

What makes a good discussion? Insight from students

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1. Introduction

Discussion is often considered a vital means of fostering critical thinking and communication skills. Yet for many instructors, their notion of the ideal discussion and the realities of the classroom of students they face are widely divergent. For the CLIL or EMI instructor, the challenge is further compounded by student difficulties in expressing themselves in a foreign language. Moreover, students may have limited experience with discussions in their native language. In order to proceed in a meaningful and fruitful way, it is essential to ensure that instructors and students share a common vision of what is implied by a “good discussion” as well as an understanding of the skills, strategies, and expressions needed to enable students to make progress in approaching the ascertained objective.

This paper reports on the findings of an upper intermediate English course focused on discussion. The goal of the research was to better comprehend students’ images of a good discussion as well as the obstacles they perceived confronting them in their attainment of this target, with a view toward enhancing discussions in a way that both the instructor and the students recognized as useful and satisfying. While instructors are witnesses to, and sometimes participants in, discussions, it is the student experience of the discussion that is key to identifying how best to overcome impediments to

the meaningful exchange and elaboration of ideas as well as further bolster existing strengths. This will lead to an assessment of a rewarding and enriching communicative event, necessary to propel motivation for further development.

If students do not perceive or value a given facet of discussion as beneficial, they are unlikely to focus on making it part of their repertoire. Such cases may indicate a need to modify the type of guidance provided. In addition, student reflection post-discussion allows students to foster a sense of autonomous exploration of the strengths and weaknesses as discussion participants of themselves and their classmates and, accordingly, more precisely adjust their efforts, both in preparation for and during discussions.

2. Discussion benefits

The anticipated benefits of discussion are copious. Discussion develops critical thinking (Bruss, 2009; Hayes and DeVitt, 2008; Larson, 2000) and enables students to apply knowledge acquired to a broader context (Larson, 2000; Wilen, 2004). Further, it integrates previous knowledge with new knowledge (Shemwell and Furtak, 2010), and allows students to engage in the process of knowledge discovery: the difference between, for example “knowing history” and “doing history” (Havekes et al., 2017). Moreover, it permits students to consider different perspectives, through sharing viewpoints with classmates (Dashwood, 2005; Larson, 2000). It additionally allows students to gain greater prowess in communicative skills (Larson, 2000).

Beyond student cognitive and linguistic development, discussion serves other purposes as well. It can enable teachers to assess students’ comprehension of the subject matter (Larson, 2000). Moreover, with sufficient preparation, discussion can reduce lecture time. Morgan et al. (2005) found that if students viewed four 10-minute videos online and then engaged in a one-hour discussion, comprehension was equivalent to three hours of lecture. Competence obtained in discussions may additionally enhance other linguistic proficiencies. For example, Bruss (2009) found that skills obtained through

discussion enhanced students' writing skills.

3. Discussion trade-offs

Discussion objectives frequently come into conflict, as focus on one feature of discussion may not only detract from potential gains in another facet of discussion but potentially even lead to its near-obliteration, as students become accustomed to conducting discussions in a given way that highlights certain methods and modes at the expense of others. These clashes include the use of recitation vs. student-centered discussion; encouraging the application of special terminology vs. the provision of ample explanations; argumentation as the primary discussion mode vs. collaborative exploration of a topic or issue; boosting student participation vs. maintaining quality control; and advancing subject matter competence vs. enhancing communicative ability and multiple perspectives. These paired mismatches are discussed below.

3.1 Recitation vs. discussion

Recitation – teachers posing questions, answered by students and then evaluated by the teacher – often stands in as a proxy for discussion. Once this pattern of interaction is entrenched, it can be very difficult to undo it, even over a sustained period of attempted modification (Alvermann and Hayes, 1989). This “quasi-discussion form” (Wilen, 2004, p.33) allows the teacher to control the direction of the discussion, but it limits students' ability to push back when criticized, due to awareness of the teacher's authority, although they might be more open to forging on with their opinions when challenged by a fellow student (Drie and Drekker, 2013). Indeed, student willingness to engage in discussion is often based on students' perception of “freedom from” teacher management of the discussion and “freedom to” determine the direction and manner of the discussion (Trent, 2009, p.265).

Nevertheless, recitation can be tweaked to promote greater student contribution and indeed become transformed into true discussion. Dashwood

(2005) found that teacher *questions*, while most common, yielded the shortest responses, comprising between 4%-10% of student utterances, and often needed to be repeated to garner any responses. On the other hand, *statements* such as a thought that occurred as a result of what a student said or a statement of interest in what was said led to longer student contributions.

3.2 *Applying special terminology vs. Provision of ample explanations*

While mastery of special terminology is a frequent goal of discussions, overemphasis on it may result in sparser explanations. Students may indulge in “name-dropping” of concepts with little careful consideration of what the concepts represent (Havekes et al., 2017). Specialized language often serves as a shortcut in communication for those who understand it well, yet other discussion participants with less understanding may not be able to engage meaningfully when such conventional quick routes to concepts are utilized. Moreover, over-reliance on its use may detract from “conceptually rich” discussion, as students rely on the terms without going through the process of showing a deep understanding of their meaning (Shemwell and Furtak, 2010).

3.3 *Argumentation vs. Exploration*

Argumentation is sometimes conflated with discussion, but although it can be one component of discussions it assumes a goal of persuasion and eventual agreement, excluding from consideration discussions of a more exploratory nature (Shemwell and Furtak, 2010). Furthermore, an excessive focus on argumentation may lead students to believe that fashioning an argument is the primary objective (Havekes et. al, 2017), leading to a neglect of other purposes and a belief that any answer is permissible as long as it is accompanied by an argument. Moreover, when argumentation is emphasized, students may seek to construct a good argument as quickly as possible, rather than engaging in exploratory talk that might lead to a deeper discussion (Shemwell and Furtak, 2010).

3.4 Boosting student participation vs. Quality control

Research suggests that various initiatives to increase student participation in discussions do not always succeed. Asking students to prepare questions to ask each other may result in the exchange of comprehension-type questions based on the material that do little to develop the discussion (Alvermann and Hayes, 1989). Additionally, when teachers focus on increasing student talk, even if an increase takes place, it may not result in greater student comprehension of the subject (Murphy et. al, 2009) and it may result in a decrease in “elaborated” talk (Alvermann and Hayes, 1989). Moreover, without good discussion skills, the discussion will not aid in greater understanding of the subject (Larson, 2000).

Teachers may furthermore be eager to get any type of participation from students, leading them to be torn between their desire to improve the reasoning skills of students and, at the same time, encourage participation (Drie and Dekker, 2013). Similarly, they may be unwilling to question any answers provided for fear of discouraging students, or they may end up engaged in a prolonged discussion with one student while the rest of the class disengages (Alvermann and Hayes, 1989; Drie and Dekker, 2013). Havekes et al. (2017) identified three objectives of discussion: encouraging students to examine multiple perspectives rather than search for one answer, learning specialized language, and focusing on the quality of contributions, but they found that although the first two objectives were frequently covered, the third was only engaged in by one teacher in their study.

3.5 Advancing subject matter competence vs. enhancing communicative ability and multiple perspectives

Increased student engagement in discussions does not necessarily align with enhanced understanding of the subject matter (Murphy et. al, 2009). On the other hand, teachers may refrain from implementing discussions due to a belief that students have insufficiently mastered the material (Havekes et al., 2017). Although enhanced knowledge of the subject matter is a frequent

objective, there may be no difference in the attainment of this aim between discussion activities and individual activities, although students may find greater enjoyment in the discussion – while nevertheless not professing greater attained subject knowledge than those engaged in individual work – and become more adept at the nature of inquiry (Del Favero et al., 2007).

4. The study

The difficulty of balancing factors related to discussion that are often in conflict makes planning and guiding discussions a delicate task for teachers. However, student notions of discussions are yet another vital aspect, which has received less attention from researchers. Accordingly, the present study sought to investigate the question, “What skills or strategies do students value or find important in discussions?”

16 students took part in an upper intermediate “Speaking” class in the fall semester of 2020. They were assigned to read “Zero to One” by entrepreneur Peter Thiel in English or Japanese, at a pace of one chapter per week. Each week they were assigned to answer five or six comprehension questions in English related to the chapter as well as to create sentences using 10 vocabulary items chosen by the instructor from the book. The course was conducted online.

At the beginning of class each week, the instructor introduced one discussion skill, briefly, on a handout also available on the university Moodle. First, the rationale for the skill was introduced, followed by some specific expressions to be used. The skills covered were: 1) Initiating discussions; 2) Confirming understanding, paraphrasing; 3) Expressing confusion; 4) Discourse strategies; 5) Building on discussion contributions; 6) Agreeing; 7) Disagreeing, playing devil’s advocate; 8) Asking for others’ input; 9) Confirming others’ understanding and clarifying; 10) Gaining and ceding the floor; 11) Getting back on topic; 12) Looping back; 13) Moving on; and 14) Summarizing.

After going over the week’s particular discussion skill, the students were put into breakout rooms, with about five students per room. One student was

assigned to be an observer and make a record of who spoke, the starting and ending times of their turn, as well as the content, such as expressing an opinion, asking a question, agreeing, disagreeing, or adding to what another person said. The observers submitted their observation record after class, adding their general observations about the discussion. After the breakout room discussions continued for about 40 minutes, the students returned to the main room, and the observer gave a summary of the discussion content to the rest of the class. Then, 4-6 students who had been in different breakout rooms started a new discussion in the main room for about 25 minutes as the other students observed. In the last 10 minutes of class, the rest of the classmates who had observed it were asked to share what they thought had worked well in the discussions and what could have been better.

After every class, the students who had not been observers in the breakout room were required to submit a discussion analysis worksheet by the following evening, reflecting on four questions: Q1) ways they made a positive contribution to the discussion; Q2) anything they could have done better to make a positive contribution to the discussion; Q3) ways other classmates made a positive contribution to the discussion; and Q4) anything other classmates could have done better to make a positive contribution to the discussion. Additionally, the students completed a final reflection assignment at the end of the semester, looking back on the course as a whole.

5. Findings

5.1 *Weekly discussion analysis worksheets*

While the students were likely influenced by the discussion skills introduced each week, they were not asked to particularly reflect on these skills when filling in the discussion analysis worksheets, and indeed, the student responses often were unrelated to the skills introduced. After reviewing the data obtained, the responses were tagged according to 15 categories: 1) Asking questions; 2) Paraphrasing; 3) Requesting clarification; 4) Speaking simply; 5) Encouraging/helping; 6) Facilitating; 7) Speaking smoothly/actively; 8)

Expressing new opinions; 9) Building on others' opinions; 10) Disagreeing/opposing; 11) Deepening discussion; 12) Expanding discussion; 13) Explaining clearly/specifically; 14) Using expressions/vocabulary; and 15) Other.

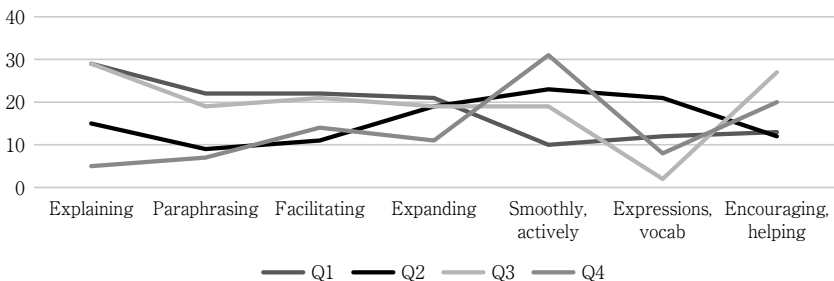
Table 1 shows the discussion skills mentioned in the 12 weeks of discussion analysis worksheets submitted according to question. The total number of discussion skills referred to was 739, and the largest number of discussion skills were in reference to Question 1, with a total of 222, followed by Question 3, at 204. That is, the students included more skills that they themselves or their classmates used successfully than skills they could have done better.

Table 1. Discussion skills mentioned in discussion analysis worksheets

Discussion skill	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Avg	Total
1 Asking questions	9	3	5	3	5	20
2 Paraphrasing	22	9	19	7	14.25	57
3 Requesting clarification	16	10	19	7	13	52
4 Speaking simply	6	7	11	12	9	36
5 Encouraging/helping	13	12	27	20	18	72
6 Facilitating	22	11	21	14	17	68
7 Speaking smoothly/actively	10	23	19	31	20.75	83
8 Expressing new opinions	9	3	5	6	5.75	23
9 Building on others' opinions	19	4	10	4	9.25	37
10 Disagreeing/opposing	17	5	6	11	9.75	39
11 Deepening discussion	15	9	9	15	12	48
12 Expanding discussion	21	19	19	11	17.5	70
13 Explaining clearly/specifically	29	15	29	5	19.5	78
14 Using expressions/vocabulary	12	21	2	8	10.75	43
15 Other	2	4	3	4	3.25	13
Avg	14.8	10.33	13.6	10.53	12.32	49.27
Total	222	155	204	158	184.75	739

Skills with a total average of more than 20 items in Question 1 (things they felt they had accomplished well) included explaining clearly and specifically (29), paraphrasing (22), facilitating (22), and expanding the discussion (21). Regarding skills they felt they had not performed well, Question 2, the top responses were speaking smoothly/actively (23) and using expressions/vocabulary (21). The students assessed their classmates' skill in explaining clearly/specifically most highly (29), followed by encouraging/helping (27), and facilitating (21). Concerning what their classmates could have done better, Question 4, speaking smoothly/actively was most referred to (31), while encouraging/helping garnered 20 mentions.

Graph 1 shows a comparison of the skills most often mentioned across the questions. Responses to Question 1, related to what the students themselves did well, and Question 3, their evaluation of their classmates, are often closely aligned, but show some gaps regarding speaking smoothly/actively as well as encouraging/helping, with a higher frequency regarding other classmates, and using expressions/vocabulary was more likely to be mentioned about themselves. Similarly, Question 2, regarding what students themselves could have done better, and Question 4, what their classmates could have done better, particularly diverge regarding speaking smoothly/actively, raised more as an issue for others; and using expressions/vocabulary, with a higher rate of mention when evaluating themselves.



Graph 1. Comparison of skills mentioned across questions

Table 2 shows the top five rankings of the discussion skills according to question. (For Question 3, speaking actively/smoothly and expanding the discussion both represented 9% of the comments, and accordingly both ranked in fifth place.) Four skills appear in the top five of three questions: explaining clearly/specifically and expanding the discussion were mentioned for Questions 1, 2, and 3, and speaking actively/smoothly and encouraging/helping others were frequently referred to in Questions 2, 3, and 4.

Table 2. Top five rankings of discussion skills by question

Rank	Q1		Q2		Q3		Q4	
1	Explaining	29 (13%)	Speaking actively	23 (15%)	Explaining	29 (14%)	Speaking actively	31 (20%)
2	Paraphras- ing	22 (10%)	Expres- sions	21 (14%)	Encourag- ing	27 (13%)	Encour- aging	20 (13%)
3	Facilitat- ing	22 (10%)	Expand- ing	19 (12%)	Paraphras- ing	19 (9%)	Deepen- ing	15 (9%)
4	Expanding	21 (10%)	Explain- ing	15 (10%)	Requesting clar.	19 (9%)	Facilitat- ing	14 (9%)
5	Building	19 (9%)	Encour- aging	12 (8%)	Active + Expanding	19 (9%)	Speaking simply	12 (8%)

Below are some excerpts from the student's comments that make clear how they feel about these skills.

Explaining clearly/specifically

For question 1 and question 3, which asked what the students themselves did well and what others did well, explaining was most prevalent. It was also mentioned as the fourth most often neglected skill by themselves (Q2). However, it was not ranked in the top five for things classmates could have done better. For the students, explaining clearly/specifically means giving examples and clear reasons. One student wrote how examples allow other students to visualize more plainly what is being discussed:

I gave a concrete example when giving an opinion. I think it is easier to get an image than just saying a company. (Student 12, Class 4, Q1)

Another student conveyed appreciation for other students' efforts to make their points comprehensible, a common sentiment among the students:

They expressed their opinions and reasons clearly. (Student 14, Class 3, Q3)

Of all the skills noted by students, 11% were related to explaining clearly/specifically, making it plain that they found the ability to explain in an accessible way to be an important key to successful discussions.

Expanding the discussion

Expanding the discussion refers to suggesting ideas or coming up with other topics. Many students found it difficult to move on, even when one aspect of the chapter in question had been exhausted. It was the fourth most common skill mentioned for Question 2, the third most prevalent for Question 2, and the fifth most frequent for Question 3 (along with speaking actively/smoothly). One student remarked on the importance of going to another topic when the discussion is not proceeding:

In this class, I discovered a good point of classmates. The good points is to switch the topic if they find it will not develop. I think the finishing up is important. (Student 13, Class 14, Q3)

At the same time, another student commented that too frequent topic shifts make for shallow communication. The student's observation also indicates that students can be excessively influenced by a teacher's advice; in this case, the discussion skill introduced in class of how to move on to a new topic was overly applied:

Today's task is to change the topic smoothly. We care about it so much that we easily change the topic and the number of conversations is less than usually. (Student 11, Class 13, Q2)

Students were not required to come up with topics for discussion in advance although they were encouraged to read Thiel's book while thinking about whether they agreed with author, whether they thought the situation might be different in Japan, whether there were exceptions to the propositions expounded by Thiel, etc. One student, however, noted that considering topics ahead of the discussion had worked well:

I was able to change a lot of topic. I came up with five ideas in the five minutes I thought at the beginning of class. I could not discuss this all theme, but I was able to change topic relating to others opinion. For example, when the discussion about wanting to be a salesperson in the future is about to end, I was able to change the theme that what is important for salesperson. (Student 12, Class 13, Q1)

Inability to expand the topic often resulted in the discussion going over and over the same points, which students seemed to be aware was unproductive and uninteresting, but they often were not sufficiently skilled at finding ways to develop the discussion.

Speaking actively/smoothly

Perhaps unsurprisingly, speaking actively was mentioned most as the skill that could have been done better by themselves and by their classmates, Question 2 and Question 4. Interestingly, students were more likely to write that their classmates could have been more active than themselves. On the other hand, students also evaluated their classmates' ability to speak actively and smoothly as the fifth most frequent. One student commented on the tendency to call perfunctorily on classmates to respond, which limited

spontaneity:

I want them to speak more aggressively. We call the name who they want to be replied each time in the end of conversation. It made bad tempo. (Class 6, Q4, Student 6)

Another student put the need for lively discussion even more bluntly:

Talk more actively, even if it is meaningless. (Class 3, Q4, Student 11)

Students occasionally linked the use of a discussion skill, in this case paraphrasing other's contributions, with a beneficial outcome:

They could say something in different words and confirm the meaning of the opinion they received. In 25 min discussion, I think it is very good that they developed the discussion about one topic. It was not just a statement, it was conversation. The tempo was good. (Class 5, Q3, Student 9)

Across all the discussion analysis worksheets, speaking smoothly/actively was mentioned the most often, representing 83 of the 739 tokens.

Encouraging/helping classmates

Encouraging or helping classmates communicate was fifth-ranked for Q2, regarding what the classmates felt they themselves could have done better, but it was ranked second for Q3 and Q4, about what other classmates did well and what they could have done better, suggesting that when classmates aided in creating a discussion environment that made it easy to participate, classmates were appreciative. In the following case, the student assigned to observe stepped in to assist:

The observer tell us the appropriate word when we have trouble to find

word of mistakenly use words. (Class 13, Q3, Student 11)

Conversely, when classmates failed to help or encourage, students noticed the lack:

Try to help when someone stacked and to take care that every member understand what talking equally (Class 5, Q4, Student 14)

This is an important point because it makes plain that the students viewed discussion as a collaborative activity rather than as a series of discrete turns. Rather than feeling that classmates not currently speaking were out of the spotlight and could take a break, they revealed a sense of ongoing responsibility even when they did not have the floor.

Paraphrasing others' contributions

Paraphrasing in this course referred to other classmates restating and confirming what someone had said. It was the second most common skill students felt that they performed well (Q1), and it was also ranked third for skills which classmates accomplished ably (Q3). Conversely, paraphrasing did not appear in the top rankings for skills that were lacking in themselves (Q2) or others (Q4). One student appeared to feel that paraphrasing made it possible for other students to better understand what had been said and accordingly respond more appropriately:

I think it was good to hear "So, you're saying...? After other people said their opinions. (Class 4, Q1, Student 3)

Another student noted the usefulness of paraphrasing when they were unable to comprehend the meaning of another classmate's point:

When I didn't understand the other person's opinion, I paraphrased it

myself and confirmed it to facilitate the discussion. (Class 5, Q2, Student 16)

In describing the result of too little paraphrasing, it was further suggested that paraphrasing permitted other classmates to consider how to respond. Without paraphrasing, the discussion became less lively:

There were few paraphrases and confirmations of the party's opinion. If they have done, the discussion was become more active because others had time to think. (Class 14, Q4, Student 10)

Despite this last observation, paraphrasing is notable because it is one of the skills that students particularly felt that both they and their classmates executed well. It was mentioned more than twice as often in response to Question 1 and Question 3 than to Question 2 and Question 4.

Facilitating the discussion

Facilitating included actions such as initiating the discussion, clarifying the topic, and ensuring the participants stayed on topic as well as summarizing the points expressed and concluding. It was the third-most raised skill in response to Question 1 and the fourth-most mentioned in relation to Question 4. That is, many students included it as something that they had done to contribute to the discussion but were more likely to refer to it as something that their classmates could have done better. Beginning the discussions was always challenging, and when students were able to accomplish this, they were likely to note it:

I was able to start the discussion and give an easier topic. (Class 4, Q1, Student 4)

Summarizing also required not only the ability to remember what other

classmates had said, but also to synthesize the opinions at an appropriate point:

Summarized all of the opinions (Class 7, Q3, Student 1)

Students who frequently started the discussions felt that other classmates should fulfill this role sometimes. Additionally, some students appeared to be aware of a lack of coherence to discussions in which no one set out the general suppositions to work through:

Some people were talking about the topic without the assumptions being decided, so I thought it would be better to check the assumptions. (Class 7, Q4, Student 9)

It is important to note that the instructor did not assign students to serve as facilitators for the discussions, which some students seemed to expect at first. However, students soon came to view discussions as collaborations in which multiple students could serve as facilitators and negotiate the flow of the discussion.

Deepening the discussion

Deepening the discussion included developing the topic and connecting it to both the book and to events and occurrences outside it. It was the third most cited skill for Question 4, so it appears that students were most apt to find it as something lacking in their classmates. Insufficient knowledge of the issues in the book merged as one barrier to deep discussion. Although students were not required to prepare beyond reading the assigned book chapter and answering the comprehension questions, many students felt they needed to do more:

We should have searched more about sales before class. By doing so, we

should have been able to have smooth discussion from the beginning. (Class 13, Q4, Student 3)

Other students mentioned the need to read the book with more of a spirit of inquiry:

I couldn't disagree with classmates' opinions. The reason is I don't have any question about things written in this book. I should change the attitude when I read it. (Class 7, Q2, Student 6)

Another student similarly felt that the classmates needed to consider various angles and push themselves to go beyond their first common views:

I think there were a lot of ordinary opinions, so I think it would have been a deep discussion if we could discuss it from a multifaceted perspective. (Class 8, Q4, Student 5)

Yet another obstacle to deep discussion appears to be an attitude of trying to get through the discussion rather than develop issues raised:

After each presentation, they immediately moved on to the next topic, so I thought it would have been better to discuss it more. (Class 13, Q4, Student 7)

Deepening the discussion differs from expanding the discussion, as the first involves looking more closely at issues raised while the second is related to exploring topics tangentially related to the original topic. A failure to expand the topic did not, unfortunately, necessarily lead to a deepening of the topic at hand, as students found it difficult to excavate their opinions and instead had a tendency to keep repeating previously expressed observations. Nevertheless, the comments in the discussion analysis worksheets reveal that

the students themselves were not only aware of the problem but also had ideas about how to ameliorate shallow discussions.

Using expressions/vocabulary

Using expressions and vocabulary was the second most frequent comment for Question 2, following speaking actively/smoothly, and it is closely connected to it. Students were assigned vocabulary from the book to practice by writing sentences using the words, but many found it difficult to actually make use of the vocabulary in the discussions. In fact, many felt they struggled with more basic terms. “Expressions” generally refers to expressions introduced by the instructor concerning ways to execute the various skills introduced. Students appeared aware that they were using the same expressions repeatedly and also that use of the expressions would enable them to develop the discussions in various ways:

I used “How about...” when talking to other people. I want to be able to use, “You look like you agree or disagree” flexibly by looking at other person’s facial expression and the number of nods. (Class 10, Q2, Student 10)

Another student similarly mentioned that the expressions could enable more nuanced contributions:

To use “I partly agree with your opinion but I think...” Not only said “I think so” (Class 6, Q2, Student 1)

Additionally, students struggled with the contrasting desires to speak without pausing unduly but also to become proficient in using more sophisticated phrases:

The word I use to ask is very simple and childish like “please talk again”

(Class 9, Q2, Student 11)

For the instructor as well, the balance between nurturing confidence through supporting any contribution and, on the other hand, pushing students to widen their linguistic repertoire was difficult to navigate. However, many students seemed to take the approach of saying what they could but noting what they could not and trying to bolster weaknesses in vocabulary with a view to future discussions.

Building on others' opinions

Building on other's opinions related to efforts students made to foster a discussion that was a true exchange of ideas rather than a series of discrete opinions announced in succession. It was the fifth most cited skill for Q1, and it demonstrates that students were aware that discussions should involve the integration of others' input:

I incorporated my opinion into everyone's opinion and connected the conversation. (Class 3, Q1, Student 3).

While students were most likely to mention building on others' input as a skill that they themselves had achieved, it was also raised as a skill that other classmates used effectively. Interestingly, students were more than twice as likely to note it as a skill that was executed well (Q1 and Q3) rather than a skill that was lacking in them or others (Q2 and Q4). When other classmates managed to assimilate others' contributions so that the resulting discussion had new, merged elements, students appeared to feel admiration for those who had accomplished it:

It was good to take both opinions and express their opinions when there was a conflict of opinions. Specifically, when there was a conflict over whether the university should be professional, they agreed with both opin-

ions, and made an eclectic idea that we should be able to change the faculty. (Class 9, Q3, Student 12)

The ability to build on others' opinions is closely related to the ability to understand others; failure to comprehend necessarily leads to disjointedness. As students became more confident in paraphrasing others' opinions and requesting clarification, they were better able to build on what they had heard. It should be noted, however, that students were most likely to consciously attempt to build on others' statements in Class 5, in which the skill was introduced. Even by the following class, there was a large drop in student reference to this skill, suggesting that it merits repeated emphasis and practice.

Requesting clarification

One of the biggest problems that students appeared to encounter was failing to understand what another classmate said. In such cases, students often fell silent rather than admitting incomprehension. However, requesting clarification was the fourth-ranked strategy for Question 3, indicating that students were aware of the need to do so and noticed when classmates could summon the courage to disclose to others they hadn't understood:

It was good to ask questions immediately when they didn't understand. (Class 13, Q3, Student 3)

While this strategy was most prevalent in Q3, it was also noted in other questions in the discussion analysis worksheet, for example, as something the student themselves had done:

When I couldn't understand what other member said, I tried to ask without hesitating, I'm sorry I couldn't understand what you said. Please say once more. (Class 7, Q1, Student 8)

It was also noted as a skill the whole group had come to be more comfortable with:

If not understand what someone said, we use this phrase "Could you please rephrase that?" (Class 6, Q4, Student 1)

It is notable that requests for clarification became more frequently mentioned in the class discussion analyses in the last two days of discussions, suggesting that as the students became more familiar with each other and relaxed they were able to engage in the potentially face-threatening act of exposing their inability to fully grasp what had been said.

Speaking simply

Speaking simply was the fifth most frequently mentioned skill for Question 4, indicating that it is something that students felt their classmates could have done better. The reasons for not speaking simply are likely diverse: employing phrases directly from the book, wishing to show one's ability to use difficult words, or fearing that speaking simply would imply to others that they were incapable of more complicated ways of expressing themselves might all contribute to this occurrence. When students became aware that speaking simply was beneficial rather than evidence of a lack, they recorded this as a positive self-assessment in their class discussion analysis worksheets:

I used easy to understand words (Class 8, Q1, Student 7)

Speaking simply was also viewed as a way of helping others be understood:

I think that when there was a person who was at a loss for words, the discussion would have progressed more easily if I had put it in a simple way (Class 8, Q2, Student 5)

Speaking simply is a skill that is somewhat different from the others as it requires pluck and assurance more than verbal prowess. As students had opportunities to try it out themselves as well as witness other classmates' successes, it is likely their belief in the importance of this skill increased.

Changing emphasis on various skills during the semester

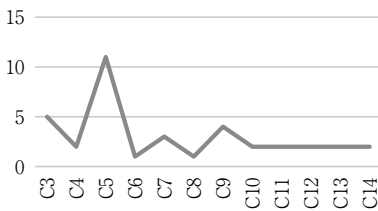
Regarding many of the skills mentioned in the discussion analysis worksheets, the rate of allusion was not stable throughout the course. There was a great range in terms of references for some skills, with the greatest of these seen in the skill of "disagreeing/opposing". Other skills with a wide range included "Encouraging/helping"; "Facilitating discussion"; "Building on others' opinions"; "Expanding discussion"; "Explaining clearly/specifically"; and "Using vocabulary/expressions". Table 3 shows the classes for which specific

Table 3. Classes for which specific skills were most/least frequently mentioned

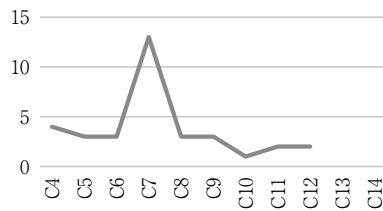
Skill	Most freq.	Least freq.	Range	Median
Asking questions	C3, 4 (4)	C6, 7, 11 (0)	4	1.5
Paraphrasing others	C5 (8)	C 6, 8, 10 (3)	5	5
Requesting clarification	C13, 14 (7)	C11 (1)	6	3
Speaking simply	C12 (6)	C11 (0)	6	3
Encouraging/helping	C4 (12)	C7, 10 (3)	9	6
Facilitating discussion	C7 (12)	C9, 12, 13 (2)	10	4.5
Speaking actively/smoothly	C3 (10)	C8 (4)	6	6
Expressing new opinions	C10 (4)	C5, 8, 11, 12, 13 (1)	3	2
Building on others' opinions	C5 (11)	C6, 8 (2)	9	2
Disagreeing/opposing	C7 (13)	C3, 13 (0)	13	3
Deepening discussion	C4, 8 (7)	C9 (0)	7	4
Expanding discussion	C13 (11)	C7, 11 (1)	10	6
Explaining clearly/specifically	C3 (10)	C11 (1)	9	4
Using expressions/vocabulary	C6 (11)	C5 (1)	10	7

skills were most/least frequently mentioned.

“Building on others’ opinions” (Graph 2) and “Disagreeing/opposing” (Graph 3) show clear peaks at class 5 and class 7. In both of these cases, these high points conform to the strategy introduced by the instructor at the beginning of these classes. Students likely tried these techniques most actively in these classes and also recalled them when they were writing their discussion analysis worksheets.

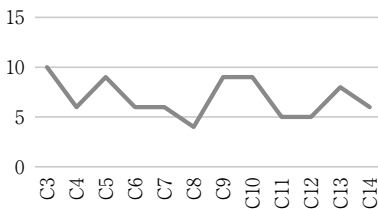


Graph 2. References to Building, Q1-Q4

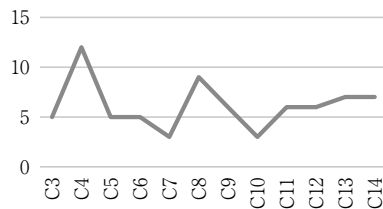


Graph 3. References to Disagreeing, Q1-Q4

On the other hand, “Speaking smoothly/actively” (Graph 4) and “Encouraging/helping others” (Graph 5) do not show much difference in the rate of allusions across the classes, apart from a slight jump in class 4 for encouraging/helping, suggesting that these are foundational skills students naturally pay consistent attention to.



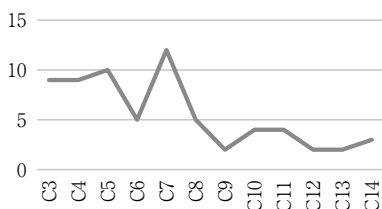
Graph 4. References to Speaking Smoothly/Actively, Q1-4



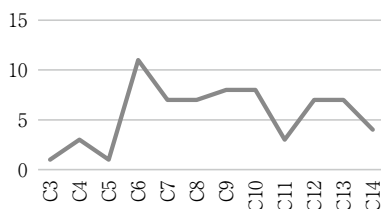
Graph 5. References to Encouraging/Helping, Q1-4

Mention of some skills was more conspicuous near the beginning of the

course but became less cited as the semester proceeded, whereas others became prominent in the discussion analysis worksheets later in the course. For example, “Facilitating” (Graph 6) received more focus from the students near the start of the course, reaching a peak at class 7. Similarly, “Asking questions” was mentioned most often in the first two classes. On the other hand, “Using expressions/vocabulary” (Graph 7) received less attention in the first weeks of class. It is possible that students were in a “survival mode” initially, making them notice those classmates (including themselves) who advanced the discussion, while less alert to how they themselves or other classmates could bring particular expressions and vocabulary to bear effectively in the discussions. “Requesting clarification” garnered the most references in the discussion analysis worksheets for the last two classes, which may demonstrate that students felt sufficiently at ease to indicate that they had not comprehended fully what had been said.



Graph 6. References to Facilitating,
Q1-4

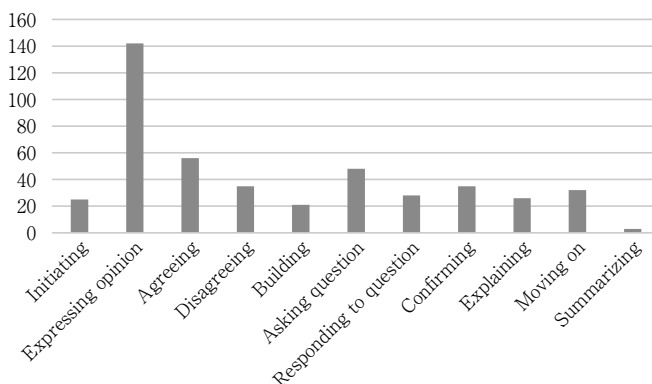


Graph 7. References to Expressions/
Vocab, Q1-4

5.2 Weekly observation sheets

Every week, during the small group discussion segment, one classmate was chosen to observe the discussion, writing down the name of each student who spoke as well as the type of contribution made, for example, asking a question, agreeing, or building on what another classmate said. After the class the students observing submitted their observation sheet, along with general comments about their impression of the discussion. Twenty-seven observation sheets were submitted, with a total of 452 contribution tokens

recorded. In contrast to the discussion analysis worksheets, which asked students to record the positive contributions made by themselves and other classmates and the things that could have been done to make a more positive contribution, the observation sheets were intended as a simple record of what actually occurred. Graph 8 shows the frequency of the different discussion components.



Graph 8. Discussion components in observation sheets

The observers most frequently recorded contributions as expressing an opinion. These amounted to 142 tokens, 31% of all contributions recorded. This was followed by agreeing, at 56 tokens (12.4%) and asking questions (48 tokens, 10.6%). These frequencies diverged significantly from those of the discussion analysis worksheets, for which expressing opinions was ranked 13th and asking questions 14th most frequently mentioned out of 15 categories, with only “other” marking a lower frequency. Even more notably, “agreeing” was never mentioned in the discussion analysis worksheets.

In four of the 27 observations of the discussions (15%), the observers did not record anyone initiating the discussion, suggesting that these discussion starts may have been weak or ambiguous. On the other hand, in two of 23 observations, the observing student noted that the initiations were executed

by two students, pointing to a potential role of collaboration in entry into a discussion, which is often difficult to perform.

5.3 *Final overall assessment of discussions*

The students' last assignment was a reflection on all of the discussions over the semester. They were asked to respond to the following questions:

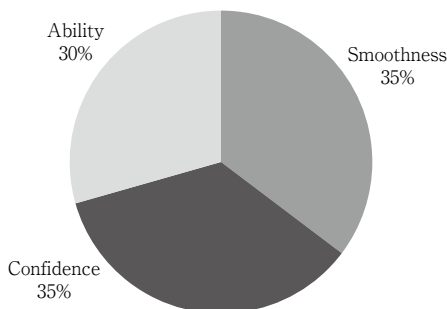
1. Do you feel that your ability to participate in discussions in English improved? If yes, how? If no, why not?
2. What was hardest about participating in the discussions? (Ex: lack of vocabulary, lack of ideas, not understanding Thiel's points, difficulty understanding other student's points, etc.)
3. Which of the discussion skills introduced in the handouts was most useful?
4. Is there any other kind of support/preparation that would have been helpful?
5. Please add any other comments about the course that you have.

Regarding question 1, all the students responded affirmatively that their ability to participate in discussions in English had improved, and in explaining how it had improved, their comments fell into three categories of roughly equal frequency: "ability", such vocabulary, grammar, or discussion techniques; "smoothness", for example, speaking without long pauses; and "confidence", feeling less scared or reluctant. If students mentioned more than one of the categories in their comments, each was tallied. Graph 9 shows the breakdown.

The following are representative comments:

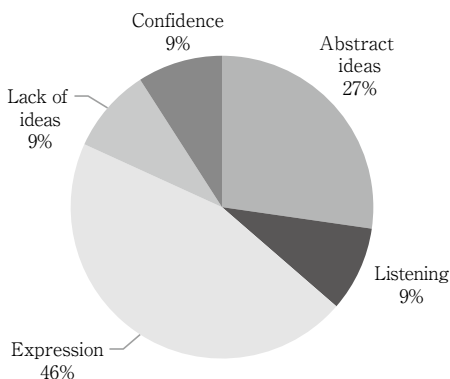
- 1) *Yes. Because I can hold a conversation much more smoothly than before. Also, I feel that I was able to have better discussions by using the grammar we covered in class. (Student 7)*

- 2) *Yes. At first, I felt expressing my opinion in English is so difficult because I have no confidence to my pronunciation. But now, I don't feel that speaking English is scare. I became able to express and react without resistance. (Student 13)*
- 3) *Yes, I have improved my discussion and English skill. Through this class, I get to be confident when speaking my opinion both in English and in Japanese. And, to use the techniques which we have learned, I can participate in discussion appropriately and discuss smoothly without long silence. (Student 14)*



Graph 9. Class 15 Reflection sheet, Q1

Five categories emerged for Question 2, regarding what was difficult: being able to express themselves; dealing with abstract ideas in the book; lacking confidence; lacking ideas; and difficulty in listening. If multiple difficulties were mentioned, all were tallied. Almost half of the responses (46%) were related to the difficulty the students had in expressing themselves, while 27% remarked on the challenge of talking about abstract ideas. These were followed by lacking ideas, lacking confidence, and lacking listening skills, each of which comprised 9% of the comments. Graph 10 shows the breakdown of the categories.



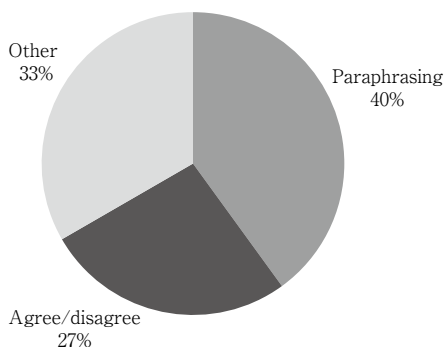
Graph 10. Class 15 Reflection, Q2

The following are representative comments:

- 1) *It was the hardest to convert what I come up with in Japanese into English. In the future, I want to speak English without thinking in Japanese. (Student 8)*
- 2) *The most painful thing was lack of vocabulary. I couldn't express what I wanted to say well, and it took me a long time to speak. Also, it was difficult for me to start discussion. I often wait someone to say something, I wish I could speak more. (Student 15)*
- 3) *Lack of vocabulary, lack of ideas, not listen to English well. (Student 1)*
- 4) *Lack of vocabulary and what Thiel said. (Student 4)*
- 5) *For me, the difficulty of topic is serious problem to discuss, because I can't find anything to discuss when I can't understand about the topic. Abstract topic is the hardest, so we have to start with concrete or personal experience, I think. (Student 14)*

- 6) *The hardest about participating in the discussions is to hear and understand the other's saying in English. I cannot listen to English very much. (Student 2)*

Question 3, regarding which of the discussion skills introduced in the handouts was most useful, made it plain that many students found the skill of paraphrasing to be beneficial. It was mentioned by 46% of the students, amounting to 40% of all of the tokens. For this question, too, multiple skills were sometimes recorded by students, and all were tallied. Following paraphrasing, skills of agreeing and disagreeing were the second most frequent. The remaining skills mentioned were initiating discussions; building on others' contributions; asking for others' input; confirming others' understanding; moving on; and expanding the discussion. The skills of expressing confusion; discourse strategies; gaining and ceding the floor; getting back on topic; looping back; and summarizing were not mentioned. Graph 11 shows the breakdown of categories.



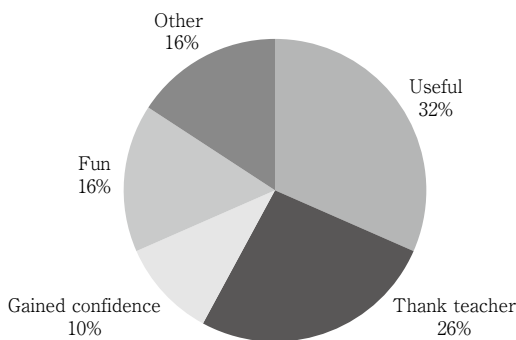
Graph 11. Class 15 Reflection sheet, Q3

There were only four valid answers to Question 4 regarding any other kind of support/preparation that would have been helpful. They were: wanting more time to think about the topic at the beginning of class; wanting the

teacher to speak more slowly; wanting to incorporate opinions of other entrepreneurs so the discussion could go in various directions; and seeing a video of people discussing as an example.

The remaining students appear to have misunderstood the question as meaning what other elements of the course had been useful. Their responses included observing the students' discussion in the main room in the second part of the classes and hearing the teacher's feedback on these discussions, having the teacher go around and observe the various discussion groups, and learning useful expressions for the discussions.

Twelve out of 13 students filled in Question 5, which asked for any other comments. Graph 12 shows the breakdown of categories.



Graph 12. Class 15 Reflection Sheet, Q5

Thirty-two percent of the comments were statements that the course was useful, and 26% thanked the teacher. Additionally, 16% commented that the course the course was fun and 10% that they had gained confidence in discussing in English. There were three "other" comments: that the skills learned were useful in discussion in Japanese as well as English; that the student wished the students could have met in person; and that the student grew mentally through the course.

6. Discussion

A comparison of the discussion analysis worksheets, the observations records, and the final assessments makes clear the complexity of analyzing student experiences of discussions. The discussion analysis worksheets reveal an emphasis on explaining clearly/specifically; speaking actively/smoothly; paraphrasing; using expressions/vocabulary; encouraging/helping others; facilitating; deepening the discussion; expanding the discussion; requesting clarification; and speaking simply.

Yet students perceive the importance of these skills depending on their specific perspective. For example, speaking smoothly/actively was much more often raised in relation to something that ought to have been done but was not, by themselves or others, while conversely, explaining clearly/specifically; facilitating; paraphrasing; and requesting clarification were mentioned considerably more often in terms of something that had been executed well, by themselves or others. On the other hand, students discussed encouraging/helping others in relation to what other classmates, not themselves, both did well and failed to do well. Expanding the discussion was more often noted as something that was done well by the student themselves and other classmates, as well as something that ought to have been done by the student themselves, but less often as something that a classmate ought to have done but did not.

It is likely that students experience these various skills in different ways. Speaking actively/smoothly is noticed in its deficiency, whereas many other skills may be perceived as higher-level skills that stand out when well implemented but do not appear as lacking or needed when absent. Encouraging/helping others was possibly particularly noticed when other students helped — or neglected to help — the classmate themselves.

In addition, certain skills were more salient in specific classes than in others. The skills of building on others' opinions and disagreeing/opposing with others garnered greater mentions after the classes in which they were

introduced, suggesting that students tried to employ these skills immediately following their presentation but may have soon become either less likely to try them in discussions or less apt to pay attention to them when they were implemented. Other skills can be more relevant contingent upon the point they were brought to bear in the semester. Facilitating was noted more frequently in the first half of the semester, perhaps because students felt in need of someone to facilitate more when simply maintaining a discussion was a challenge. In contrast, requesting clarification began to be noted more in the final two classes even though the skill had been introduced in the third class, possibly because students had become comfortable enough to risk a face-threatening act and/or because the content of the discussions had deepened enough to make clarification more necessary than previously.

The observation sheets differ from the class analysis worksheets because they are a simple record of what happened as perceived by an observer, rather than an evaluation by a student directly involved in the discussion. The results suggest that the students were doing a lot in the discussions that they failed to notice or appreciate in the discussion analysis worksheets. In contrast to the class analysis worksheets, expressing opinions was by far the most common component of the discussions according to the observations, comprising 31% of all the discussion contributions, while it represented only 3% of the skills mentioned in the class analysis worksheets. Expressing opinions is a core activity of discussions, but because of this it is possible that students did not consider such an obvious activity worthy of mentioning in their class analysis worksheets.

It may also be the case that the observers, rapidly recording the discussions components in real time, slotted various types of turns as expressing opinions that may have served as opinions that built on others' contributions or expanded or deepened the discussion. Nevertheless, the observation sheets suggest that many of the discussions involved a recitation of opinions without much synthesis or exploration. The possibility of this interpretation is further strengthened by the numerous entries of questions asked, comprising 10.6%

of the discussion contributions recorded but only 2.7% of the skills mentioned in the discussion analysis worksheets. In fact, as these questions are usually followed in the observation sheets by another classmate expressing an opinion, it appears that rather than being questions about the content of a stated opinion, these questions were often simply requests for the expression of an opinion from another classmate, such as, “What do you think, (name)?” without building on what had been said by the previous classmate.

Essentially, the observation sheets likely provide a window into what actually took place in the discussions, while the discussion analysis worksheets showed what the students valued in the discussions. In the same way, 12% of the tokens represented agreements with previous opinions, a skill that was never mentioned in the discussion analysis worksheets. The findings may indicate that the students were already largely secure in expressing opinions, asking others to express opinions, and agreeing, and therefore remarked more often on skills that were less secure, requiring more effort and initiative.

Like the discussion analysis worksheets, the final overall assessments of the discussions are evaluative. However, they differ from the weekly analyses because the students are asked to cast their minds back over the whole semester, rather than writing on an experience that was freshest in their minds from the most recent discussion. This may explain certain discrepancies between the two reports. While paraphrasing was mentioned by 46% of the students in the final analysis as one of the most useful skills, in the weekly discussion analyses, paraphrasing amounted to only 8% of the skills mentioned overall. Likewise, while agreeing/disagreeing was mentioned by 27% of the students in the final assessment, disagreeing comprised just 5% of the total weekly tokens, and agreeing was not referred to at all. This suggests that the timing and particular perspective taken on discussion skills — general or reflective of a specific, recent experience — may influence the responses obtained.

7. Conclusion

CLIL- or EMI-type university discussions represent a challenge, with multiple aims in competition, including speaking smoothly/actively, deepening and expanding the discussion, and utilizing specialized vocabulary and expressions. To attain these types of goals, further skills are required, such as speaking simply, explaining clearly and specifically, encouraging others, requesting clarification as needed, agreeing and disagreeing, building on others' opinions, paraphrasing, and asking meaningful questions. Despite this, in real time, students are often anxious to make their own discrete contribution, without paying sufficient heed to the discussion at large, resulting in a recitation of opinions that fail to intermingle.

Nevertheless, the present study suggests that when introduced to a range of skills and strategies and asked to reflect on the discussions they have participated in, students are adept at recognizing the drawbacks of their discussions as well as the means of enhancing the quality of them. The findings indicate that students highly evaluate skills which are not the obvious and common ones such as expressing opinions or agreeing, but rather those that may prove more difficult to execute initially but which can enable them to achieve a discussion which truly integrates the input of all and allows the participants to discover and develop new ideas.

It is not possible to generalize the findings of this study to CLIL or EMI discussions at large, as the students' English proficiency and motivation, the complexity of the subject matter of the discussion, as well as practical issues such as class size and the medium for discussion, will all affect the skills and strategies noticed and appreciated by students. Nevertheless, the results suggest that student analysis of discussions heightens their awareness and motivation, and reveals the skills and strategies identified as particularly significant by the students, a research perspective that so far has received less scrutiny, but which may serve as a basis for further planning of CLIL or EMI discussion classes.

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