

## Wanting to Talk: Discussion Building in a Japanese College Classroom

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# Wanting to Talk: Discussion Building in a Japanese College Classroom

Timothy Stewart

*"Okay, now let's have a discussion."*

It's not only second language learners who cringe when they hear these words. Most college students have difficulty generating lively discussions (Abbott, 1995). Foreign and second language teachers of Japanese learners know that students do not normally initiate discussion during a class. When they have questions they will often consult a peer first before asking the instructor, if they dare ask at all. It is not unusual to be approached by Japanese students with questions or discussion points after class or during office hours when they feel more at ease to speak. Anderson believes that Japanese "students are hesitant to talk in settings where they will stand out in front of their peers" (1993, p. 103).

Few of the publications on leading discussions in regular college classes examine material to be used in courses. Much of the focus is on strategies and activities to lead discussions (Bonwell & Eison, 1991, p. 23). These sources and many available in TESL books are methods oriented. Methods provide students with a needed push and a framework in which to discuss a given issue. However, we need to look beyond structural arrangements which force Japanese learners to talk. In my twelve years of teaching Japanese students both in ESL and EFL settings, I have found that offering them appropriate materials and tasks can overcome the fear of talking in class. My commentary examines materials as well as activities and techniques for leading Japanese EFL students to the point where they will initiate discussion. How can teachers build up enough content-language knowledge to make Japanese college students want to talk about their opinions in an open discussion?

Bonwell and Eison maintain that "the selection of subject material is of paramount importance to developing a successful discussion" (1991, p. 23). They outline three requirements for discussion material: first, it must interest students and instructors; second, the issues need to be presented from several perspectives to engender different points of view; third, it has to be possible to cover the material in the class. They believe that instructors should not try to spark discussion based on assigned readings. "Taking time in class to develop a common base of experience is one way to reduce greatly the risks associated with discussions; it is well worth the time invested" (Bonwell & Eison, 1991, pp. 23-24). If Japanese learners are generally reserved and quiet, how can we get them to engage in substantive open discussion in English?

## Contextualizing the Discussion Topic

I describe below how Bonwell and Eison's requirements can be applied with Japanese lower English proficiency (LEP) students. For our course unit on the family, my content partner and I planned a section on "international/multicultural marriages". This topic interests me in more than a general scholastic sense since I have been living in a multicultural relationship for over ten years. I thought more deeply about this topic and began to see it as the major focal point for the course unit on the family we were planning. At Miyazaki International College (MIC), our students encounter many Japanese and non-Japanese professors who are in a

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multicultural marriage. This is an oddity for Japan and so it interests them. For this reason mainly, I convinced my teaching partner that we should exploit this topic as much as possible. Below, I offer a short description of how we led our class of Japanese LEP students to the point of free and open discussion.

The classroom setting was an undergraduate college course—Introduction to Sociology. This class was developed, taught, and assessed collaboratively by me, an ESOL instructor, and my content-area partner. There were eighteen students in this class, all native Japanese speakers who ranged in English language proficiency from high-beginner to high-intermediate. They were all in their second semester of study at MIC. The class met for a total of 330 minutes weekly, divided between two sessions.

We had been reading, writing and talking about the family in class for about four weeks. The students also did several exercises on forming questions prior to our introduction of the marriage topic. The general topic of marriage is within the student's own experiential base. All of our students had seen weddings in films and on television. Two of them had attended weddings. Every one of them had thought about marriage relationships to some degree. During my preparation for this topic, I saw a naturally integrated content and language learning opportunity opening up. As a primer to the topic of multicultural marriages, the students did several activities on norms and roles of the family. They also created a class questionnaire and surveyed classmates about their expectations in a future spouse.

## The Crucial Stage: Engaging Japanese College Students

For the international marriage section of this unit, I took the video tapes of my own wedding ceremonies and receptions in Canada and Japan and edited them into one short tape of four clips (see Stewart, 1997, for a detailed lesson plan). I told our learners that they were going to watch a short tape about international marriages. My partner then conducted a brief mini-lecture review of marriage and the family to set the context. Following this, I asked them what they might see on the video and put categories on the board (such as, people, clothing, food, actions, objects, and places). Then, in groups of three they used the common cooperative learning technique of brainstorming to write down as many words as they could think of by relating marriage to these categories (Kessler, 1992).

We went over difficulties with vocabulary and concepts after the groups had written their word lists on the board. I then changed the groupings to pairs. Each pair received a worksheet to be completed while viewing the video clips. To heighten tension and establish an element of surprise, we did not tell them that they were going to see the Japanese and Canadian weddings of me, their *sensei*. As each of the four clips was played, they recorded what they saw and more and more of the students began to realize that their teacher was the star of the show. While the second clip was being played, the classroom began to buzz with excitement. Questions were coming out of every section of the room, simultaneously, and without hesitation. They were hooked.

Next, we continued with question formation which we had been working on earlier in the course. The students were given about ten minutes to write up as many questions as they wished. Sixty-two questions were generated. Some wrote as few as three, and others wrote as many as eight questions, for an average of just under five each (13 students attended this session). I don't recall ever having such an output of questions generated in so little time. These were then deposited anonymously into a box. I later selected several questions for grammatical and topical content. In the next class, the students asked their own questions and as we worked together on structural problems, I answered their questions. This is one way of turning the

competitive Whole-Class Question and Answer structure into a more cooperative task (Olsen & Kagan, 1992).

Over the next two weeks, we continued preparing them for discussion in several more ways. One assignment was to note the similarities and differences between the two types of wedding ceremonies and receptions on the tape. They then constructed comparison and contrast sentences and shared these orally with classmates. We also asked our learners to write an opinion paragraph on international marriage for homework. They presented their opinions to partners and later to their entire group by using the Three-Step Interview technique (Olsen & Kagan, 1992).

To continue building positive relationships in class, we asked pairs of students to prepare to interview MIC faculty and staff who are involved in multicultural marriages. This is a type of goal-structured interdependence task described by Olsen and Kagan (1992, p. 9). The lead-in to this was begun several weeks earlier through exercises requiring question formation. During the next two classes, the interview pairs brainstormed, categorized and edited their interview questions. Finally, each pair went out to meet their interviewee with about ten prepared questions. To conclude this cooperative group investigation project (Olsen & Kagan, 1992), every pair presented their interview findings to the class. These presentations began with factual descriptions of the interview. This was generally followed by some personal reflection on the interview. Questions from the audience closed out this oral presentation.

After hearing all of the interview reports, we asked our learners to think about the questions and comments generated during their presentations and to reflect further on their views of international marriage. More specifically, the students were directed to re-read their initial opinion paragraphs on the topic of international marriage, and to do another writing of one or more paragraphs stating whether or not they still agreed with this opinion by providing reasons. More than half of the class changed their opinions on multicultural relationships from negative to positive, although many students still saw drawbacks. Reading these papers it was clear to us, the instructors, that these students were thinking critically about this issue in a sophisticated manner. Armed with several English discussion gambits, they were ready to cross the threshold and participate in an open discussion of ideas.

## **Learnings From This Practice**

To summarize, we prepared our Japanese college students for open discussion by first choosing a topic of interest to them and us. They were presented with several perspectives on the issue of international marriage. Some of these were transmitted through traditional sources such as readings and short lectures. Others were drawn from sources more likely to generate greater student output and thus, give them a sense of ownership of the material. In this way, we were able to create a classroom environment in which they felt at ease with the teachers, their peers and the information they had on the topic. Viewing the video tape of my own marriage ceremonies and receptions created a personal connection and sense of openness between all of us. The students then provided us with thoughtful opinions on the issue in their first writing assignment. One of our goals was to have students recognize that their professors are approachable, and also interested in learning from them. I believe that most of our students realized this as a result of their interview experience. In their presentations they were enthusiastic and each pair shared some valuable insights with the class. After listening to all of the presentations, they were able to examine critically their first opinion paragraphs on multicultural marriages, and write sophisticated reflections on the issue.

This is an adaptation of Bonwell and Eison's advice about covering the material for discussion in class as a way to build a common base of experience. In our case we accomplished this by having our students actually generate much of the discussion material themselves. According to Kraft (1985), meaningful discussions are produced after students develop their own opinions and responses. He goes on to say that writing and speaking exercises are needed to foster critical thinking, and that students learn best when they cooperate in groups (as cited in Bonwell & Eison, 1991). These things might seem obvious but, because they are so basic, many professors neglect to allow students sufficient time to prepare for a discussion. The salient point coming out of my description is that the amount of time needed to build a common experiential base in college courses with LEP native Japanese students attending college in Japan, will be much different from the contexts Bonwell and Eison are referring to. Our preparation took considerably longer than one or two class periods to do. As Kraft suggests, we felt our LEP students needed to hear about, read about, write about, talk about, research about, and reflect on the topic several times in order to be prepared to generate any spontaneous discussion. This is how we brought our Japanese college students to the point where they wanted to engage in open discussion.

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