

# The Value of Discussion in the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language

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Few teachers of English as a foreign language will gainsay the value of discussion sessions as a means of enabling students to attain fluency of expression. The role of the tutor, however, in such an activity tends to be misunderstood and very often abused. This paper is an attempt to define and determine the teacher's role in conducting discussion sessions with groups of advanced students of English who are normally conversant with the language and wish to achieve a high degree of fluency.

The discussion session tends to be used as a soft option where the tutor can safely depart from the rigorous demands of a language lesson and ease the pressure a little by withdrawing to the background and allowing the students to engage in a free-for-all debate on a controversial topic of his choice. This line of procedure tends to find support among teachers who would argue that the inhibiting presence of the teacher is eliminated and the students are thus free to give vent to their feelings. They would further argue, with some justification, that such discussions enable the students to establish a kind of camaraderie through the medium of argument for it is here that students of various nationalities are given the opportunity of 'tuning in'.

Nevertheless, if one were to weigh the discussion session in terms of its pedagogical value the result would not be as rewarding as some teachers suppose. There are in fact many reasons for this. The teacher's role indeed, seems to waver between two extremes. On the one hand, there is the strong temptation for the tutor concerned to intervene which is prompted by the feeling that he ought to assert himself and justify his existence. Such intervention usually takes the form of disagreement with the argument put forward, the questioning of facts presented, or on the spot correction of the speaker's errors in grammar and pronunciation. There is a danger too of the tutor's channelling the discussion to his own area of experience thereby monopolizing the conversation. All this points to subtle and probably unintentional ways of silencing

the student who has been bold enough to venture a comment or two. On the other hand, a tacit policy of non-intervention on the tutor's part often tends to end in a heated discussion during which the tutor himself is forced into the role of helpless bystander in the proceedings. Given such a situation it would now be opportune to reconsider the tutor's actual role during the discussion session.<sup>1</sup>

The main difficulty here for the tutor concerned is that of allowing the students sufficient latitude to use the language for their own purposes while at the same time keeping the discussion within the constraints of the lesson. The tutor's problem, in other words, is that of controlling spontaneity. I should now like to offer the following suggestions which may help the tutor concerned to overcome this difficulty.

First, it should be made clear from the outset that the tutor who decides to hold a discussion session with an intermediate or advanced group of foreign students should not be primarily concerned with the ideas expressed but with the expression of ideas, particularly since the discussion itself can be a useful medium for the teaching of contemporary English.

Secondly, a convenient way in which the tutor

**The tutor as helpless bystander, or overbearing participant**

**The problem of controlling spontaneity**



can control spontaneity is by 'exerting a kind of 'remote control'. That is, he must allow sufficient time for the discussion to take place with the minimum of intervention on his part while at the same time devoting part of his time to a 'follow-up'. Ideally, two normal language sessions should be allotted to this activity – roughly three quarters of the time at one's disposal to the discussion proper and the remaining quarter to the follow-up.

The 'follow-up': this from the tutor's point of view should be of the first importance for it is here that the tutor should deal effectively with individual and general lapses such as language transfer, ignorance of rule restrictions, overgeneralization of rules, spelling pronunciations, cognate pronunciations and other systematic errors made by foreign learners at this stage.<sup>2</sup> This, of course, presupposes constant note taking on the tutor's part throughout the discussion. The 'follow-up' provides an excellent opportunity for the tutor to list and discuss key words and phrases directly connected with the topic in question which are not necessarily restricted to the passage. The purpose here would be that of developing the students' vocabulary since most students at this level normally tend to play safe and avoid taking risks.

The third and last suggestion I wish to make concerns the actual material for discussion. It may prove difficult to set the discussion in motion especially if the tutor is confronted with a somewhat unresponsive class. Perhaps the best way to begin in such cases is to provide handouts containing deliberately provocative material. The response is usually immediate and it saves the bother of having to nudge the shy or reluctant student; it also serves as a common referent during the discussion. Useful

material could be culled from the newspapers in the form, say, of an irate letter to the editor on the subject of violence on television. Other suitable source material are *Argument* by Alan Harris and Gerald Gurrey or L. P. Alexander's *For and Against* which could serve as a text.<sup>3</sup> The latter book contains short, informal essays on controversial topics and purposely designed, because of the extremist view they represent, to spark off a discussion.

It is hoped that these suggestions and observations will be valuable to those teachers who are keen on holding discussion sessions with their students as part of a language teaching programme. These considerations, I am convinced, should lead to the successful imparting of communicative competence without undermining confidence in communication.

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1. The role of the teacher in a formal debate has been discussed by Hugh Leong in 'The Debate: A Means of Eliciting Semi-Spontaneous Communication in the TELF Classroom' *ELT*, 1980.
  2. For a systematic treatment of such errors and their classification see Marina K. Burt, 'Error Analysis in the Adult EFL classroom', in J.E. Alatis and R. Crymes (eds.) 'The Human Factor' in ESL, *TESOL*, 1977. For a full discussion see L. Selinker, 'Interlanguage', *JRAL*, X, 3, 1972; J. Richards 'Error Analysis and Second Language Strategies' in *Language Sciences*, 17, 1971 and S. Pit Corder, 'Error Analysis' in J.P.B. Allen and S. Pit Corder (eds.) *The Edinburgh Course in Applied Linguistics*, Vol. 3, Oxford University Press, 1974.
  3. L.G. Alexander, *For and Against*, Longman, 1968 and A. Harris and Gerald Gurney, *Argument*, Cambridge, 1969.