

Improving Discussion Skills

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The discussion centred largely on skills. The main skills talked about were: discussion skills, presentation skills, feedback skills and research skills.

- Ellen talked about getting students to lead a discussion based on a picture with no text and to keep it going. For example, a student would begin with a picture of an apple and after asking obvious questions like “Do you like apples?” and “How often do you eat apples?” would be encouraged to branch out with questions such as, “Do you come from an apple producing area?” and “What are the dangers of genetically modified apples?” There was a brief debate about how far students should digress, with Ellen saying that she felt it was okay if the students left the original topic behind and Rob saying he thought it was important to return to the original topic. Ellen said she usually does this activity with groups of four or five.
- The discussion on research skills began with a look at ‘Bloom’s Taxonomy to Graduate-Level Writing’. This shows how to categorize students in terms of their level of sophistication in combining ideas from different texts with the most basic level being indiscriminate copying. It was agreed that students need help to move beyond this and both Ellen and Ian said they use a system whereby students begin by highlighting main ideas, follow this by paraphrasing the main ideas on an adjacent page, then write the main ideas in note form. Finally students should write a research question to guide them in their next choice of article. Rob mentioned that he has had some success with getting students to use mind maps to combine ideas from different texts. A question that was not really resolved however, was how best to get students to produce an original presentation plan and evolve it as their reading progresses.

NOTE: After reading the first draft of this summary, Ellen added the following comments about the value of paraphrasing as opposed to copying main ideas in the first step: ‘I don’t like to encourage them to copy. They do that well enough on their own. Paraphrasing takes more effort, but it’s worth it and really cuts down on the plagiarising (unintentional because they honestly have never thought that copying wasn’t the goal, as well as intentional -- which I find is mostly done out of laziness). So for me, I usually go from paraphrasing to note-taking to summarizing. After they get used to paraphrasing, I skip that and go directly to note-taking.’

- The discussion of research skills lead Zorana to suggest the creation of some kind of manual which would contain useful materials for achieving the teaching of things such as making key point notes. It was generally agreed that this was a good idea and that simplified articles should be a key part of the manual. Some things that could usefully be included in the manual are materials for teaching: brain-storming, note-taking, summarizing, making research questions and source citation. It was mentioned that skills could be included in the entry and exit goals to provide more detailed guidance for teachers.
- On the topic of simplified articles it was generally agreed that the best success with having students research topics comes with carefully selected simplified articles. There was also a consensus that students ought to conduct their research through English language sources. This lead to the inevitable conclusion that the development of the taught-in-English web site with more topics and more simplified articles would be the single thing that would most help with the teaching of research skills. There was some discussion of suitable existing sources and Wikipedia was mentioned (though we agreed it’s far from ideal) along with the new Japan Times Junior, which nobody knew much

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about. We wondered whether there might be other news sites that have already been graded for non-native speakers. Ian mentioned that it would be useful to have a computer in the classroom with a projector so students could be shown directly how to find relevant websites, though lack of internet access in the classrooms may hamper this. We agreed that, although choice can be motivating, students would mostly prefer to be told which graded sources to use rather than be given a wider choice with less guidance and a higher degree of potential difficulty.

- There was a brief discussion of grading. Everyone who teaches this course does group presentations and includes those in their final grade. Class work is also a common feature of grading. Some teachers have student produce a language log detailing their self study and collect them and grade them. Ellen said she plans to introduce a group speaking test for the first time this year.
- A couple of miscellaneous points. People mentioned a video that is available with past presentations from classes at Chuo and that this could be used as a model for the students. Finally we agreed that the discussion had been stimulating, but the more we discuss, the less confidence we have in what we are doing!

With thanks to those involved in the discussion, and to Andy for stressing Zorana's name on the first syllable as her countrymen and women do.