

Basic Discussion Skills (Round 2)

Susan Binder, Zorana Vaciljevic, Saeko Nagashima, Eric Shade, Mike Nix, Yuriko Ishizaka, Jay Veenstra, Ian Platt, Greg Lamb, Stacey Vye (with notes by Mike)

This discussion was billed as the Basic Discussion Skills Round 2 but we actually talked about the other Listening & Speaking classes (Introduction to Communication Skills, Improving Discussion Skills and Advanced Content-based classes) too, as well as Reading classes briefly. We thought quite a bit about the reoccurrence and reinforcing of skills through the different levels of the curriculum, about the progressions for students between courses and levels (or lack of them), and about how this affects our sense of what 'curriculum' means in this context.

Helping students do research

Simplified articles (readings) on issues are a very useful way in. There are about 25 teachers in the taught-in-English part of the curriculum – and it was suggested that if everybody simplified two articles, that would make a library of 50 or so simplified articles we could all use.

It would be useful to have models of how to do research – perhaps a series of mini-manuals. We already have samples of notes on the website – would be good to have samples for the whole research process, through to putting a presentation together. Zorana thought students get stuck on doing research, especially how to put different pieces of research together, so need help/models for that. Clear models are good but we also need to recognize that there's no one way to do research.

The online guided research sites and issues research links are helpful. Some issues don't date too quickly but some issues have got out of date and students' interest change quickly. How do we keep those research resources (and readings) up to date? Is there a way for students to input new sources of info from their own research to the site?

Extensive reading in Introduction to Communication Skills

Jay described what he's doing in his ICS class with the graded readers. He said there was initial shock from students that they had to read 12 books (8 in the first semester) but they seem to have got into it. Students write a summary of their book, with an introduction, middle section on main characters and plot summary, and their opinion of the book at the end. Now they're familiar with this task, they can expand on the basic structure, for example with timelines or discussion of character development.

Developing fluency in presentations and other speaking activities

Several teachers are encouraging students to develop fluency through repeating a speaking task several times, with progressively less support from notes. In ICS, Jay has students talk first from their written summary, then from their notes, then off the top of their heads

Ian has students do their presentations in his IDS class twice, the first time with notes and then he takes the notes away: the first time is a chance to practice and "then you fly"!

In her BDS class, Stacey took photos of each of the presenters so they could see for themselves whether they were reading from their notes or engaging with their listeners.

Greg teaches students how to look and talk when they do presentations. They use note-cards to get away from having big sheets of papers to hold.

Mike tells students to put their notes down and take their hands away so they don't hold them. That helps them sit back, and talk to/interact with their partner, not read, when

presenting.

Presentation formats

Stacey and Ian have students do poster presentations with posters on the wall, aircon unit, blackboard, etc. Greg has students presenting in groups of three, sitting at a table. Mike does 'mini-presentations' most weeks, as well as full poster presentations in small groups at the end of projects. In mini-presentations, students give quick (5 minute-ish) presentations on their ideas about the topic in pairs with minimal preparation.

Note-taking

We generally agreed on the importance of good note-taking for being able to talk, not read, and for developing fluency. Note-taking is important in Jay's ICS: students take notes both on their reading and when listening to other students talking about the books they read. Jay stresses making notes with key words not in sentences.

Zorana like Jay, stresses words, not sentences and has students start by breaking sentences up into words, before looking at e.g.s of note-taking on whole texts.

Stacey said she had tried doing note-taking in Japanese and realized how difficult it is. So she emphasizes the value of students going over their notes again, after they have made them, to reorganise them.

Glimpses of curriculum (dis-) connections

Greg noted the importance of students becoming able to read and find main points in a text in the ICS class before moving up to BDS.

Mike explained that this progression is only true for some students. BDS – as well as ICS and IDS - have both 1st and 2nd year students. Half or more of students in BDS will likely be first years who haven't been through ICS. And, although some 2nd year students will have come 'up' from ICS, other 2nd years will not have made this progression. Instead, they may have:

- taken a Reading class instead of a Listening and Speaking class in their first year and so come straight into Listening and Speaking at the BDS level in their second year; or
- have been in BDS in their 1st year and stayed at that level in the 2nd year; or even, have been in IDS in their 1st year and have 'dropped down' to BDS in their 2nd year.

The moves that students actually make between 1st and 2nd year will depend on whether their TOEIC score rises or falls enough to put them in a different level (and for some students on a choice between taking Reading and Listening & Speaking classes).

Yuri explained that three of her 2nd year students had not only stayed at ICS level but chosen her ICS class for the second year running.

Ian said that he thought the TOEIC bands produced classes of students that were within acceptable limits for a class. Greg smiled ruefully: This year, his Advanced class was so timid that on the first day he thought that he had gone into the wrong room and was teaching a class of much lower level by mistake.

Saeko explained that most of the Reading classes – called regular Reading – are not leveled at all so she has students with TOEIC above 800 and below 300 in the same class!

Mike suggested there were two ways of thinking about curriculum, and its levels and progressions. One is to assume that the skills, processes and goals at each level are completely different: students 'complete' one level and then move on to the next level of

different tasks and objectives. The second is to assume that there needs to be recycling and reinforcing of the same skills and processes throughout the levels with objectives becoming more challenging but not changing completely between levels. The second version seems to make sense especially in Chuo Law.

Zorana added that she thought that all students would have good note-taking skills by their 3rd year, but they didn't – so there's still the need to recap note-taking at this stage, though moving at a faster pace than in 1st and 2nd year classes. So it's better to have a curriculum that reviews and recycles.

Stacey's student do Language Learning History presentations so she gets insights from 1st year students into their high school English study experiences, and from 2nd year students into their 1st year English classes.

'Passports' and portfolios

Mike floated the idea of some kind of 'passport' (the idea comes from the European language Portfolio but 'passport' is not quite the right image). In this, students would record, perhaps twice a semester, their view of what they had done in each English class (activities, cycles, skills, etc) and how their English had developed. Teachers could look at this (or keep it during the course and return it at the end) to get a sense of what students had done in their English classes in previous years, and what they were doing in their other English classes that year.

Susan suggested that LLHs, of the kind Stacey does, could be incorporated into a mini-portfolio that would help other teachers learn about what the students had done previously.

Language Learning Histories

Stacey already has students make a mini-portfolio of the LLH work (note-taking, presentations, goals, reflections, group feedback). Doing these LLHs helps the students bond as a group.