

The Main Key Principles of Discussion Based Learning of Foreign Language

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Article Information

Received: April 21, 2023

Accepted: May 19, 2023

Published: June 13, 2023

Keywords

method, technological innovation, ICT, discussion, recitation, instructional conversations.

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the main priorities and key principles of discussion-based learning in language learning field. As we now know language is always in action and demands regularly interaction. That's because types of interaction such as discussion and debates play important role in this process. Thus, author claims several strategies in the article that can be effective for both learners and teachers in EFL.

Introduction. Traditionally, language researchers and specialists have subscribed to the belief that second and foreign language pedagogy renews and improves itself in three basic ways: innovation through change in teaching methods, innovation through language related sciences and research, and technological innovation. In connection to technological innovative ways, it has been observed that changes in theories of language teaching and learning affect uses of technologies and new technologies affect language teaching and learning theories. (Harmer, 2001).

Discussion is a term that refers to “talk between two or more people in which thoughts, feelings, and ideas are expressed, questions are asked and answered, or news and information is exchanged” (The Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary). Thornbury and Slade (2006) defined discussion along seven basic characteristics. Discussion is (1) predominantly spoken and based on a set of prosodic features; (2) spontaneous and synchronous; (3) occurs in a shared context; (4) interactive; (5) interpersonal; (6) endowed with an informal style but in certain communication situations, it takes place more formally; (7) revelatory of the speaker’s identity. Whenever one communicates, one discloses information about one’s identity. This latter is never fixed; it is “something which we are constantly building and negotiating all our lives”

(Thornborrow, 2004: 158). It is indisputable that interaction is the most fundamental mode of human communication. Humans are social beings who need to communicate and to establish and strengthen social relationships with people around them, and this can be attained through language. We resort to language and more precisely to discussions to change our beliefs, values, aspirations, hopes and most of all our identities. Vygotsky (1962) claimed that we learn through our interactions and communications with others. He suggested that learning occurs through the interactions students have with peers, teachers, and other experts. Unfortunately, in Algerian schools and universities the opportunities of second/foreign language learners to talk, interact, and participate in class are very restricted; discussion as an extended communication, often interactive is of minor preoccupation and learners are not given enough opportunity to exchange views on some topics. Discussion is given little attention. It is very frequently limited in English language classroom and issued for comprehension goals rather than for developing students' thinking. Most students remain silent in a classroom, half listening to their teachers as they lecture in front of the room. Teachers still rely on the IRE (Initiate-Respond-Evaluate) traditional model despite its failure to promote students' discussions and thinking at higher levels. Some teachers do insist on their autocratic teaching and do not appreciate discussions with its outcomes and issues. Some others are not certain of its workability with too large sized classes where only few students are taking part while the majority is listening stonily (Dillon, 1994). As we began to shift from teachercentred to learner-centred model, many laudable efforts to change things have been taking place, and conversation is slowly but surely working its way in order to oust the traditional teacherdriven management of talk. So it is time to start looking at ways to enhance classroom discussion. Coming back to the nature of communication, it is true that discussion is complex and necessitates not only a sufficient knowledge of the linguistic system in terms of syntactic and grammatical structures, vocabulary and pronunciation, but also the ability to conduct a conversation according to some pragmatic, socio-cultural, and discourse rules. Yet, the two main difficulties encountered by foreign language learners may be divided into two symptoms and root causes: either their unfamiliarity with the different aspects of language and thus inability to produce language suitable for discussion, or the availability for use of such knowledge is not well-exploited; a fact that constrains learners to resort to some communication strategies. Algerian students learn English for academic purposes or as an international language in order to communicate with both native and non-native speakers. It is the case where intelligibility takes precedence over accuracy. Mispronunciations and other communication strategies are tolerated. However, ideally students are at the same time intelligible and accurate. The secret is simply to find the right way to do it in classrooms.

Discussion-based teaching involves the systematic use of discussions to accomplish curricular objectives. It was initially advocated to promote democratic values in response to the rise of fascism in Europe in the 1930's (Delamont, 1983). Throughout the remainder of the twentieth century, interest in discussion-based teaching spread, partly due to the increasing recognition of the essential role of social interaction for promoting student thinking and partly due to the increasing support for discussion-based teaching in the research literature. Benefits have been demonstrated across multiple subject areas, including social studies, English, science, and mathematics. More specifically, discussion-based teaching has led to gains in general subject mastery, reading comprehension, conceptual understanding, problem-solving ability, moral development, attitude change and development, and communication skills. The acceptance of discussion-based teaching as a sound pedagogy has led to the introduction of

numerous instructional approaches for improving the quality of teacher and student dialogue, such as indirect instruction, dialogic instruction, conversational teaching, and instructional conversations. (See “For Further Reading.”)

Obstacles to Discussion-Based Teaching

Despite the research-supported benefits and a proliferation of new methods, recitation is still a much more prevalent form of classroom discourse than discussion. Several explanations have been offered for the lack of discussion-based teaching. One suggests that teachers don't value a discussion-based approach. It is thought teachers may not appreciate the beneficial outcomes of discussions, or they simply may prefer avoiding controversial issues by adopting a more autocratic teaching style (Gall & Gillet, 1980; Gall, 1985; Dillon, 1994). A second explanation is that limiting factors in the teaching environment may inhibit discussion-based teaching. Teachers may avoid discussions when their class sizes are too large, or when they feel pressure to raise test scores by teaching the acquisition of facts and skills (Gall, 1985). In a stressful environment, controlling the talk in a classroom talk can often appear to be the safest and most efficient option.

For effective discussions, three foundational skills need to be practiced and developed not only by teachers but also by students: questioning, listening, and responding.

Questioning. There are forms of questioning that promote recitation and those that foster discussion. The dominant form of classroom talk is recitation, which also been dubbed by researchers as IRE: Initiate, Response, Evaluate (Walsh, 2015). Recitation is a type of formative assessment, a way to check for understanding. In contrast, questioning for discussion encourages a deeper understanding of concepts and provides opportunities for students to make connections. College teachers should be transparent about course objectives so that students know the learning goals and ensure that the types of questions asked are congruent with those objectives. For example, if a course is intended to focus on developing a student's ability to apply knowledge, then the instructor should intentionally and strategically design questions that promote that level of cognition. Ideally, both teachers and students should be familiar with Bloom's Taxonomy and practice awareness of the types of questions that are being posed in class discussions (Krathwohl, 2002).

Listening. Listening is essential for teachers in a DBL classroom because they must be able to evaluate the understanding of students, help them make connections, and ensure continuity of the discussion. Thus, listening means much more than merely being quiet and allowing students to talk; it involves attempting to understand the speaker's point of view and assessing what is being expressed. One of the biggest obstacles to listening effectively is that an instructor can be preoccupied with thinking about what they should say next. Instructors must practice being mindfully present and listening attentively; this not only shows respect to their students but affirms to them that their contributions are valuable.

Responding. Choosing how to respond to student contributions during discussion is an equally important but challenging skill. If an instructor is not careful, their response can inhibit student engagement and/or stifle the flow of the discussion. There are at least sixteen techniques for responding to student contributions in classrooms: affirm, evaluate, correct, express wonderment, share gratitude, restate, be silent, use non-verbal cues, explore, extend, challenge, repeat the question, raise a new question, invite, summarize, or make a statement. Rather than elaborate on that list (which may seem extraordinarily daunting), we shall attempt to simplify

this significant but elusive skill of responding. Toward that end, instructors should carefully consider Christensen's (1992) "decision tree" with two branches for discussion teaching: "either continue the teacher-to-student discourse or shift to a student-to-student mode" (p. 167). If the discussion teacher chooses to continue the teacher-to-student discourse, then there are three options: explore, extend, or challenge. Conversely, a teacher can opt to let go of the discussion and encourage student-to-student interaction by restating the question, raising a related question, or directly inviting two students to share their contrasting points of view.

Conclusion. Those instructors who utilize DBL may encounter various challenges, including engaging students in discussion, encouraging high-order levels of thinking (e.g., analysis, evaluation, and creation), and managing dominant talkers. To overcome those challenges, DBL teachers must be willing to invest time and effort in creating safe, inclusive learning environments that will promote and encourage student engagement and a sense of belonging. This can be accomplished by learning students' names and interests and connecting students through using icebreaker activities. Also, instructors should prepare students for DBL, and students must also recognize their responsibility to prepare for quality discussions. Sharing the list of discussion questions before class and utilizing response papers or informal writing will allow students time to process their ideas and formulate responses that can be shared in class discussions. Finally, both teachers and students need to practice and develop the essential skills needed for effective discussions, including questioning, listening, and responding.

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