic was #9 about tourism. Several participants indicated that their personal experiences as tourists overseas as well as the lack of seriousness in the discussion made it particularly enjoyable and easy to relate to. The second most popular was #4 about Japan's uniqueness. One member came to the conclusion that 'Japan is strange' while another appreciated learning about the foreign perception of Japan's uniqueness.

Were there any topics that were not interesting?

Most responses were either 'nothing' or not provided.

The most unpopular topics were #2 and #6. As for #2, one member claimed to have no knowledge of it while another stated his belief that 'war deeds of other countries must be discussed.' As for #6, two members said that they had no interest in the topic.

What other topics of international concern would you have been interested in discussing?

Those who responded to this question provided the following ideas in no particular order:

- scientific issues (examples not provided)
- racial discrimination
- religion and the national character
- aid for North Korea
- comparing Japanese lifestyle with those of other countries
- Spratly Islands
- whale-catching
- foods
- Japanese multinational corporations
- Asian issues (especially China)

Did you like the meeting format (structure)? What did you like or dislike about it?

The responses were mostly positive, and mainly cited the appropriateness of having everyone making opening and closing comments. This allowed everyone to have a chance to speak, albeit not without some coercion.

Individual criticisms/suggestions were varied including the ones below:

- 'Fewer participants would have been desirable.'
- 'The meeting should have been 90 minutes.'
- 'It should have been a little more relaxing.'
- 'More detailed articles which matched the moderator's questions should have been provided.'
- 'Although it was good to allow people to make comments in the beginning and end, it also could have been done in the middle.'

Please comment on the moderator. Did he do a good job? How could he have done better?

Generally, the moderator was praised for doing a good job in directing the discussion. In particular, he was complimented by some as being well-prepared, fair-minded and humorous.

Suggestions that were proposed centered on the idea that he should have made more effort to get participants to discuss topics with each other more often instead of only responding to his questions. One suggestion was that it was not always necessary to raise hands to speak and that such a procedure was rather detrimental to a more relaxed, free-flowing discussion.

My goal as a moderator was to encourage as many as possible to actively participate. There was no record kept as to who was speaking and how often although such information could be obtained from an analysis of the forum's tapescripts. In order to avoid overly interfering with the discussion as well as satisfy my personal curiosity of seeing how willing participants will offer opinions in public, no one was directly called upon to speak aside from designated periods in the beginning and the end of the meeting. Generally speaking, some participants were more outgoing than others but all of them took the opportunity to actively participate at their own pace.

As for the suggestion that the moderator should have encouraged participants to discuss topics with each other, no specific idea was offered as to how this desirable outcome could be developed. As the moderator, I believed that it would be too ambitious for participants who aren't use to speaking English publicly to a large group to handle the added pressure of a formal debate. Clearly, a minority did have the willingness to raise objections to others' opinions (and they often did), but as most did not have this confidence, it was viewed as unrealistic for such a condition to be imposed.

Were the articles useful? Why or why not?

The news articles were well-received as they provided the following:

- a good chance to read English
- a good source of relevant information
- useful technical terms related to the topics
- various viewpoints Vinformation which is difficult to find

Although many participants appreciated receiving the materials, they found them difficult to read due to lack of time or insufficient knowledge of English. As mentioned earlier, one respondent wanted more specific or detailed information.

Would you like to take part in another forum? Why or why not?

All the respondents answered in favor of joining another forum. Here are some reasons:

- 'I will be able to express my opinion better next time.'
- 'We Japanese should discuss serious topics.'
- 'Japanese people need training to discuss.'
- 'I can hear various opinions.'
- 'It encourages me to study English.' V'Japanese people have little opportunity to do this kind of thing.'

Please make any other recommendations or comments.

Several members expressed the desire to keep a forum of this nature on-going (beyond the 10 meetings allocated). Some of them recommended getting more native-speakers of English involved and observing an example of a 'model discussion' in order to learn about the role of discussion in western society.

Summary of the forum's attributes for ESL learners

According to the questionnaire's findings, the forum was a successful program. Participants indicated that their language ability improved in the following ways:

- They practiced making realistic conversations as opposed to those which are contrived through excessive instructional (i.e. teacher and text) guidance.
- They could speak relatively freely without worrying too much about minor grammar errors.
- In the future, they could initiate conversations without being directly called upon.
- They could learn useful technical terms related to the topics through listening to other members' opinions and reading the news articles.
- They felt that discussion forums were especially useful for Japanese who rarely engage in such activities.
- They felt encouraged to establish new goals for their English study. Even if communication under pressurised circumstances was difficult, it was regarded as useful training in the pursuit of English language fluency. They appeared to look forward to future English-speaking events in order to have the opportunity to improve on their performance.

Areas for Improvement

In spite of the discussion forum's success, future planners for a similar program may be advised to pay heed to participant criticisms and suggestions. A summary of these points is, at times, riddled with contradictions. Some people believed the forum had lots of variety while others wanted more. Some found the news articles to be difficult while others wanted them to be more detailed. Some people liked the strictly organised structure in which all participants are called upon to speak while others wanted a more free-wheeling debate without excessive moderator interference.

There was common feedback, however, that can help organisers of future forums. In general, the exercise of discussion in English on a comprehensive topic is difficult, even for advanced speakers of English. Due to the popularity of the event, more careful initial screening of participants could have helped collect a more cohesive group of confident English speakers. This was not done as it was feared that the program would be undersubscribed. Hence, there was a sizable gap between participants' confidence in public speaking as well as language levels with none falling below what may be regarded as an intermediate level.

As the pressure was high, especially for participants lacking in confidence, it's important for organisers to keep the atmosphere light and relaxing, even when a 'heavy' topic (e.g. #2) is introduced. As the forum progressed, members gradually began to relax and could contribute more effectively as a result. If more relatively light topics (e.g. #9) were introduced in the first few forums, it might have helped to prevent some participants from dropping out of the program in the early stages.

Another way to lower the pressure would be to initially separate the participants into small groups to discuss the topics as one can experience in educational workshops. A chosen leader could present the views of his/her group. An overdependency on this format, however, may have the detrimental effect of allowing participants to casually slip into their native tongue and not provide them with sufficient opportunities to express their opinions directly to a wider group. Organisers can decide for themselves how much pressure is beneficial for language learners according to their specific circumstances.

Finally, with increasing numbers of advanced speakers of English in Japan, even flawed discussion forums like the one outlined may be useful in motivating students to continue to study English. In addition, the transition of the role of teacher to moderator or organiser

can help introduce greater flexibility in the management of language learning environments.

Biographical information

Peter Connell has been teaching English conversation classes in Japan for 8 years and currently teaches in Asahikawa, Hokkaido.

The Internet TESL Journal, Vol. IV, No. 1, January 1998

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