

CULTURAL AWARENESS AND THE TEACHING OF DISCUSSION IN THE TAIWANESE UNIVERSITY CLASSROOM

Guy Matthews

Shih Chien University

ABSTRACT: *This study looks at the learning styles of Taiwanese university students majoring in English in Taiwan. It discusses whether discussion in class is an activity that is culturally appropriate, and whether traditional cultural norms in a Confucian heritage society can be problematic in the discussion classes frequently offered by universities in Taiwan. It also looks at a methodology designed to see if explicit instruction and guidance in the norms and conventions of conversation can help the students to gain greater motivation and interest in such classes. The article includes a case study of a 4th year university English discussion class at a Taiwanese university designed to see if the class was successful in empowering students to conduct discussions in English.*

KEYWORDS: Pedagogy EFL, Discussion, Cultural Awareness

INTRODUCTION

This research was designed with the purpose of gaining insight and hopefully improving teaching methods for students involved in English discussion classes in higher education. From the experience of many teachers over many years it appeared that Taiwanese students tended to have somewhat different learning styles to those students of European or North American origin. English language learners in the Taiwanese university system are commonly required to take classes in oral training, conversation or debate. This would seem to equate well with the motivation of English learners who as Brown (2014) noted commented on the “few opportunities to engage in speaking activities” (p. 157) and the fact that most English university classes predominantly involved reading and listening to teacher lectures. This combined with the high status attached to the use of English in Taiwan (Chen 2003) and its perceived value in the internationalization of Taiwan (Hsieh, 2010) would seem to suggest that such classes would prove to be extremely successful. However, students often find it difficult to engage in such classes with many finding the experience stressful. Li (2003), found that Asian students were unaccustomed with classroom practices which necessitated active participation. Wei (2014) noted that being required to speak in English classes caused high levels of anxiety to Asian college students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

University English learners in Taiwan had been accustomed to the educational methodology in English education in Taiwan, which has been rooted in the pedagogic and philosophic traditions of Taiwanese society. Ho, Peng and Chan (2002) noted that in a Confucian society, such as Taiwan, formal and hierarchical methodologies are preferred. Holcomb (2007) noted, in a study of Taiwanese education, that because of the role of a teacher is seen as a supplier of knowledge, the student’s role is that of the receiver, and is consequently a passive role. Biggs

& Watkins (2001) argued that in a Confucian culture the teacher is seen as a respected figure who has the role of a mentor. This would seem to be validated by Brown's (2014) study of English education in Taiwan, where his research indicated that teacher centered lessons based on written texts, grammar stud, memorization and frequent testing were prevalent throughout the pre-university education of Taiwanese students. Furthermore, there was an emphasis placed on avoiding mistakes.

Piaget (1958) theory of constructivist learning has been very influential in education in the western world. His argument that it is necessary for the learner to discover knowledge rather than have solutions being taught to them is reflected in the idea that the teacher's role is to act as a source and a resource in the classroom. In the western classroom, the extensive roles of discussing and questioning the subject matter are practiced and encouraged throughout the education of students from those societies. The tradition of questioning and using a dialectic methodology in education can also be seen as deeply embedded in western education with its roots in the ideas of Socrates and Plato. In such a dialectic methodology it is axiomatic that all interlocuters, which includes both the teacher and the students, do not necessarily have access to the answer or the truth.

Christensen (1991) posits that the use of discussion in the classroom involves a shift in perspectives about individuals' roles in the classroom. Thus, the idea that the teacher is the one that has exclusive control over the direction of the class and the material that is presented is no longer applicable. Discussion means that the introduction and handling of information becomes a collaborative process. However, this process seems to fit in with western educational methodology and discussion as is frequently employed in western education. This means students educated in western countries are very familiar with discussion in the classroom and they expect and have become comfortable with its use. Furthermore, as a cultural norm they are fully conversant with its norms and the behaviours associated with it. However, this familiarity might not exist for Taiwanese students. They are, therefore, being asked to follow a pedagogy which is somewhat alien to them. The imposition of a western pedagogy on students from a different cultural background has the potential to cause the students problems and not be a success (Boekaerts, 1998).

Therefore, cultural differences can be seen as a primary source of problems in the implementation of discussion in an Asian teaching environment. Ellis (1996) noted that methodology had to be both attuned and acceptable to the cultural environment. In western environments with the widespread adoption of constructivist approaches this seems to be the case. However, In Taiwan, with its Confucian heritage such tuning and acceptability may be far less certain. It is also the case that the use of a culturally unfamiliar methodology may frequently lead to misunderstandings about the process as conventions are not followed and cues are misinterpreted or not recognized (Gumperez 1982).

Being unaccustomed with the methodology of instruction has been linked to negative emotions such as low motivation anxiety, and lack of self-confidence. Krashen and Terrell's (1983) theory of the Affective Filter argues that language acquisition, even when the input is comprehensible, is impeded by the presence of negative emotions such as anxiety, lack of self-confidence and low motivation. Liu, Zhang, & Lu (2011) have shown that there is a correlation between anxiety and reticence in the EFL classroom. Therefore, when language learners are not familiar with the methodology they are unclear of what is expected of them, not sure of their ability to perform, and may be unconvinced of the educational benefit of the activity.

Nisbett (2003) has argued that social practices are variable between cultures. As people are socialized into their cultural environment they find that the culture's social practices are familiar and as such are seen as being natural and, to some extent, inherently right. This concept is applicable to education as the underlying assumptions of any particular culture towards education and the methodology that follows from those assumptions will have pervaded their classes and schools throughout their entire educations. However, if methodology is introduced which does not accord with their previous experiences then it is likely that students will feel uncomfortable or even alienated.

METHODS

In the study a new syllabus was introduced to an existing class with the intention of providing a structured and explanatory framework in order to hopefully allow students to gain more benefit from discussion as a pedagogic method. The research participants / subjects in this study were English majors studying in the Applied Foreign Language Department at a private university in Taipei. All participants were students in a 4th year undergraduate discussion class. The sample size consisted of two separate classes of students giving a total sample size of 39 students. Participation was voluntary and anonymous.

The first stage was to introduce at the beginning of the school year an explicit focus on the importance of discussion as a vital form of spoken discourse between native speakers. First, the students were asked using a questionnaire and a set of surveys about their attitudes. Students were then put into pairs to analyse the use of discussion, its relevance to the students, and how important it is in the world outside of the classroom. Pairs were used as this was a low-pressure way of getting the students to use discussion with no necessity for public performance. In addition, teaching was focused on maintaining communication rather than on the English usage.

The next stage was designed to provide the students to the forms and conventions of holding discussions in English. Structured discussion activities were provided to the class. In such activities guidance was given by having explicit and marked stages in the discussion activity. In addition, the assignment of roles was also employed. This was done so students could become familiar with the concept of the 'devil's advocate. It also has the advantage of meaning that disagreement or argument is depersonalized. Green et al. (1997: 139) noted that structured discussion, "provides some security for learners and may help prevent communicative breakdown." It also provides learners with the opportunity to practice the linguistic forms commonly used in discussion and debate. Conversational conventions and forms were presented on handouts and through the viewing and analysis of authentic video conversation.

The third stage was designed to increase learner autonomy. This was done by asking students to choose their own topics. They were given the choice of selecting from a list offered in class or generating their own. They would then be asked to work in pairs or small groups thinking of arguments in support and/ or opposition on particular views on any given topic. This was both a classroom activity and also a homework activity. Students were encouraged to select and research a topic so that they could offer higher level arguments. In class they were then given the opportunity to use this research in discussions with other students and the teacher. The students were also tasked to prepare a topic and an opinion and then meet with the teacher for an individual discussion.

The final stage was to extend this by asking the students to arrange discussions with the rest of their classmates, with students selecting the topics for the classroom discussion. A small group of three or four students was then asked to research one of the topics. Each group was then given 30 minutes of class time for their topic to be discussed. The groups were given complete freedom on how they would present the topic, how the class would be organized and the format for the discussion or discussions they would hold. Guidance sessions were held outside the class with each of the groups allowing the groups to get feedback and advice on their plans. However, in the discussion the teacher's role was confined to observing the session, only providing feedback after the group had finished.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Observation of other classes and previous classes has shown that students were often unable or unwilling to engage effectively in discussion in class. This was the case even with students who showed strong motivation when engaged in other classroom activities such as answering questions. In addition, when attempting to engage in conversation it was also apparent that the support of opinions and arguments was often also extremely limited. This meant that discussion activities often were unsatisfactory as they tended to end very quickly as students were unable to continue or extend discussion.

In the individual discussions with the teacher, each session was scheduled to last for 7 minutes. The students were informed that the teacher would challenge and try to oppose their arguments and opinions. Of the 39 students all of the participants managed to give an argument and offer support. 26 (67%) of the discussions had to be terminate after 7 minutes with the discussion still ongoing. 29 (74%) were able to counter effectively arguments put by the teacher and 15 (38%) directly countered the arguments of the teacher.

In the group discussion session 9 out of 10 groups ran discussion activities that lasted from 25 to 30 minutes. The other group discussion session lasted 21 minutes. A questionnaire was given to the students comprising 30 questions. Each question scored on a rating scale of 1 to 5. It was divided into 3 sections. Part A measured : Interest, Part B : Motivation , and Part C : Utility. Answer measured the agreement or otherwise to a given statement. In these sections 1 means "I

Disagree entirely" ranging up to 5 which means "I Agree Entirely". In this post session questionnaire the majority of students agreed that the sessions were interesting, with a mean answer of 4.3 (with 5 representing agreeing entirely with statements corresponding to interest in the sessions). The students' views of their motivation in participating in the sessions showed a mean of 3.9. Most of the students' responses showed that they perceived the usefulness of the sessions, mean of 4.1.

The results indicate that discussion can be productive and educationally beneficial in Taiwanese university English classes. However, if the methodology used does not incorporate an awareness of the cultural norms of the students then the results are likely to be not completely satisfactory. The methods described in this study would seem to be a way in which students can gain the abilities and confidence to interact in English discussion effectively The empowering of students means that they are more likely to be motivated learners who can take their skills into real world situations.

Based on the results of the research follow up research could be productive. It would be useful if quantitative and qualitative research comparing different methodologies could be produced to help validate this and similar pedagogic practices. It would also be useful if the research could be broadened to include students from other cultures. There is an assumption that the conclusions drawn here would apply to other Confucian heritage cultures, but until research is done this remains an assumption. Furthermore, there is a need for further pedagogical research on the impact of culture on learning and education in the EFL classroom.

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