

# Investigating Student Group Discussion Participation

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## Reference Data:

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A lack of student oral participation in second language discussions can often be attributed to factors such as inter-group relationships, the discussion task design, and the actions of the teacher in class. In an experiment involving 129 students in a Japanese university, I examined the effects of doing prediscussion oral practice on student participation during group discussion tasks. Students prepared for discussions by verbalizing, recording, and reflecting upon planned contributions after an initial 3-minute brainstorming period. This additional oral practice was reported by students to be insignificant for building confidence, improving retention of language, increasing willingness to communicate, or reducing anxiety for speaking on a topic. In contradiction to this, however, students reported that when the self-recorded oral practice was done before a discussion, they actually felt more confident, better able to recall prepared language, more willing to speak, and less anxious during the actual discussion.

学生が第二言語でのディスカッションにおいてどの程度発言するかは、グループ間の人間関係やタスクデザイン、あるいは授業内での教師の行動などに起因することが多い。日本の大学生192名を対象とし、リハーサルを行うことがグループディスカッション中の行動にどのような効果をもたらすかを調査するための実験を行った。学生は当初の3分間のブレインストーミング後、発言内容を考え、口に出して録音し、その録音を聴いて内容を再考する追加の準備プロセスを行った。学生の報告によれば、この追加プロセスはトピックについて発言するうえで自信を持つこと、記憶力の改善、熱意の向上、また不安を和らげることに大きな影響を与えないということだった。しかしながらこれに反して、上記の追加プロセスを行った場合、学生の多くがディスカッション中により自信を持ち、考えた発言内容をよく思い出し、発言への熱意が向上し、不安感が軽減したと報告したのである。

**O**RAL PARTICIPATION is important in learning. There is always the potential for students to acquire new language and skills through receptive learning, but actually using English orally can clearly also improve students' L2 abilities. Besides learning grammatical structures and appropriate vocabulary for speech, students need to improve their overall communicative competence for discussions (Canale & Swain, 1980). Classroom group discussions in the target language are an appropriate way to do this. By practicing how to negotiate meaning through oral discussion tasks, students can improve their organizational, pragmatic, and strategic skills for speaking in a group (Bachman, 1990). These skills help students to verbalize their thoughts and feelings rather than focus heavily on preparing spoken language that they never actually say out loud. The importance of this for language learners is clear if they are to become better language users. As often as possible, students should not only be understanding language input from their surroundings, but also "actually producing"



such language as well (Ellis, 2003, p. 178). Despite this, students from Confucian heritage nations (such as Japan) have been reported to find it more challenging to make oral contributions to group discussions, compared to students from Western nations, largely due to cultural differences such as the preference to avoid sounding critical of others (Cheng, 2000; Harumi, 2011).

### Situation-Specific Factors Related to Oral Participation

Many factors in the classroom can affect the motivation for students to orally contribute during discussions or not. Of these influences, some are said to be *state* motivators and others are *trait* motivators (Tremblay, Goldberg, & Gardner, 1995). State motivators refer to the situation the students are put in (their group and the task at hand for example) and trait motivators refer to long-term influences on learners (such as their overall beliefs about English). State motivators should always be considered by teachers, as these are generally factors that a teacher can have the power to immediately take action on within the classroom. By focusing on these, the willingness of students to communicate can be improved (MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1998) and the chances of frequent and detailed verbal contributions by the students increased. An overview of factors that relate to classroom discussion activities (see Figure 1) and their potential to influence student oral participation follows.

### Group Dynamics

There are several factors about the group students are put in that can affect oral participation. First, group size has been shown to influence speech production (Han, 2007). Larger groups tend to result in students speaking less, due to increased anxiety about sharing feelings with a larger audience. Also, power relationships within a group (Cao & Philp, 2006; Forsyth,

2006) can affect turn-taking and decision-making processes amongst students. More dominant students with a higher level of “extraversion” (Nakatsuhara, 2011) or higher language levels can tend to take a dominant speaking role and leave others with less chance to add to the discussion. Teachers should ensure where possible that groups are as comfortable as possible with each other in discussions and consider making changes to group members if silence is continually encountered.

### Discussion Topic

The actual topic under discussion will, of course, have an impact on how much students decide to speak about it. Students with more familiarity with, interest in, and background knowledge about the topic will experience a lighter cognitive load (Skehan, 1998, p. 99) when preparing to speak about it to others. This is because those students can focus more effort on forming speech and communicating in English, rather than thinking about what to say on a topic they have little interest in or know little about.

It has been shown that by giving students choices in task content (such as the topic), the extent to which students participate can be increased (Stroud, 2013). Teachers can therefore better improve the chance of interactive discussions in class by ensuring the topic matches the interests and knowledge of the students at hand.

### Teacher Actions

Decisions teachers make about their own actions in class can also heavily influence student behavior during discussions. Teachers can help students feel more confident to speak during the discussion if they provide the students with feedback before and after the discussion. Such feedback might include corrections of language use, examples of how to make verbal contri-

butions, or general advice on how to respond to others (Chang, 2011). By offering this additional support, it may be possible for teachers to scaffold more anxious students into speaking more freely than when they are left alone to take part in a group by themselves.

A teacher could also take action during the discussion to support students. By using motivational strategies such as directly asking questions of students (Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, 2008), teachers can prompt responses and potentially increase the amount of speech produced by group members. Additionally, offering turns in the conversation, repeating, or rephrasing student contributions (to elicit responses to them), or even giving clues on how to respond (Harumi, 2011) can give groups the push they may need to speak more during discussions.

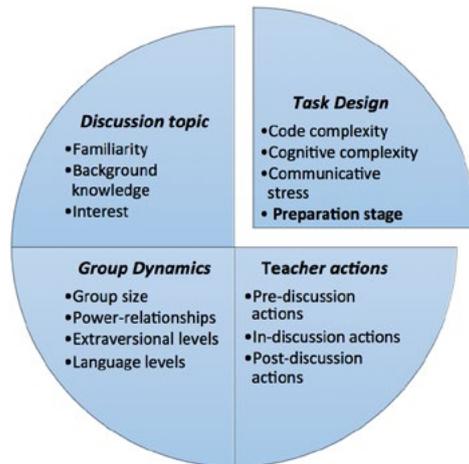


Figure 1. Factors affecting oral participation in discussions.

## Task Design

The way in which a discussion itself is set up and structured can have a huge impact on how it is received by student groups in class. Ensuring that discussion tasks have a suitable difficulty level for students, are not too complicated to understand, and are familiar to students regarding procedure and topic (Fushino, 2010) are important ways to increase the chances of students participating in them. The difficulty of a task for students depends on the cognitive load they experience during the task. This load depends on three important factors for classroom discussion tasks:

1. **Code complexity**—the variety and complexity required for language use during the discussion with regard to grammar and vocabulary. Students who have to use language beyond their abilities in a discussion are likely to stumble when they need to verbalize their thoughts and will find it difficult to participate.
2. **Cognitive complexity**—the amount of thought required by students to understand the discussion requirements, the process of undertaking the task, and the organizing and delivering of the outcome required. Repeating the discussion task type (in terms of student roles, the expected interaction and outcome, and time limits) can reduce the cognitive load upon students and help them focus more on simply speaking in the discussion.
3. **Communicative stress**—situation-specific factors that determine how anxious students become. These can include the discussion time limit, the type of verbal contributions that should be made (such as argumentative or supportive), and how large groups are (bigger groups usually result in more anxiety). Reducing stress levels through experimentation with these factors for different classes can potentially increase talk time amongst different groups (summarized from Skehan, 1998, p. 99).

## Prediscussion Preparation

One very important aspect when considering the design of discussion tasks is the preparation stage for students prior to the discussion. Teachers have control over this stage (unlike many other factors) and can use it to influence student behavior during the discussion that follows. Through appropriate design, a prediscussion preparation stage can help increase oral participation for students by reducing cognitive load and fears of making mistakes when speaking in a group (Chang, 2011). Teachers should consider that contributions made by students during discussions can be longer and linguistically more complex (in terms of clauses and speech fluency) if they are permitted to prepare beforehand (Willis & Willis, 2007, p. 160).

The mode of practice students undertake during their preparation for a discussion is an important consideration for teachers. Ellis (2003) stated that “learners’ attention to fluency, accuracy, and complexity can be manipulated by means of the kind of planning they are required to undertake” (p. 134). However, the impact of oral practice prior to discussions has been relatively unexplored in terms of its effect on participation during the group discussion that follows. Rather than students preparing in the more conventional written form (such as brainstorming, making notes, or scripting out their speech), having students record themselves speaking and reviewing it themselves could be of great benefit. By asking students to verbalize their thoughts prior to a discussion (which is how they will need to deliver them to others in the actual task) and reflect upon them, teachers can give students a greater chance to prepare for the situation they will actually face in the task. This style of practice has been explored and reported as useful for presentation preparation (see Lynch & MacLean, 2000), but not in any great detail for classroom discussions.

## The Study

After considering the different factors that can potentially affect the oral participation of Japanese students in group discussions, a prediscussion oral practice stage was added and examined in terms of students’ perceptions of its use and its potential impact on discussion participation by students.

## Research Questions

The experiment was based on the following three research questions:

1. How do students perceive a prediscussion oral practice stage in terms of enjoyment, confidence building, retention of practice, willingness to communicate during the discussion, and reducing anxiety?
2. How can the addition of a prediscussion oral practice stage help with enjoyment, confidence, retention, willingness to communicate, and reducing anxiety about the discussion that follows?
3. Upon being given a free choice, do students actually prefer to do the oral practice stage before their discussion tasks?

## Participants

Survey data were collected from 129 (65 first-year and 64 second-year) students studying science and technology-related majors (thus not English majors) at a university in Hyogo, Japan. Five classes (classes 1A, 1B, and 1C were 1st-year students, and 2A and 2B were 2nd-year students) ranged in size from 23–36 students and were of mixed gender. Each student attended a 90-minute communication class once a week in which they were expected to take an active part in several 8-minute group discussions on given topics.

## Method

The participants performed both a control task and an experimental task in two different classes. The control task involved only 3 minutes of silent brainstorming about their opinions on the set topic. The experimental task allowed for this 3-minute brainstorming stage, followed by an additional 10 minutes of oral practice using a computer in order to verbalize, record, and reflect upon planned contributions prior to discussions. Groups undertook either the control task or experimental task first and performed the other task in the following week's class. The order of these tasks was balanced between groups, so as to eliminate the practice effect from results (where any improvement in discussion skills can simply be accounted for by the fact students took part in a similar discussion more than once). Additionally, the discussion topic was balanced by having half of the groups discuss topic A first and the other half discuss topic B first (so as to eliminate any effect of slight differences in task difficulty). After each discussion, students were given a two-part survey written in Japanese (see Appendix for the English version) about both the prediscussion phase and the discussion itself.

## The Student Survey

The first part of the survey contained 20 items related to enjoyment, confidence, retention, willingness to communicate, and anxiety (four items for each variable, all having a Cronbach's alpha coefficient value of reliability above 0.7). Students rated each item from 1-6 on a Likert scale, from strongly agree (6) to strongly disagree (1). Negatively worded item scores were reversed after data collection and average scores calculated from the four items for each variable. The second part of the survey consisted of only one item for each of the same five variables. Again, the negatively worded item scores were reversed after data collection and average scores for the variables calculated for the students.

In a third class, students were given the choice to simply brainstorm the next group discussion for 13 minutes (silently) or brainstorm for 3 minutes and record and review themselves orally practicing for 10 minutes. Students were free to choose a different option than their classmates chose if they wanted to. The decision made by each student was recorded.

## Discussion Tasks Design

Two different topics were discussed by each group in varying orders with either the control preparation or experimental preparation first (as detailed above). Both discussions undertaken by each group were kept as similar as possible in terms of difficulty, to ensure that differences in results for the discussions represented the effects of the preparation stage only (the only variable used). In order to minimize on variability, all discussions were 8 minutes in length, involved the same four group members (when members were absent for either discussion, the whole group's data was discarded), were performed at the same time of week in the same location, had the same table arrangement, and were overseen by the same teacher. Both discussions involved choosing three items from a list of 10 and had the same instructions and procedures for groups to follow. Topic A was to decide three classroom equipment improvements to be made at the university, and topic B was to decide three new facilities to be built on campus. Both of these topics involved the same code complexity, cognitive complexity, and communicative stress (Skehan, 1998, p. 99) for students and thus could be said to be equally difficult to do.

## Results and Discussion

The first research question was focused on how a prediscussion self-recording practice might be received by students in English communication classes. It can be seen in Figure 2 that differ-

ences between scores in the survey for a discussion with and a discussion without recording practice appeared to be minimal. Students reported that a prediscussion stage with self-recording practice was just as effective as one without to (a) enjoy doing the discussion, (b) build confidence, (c) improve retention for language use, (d) boost a willingness to communicate in the discussion, and (e) reduce anxiety about speaking. It is, therefore, fair to say that in terms of the experience of preparing for a discussion, the self-recording practice stage did not appear to be greatly valued by the students.

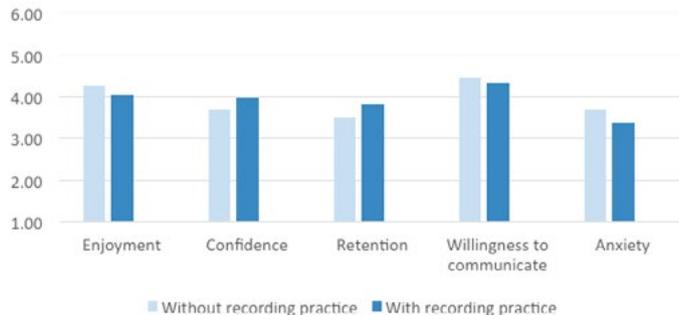


Figure 2. Average survey scores for prediscussion practice stage. Surveys were scored on a 1 – 6 Likert scale.  $N = 129$ .

However, with regard to the second research question of the effect of a practice on the eventual discussion task, more noticeable differences are present in the findings. It can be seen in Figure 3 that students felt the same factors for the actual discussion stage itself were altered by the preparation undertaken. Noticeable increases in average student scores about the discussion following the self-recording practice were identified

compared to times when students did not undertake this stage. Students generally reported feeling more confident, more able to recall their prepared language more easily, and more willing to speak with others in their group, as well as having a lower level of anxiety when taking part. It appears that by allowing the students to record themselves verbally and reflect upon the English they will use shortly after, improvements can potentially be made to their resultant participation in the discussion.

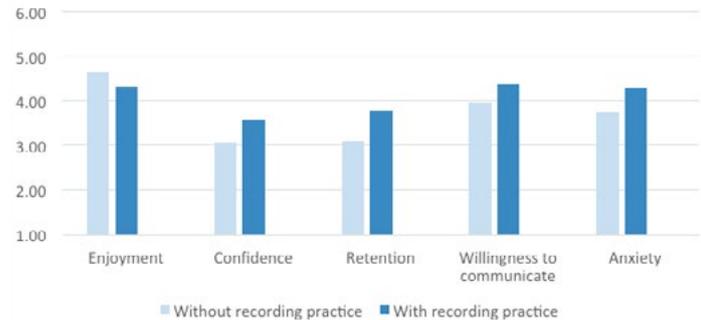


Figure 3. Average survey scores for discussion stage. Surveys were scored on a 1 – 6 Likert scale.  $N = 129$ .

A reduction in the overall student score for the enjoyment of the discussion was noted. Exact reasons for this cannot be determined with any great confidence, but could be linked to factors such as being required to do more work to prepare for a task, a feeling of lengthier speaking times being forced on students, or discussions feeling more like speeches than spontaneous interactions. More research at a later date, however, would be required to clarify this.

The final research question was concerned with how students would choose to practice for discussions, after experiencing both approaches (a brainstorming stage with or without the addition of self-recording practice) and given a free choice. Table 1 shows a breakdown of the choices made by members of the five classes. There was an overall preference by students not to do the individual self-recording practice prior to discussion (almost 75%). Exact reasons for the rejection of the added practice cannot be determined at this stage, but some informal observations of the students' reactions to the offer of the additional preparation were made. Many students clearly preferred to not verbalize their English preparation in earshot of their peers before the discussions began. Regardless of the fact that many students reported that oral practice resulted in benefits to their participation in the discussion, many of them still preferred not to do it. Classes in which many students decided not to do self-recording generally created an almost whole-class decision not to do it. Class 1C was an example (see Table 1), in which none of the students wanted to record themselves and many students actually stated it was too "embarrassing" to be heard doing it.

**Table 1. Free Choice Results for Students Prior to Experiment Follow-Up Discussions, N = 129**

Class	Student choice regarding recording practice	
	Chose not to do	Chose to do
1A	17	10
1B	15	7
1C	20	0
2A	24	9
2B	21	6
Percentage	74.4%	25.6%

## Conclusions

In this paper, the inclusion of a prediscussion oral practice phase (where students individually verbalized, recorded, and reflected upon their opinions) was examined in terms of benefits for discussion participation. It was shown in the results from student surveys that the addition of such a pretask phase can boost student confidence, retention, and willingness to communicate during the follow-up discussion. It was also shown to be possible to lower the anxiety experienced by students speaking during discussions by allowing them to take the time to prepare orally in such a manner.

However, it was also found that this additional practice stage was not necessarily viewed by students as being more enjoyable to do than just a simple 3-minute brainstorm. Additionally, the inclusion of the extra practice was not reported by students to be significantly better for lowering anxiety, increasing willingness to communicate, improving confidence, or improving retention of spoken English to orally contribute on a topic (even though the results showed that discussions could be improved in some ways with its inclusion). Also, almost 75% of the students in this study actually opted not to do the practice when given a free choice. Despite this, students still reported the prediscussion oral practice phase to have value for reducing anxiety, and improving confidence, retention, and a willingness to speak during the actual discussion.

Teachers who may frequently experience quiet or silent group discussions in Japan could consider the inclusion of a prediscussion oral practice stage as a way to create more openly interacting groups, but it may not always be received as a welcomed addition to learning by the students. Further research is required to clarify exactly why this may be (perhaps reasons such as embarrassment practicing orally next to classmates or boredom with additional oral work), as enjoyment in learning should of course be preserved. Something of concern in the

findings was that discussions were actually reported as being slightly less enjoyable when groups were asked to practice orally by themselves beforehand. Increasing the oral participation of students in discussion tasks is a clear goal for teachers, but maintaining the enjoyment of such learning should be equally considered. Thus, further research on discussion practice activities that can improve student participation during discussions, whilst being enjoyed and valued by students, is essential to continue improving the way Japanese students are taught oral discussion skills.

### Bio Data

**Robert Stroud** is currently undertaking a PhD in applied linguistics at the University of Birmingham and is developing research on the effects of task design on language use in communicative situations. He has an ultimate goal of improving students' communicative competence through the combination of task-based learning and computer-assisted language learning. He also holds an MA in applied linguistics and English language teaching from the University of Nottingham.

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## Appendix

### Student Survey

Give a score of 1 – 6 for how true the following statements are for you:

(6 = strongly agree, 5 = agree, 4 = somewhat agree, 3 = somewhat disagree, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree)

#### Part 1 – The Prediscussion Preparation Stage

1. It was fun doing the training
2. The training helped me feel more confident to speak on the topic
3. I quickly forgot the English I practiced during the training
4. Using the training style was interesting for me
5. I wanted to stop doing the training
6. The training helped me relax while preparing for the discussion
7. I wanted to prepare my speech as much as possible during the training
8. The training helped me remember how to give my opinion better
9. The training made me feel that a discussion is too difficult for me to discuss in a group
10. I was comfortable preparing for the discussion with the training
11. I enjoyed the training
12. I forgot how to discuss the topic after training
13. I really wanted to finish all my preparation for the discussion
14. The training made it easier to speak about the topic to others

15. The training was boring
16. The training improved my confidence to give my opinion in a group
17. I want to do the training again
18. The training helped me stop worrying about making spoken mistakes
19. I was still scared to speak in a group about the topic after the training
20. The training helped me remember spoken English well

#### Part 2 – The Discussion

1. I enjoyed the discussion
2. I was nervous speaking during the group discussion
3. I wanted to speak a lot in the discussion
4. I was confident about speaking in the discussion
5. It was difficult to remember and tell my group the English I had prepared in training