Teaching Group Discussions for Employability: From Needs Analysis to Course Design

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ABSTRACT

Group discussion is a communicative event where participants share their ideas on a given topic for various purposes. The topics may be related to academic concepts, social or workplace issues based on where the discussion is taking place and who is participating in it. Whatever may be the topic of discussion, participants are expected to share their views in a cooperative manner using appropriate language. Though some studies attempted teaching group discussion skills in academic settings, there appears to be less attention given to group discussion instruction for employment. While employers view group discussion as an essential component in the selection process, the incidence of many candidates getting eliminated at the group discussion stage itself points to the fact that the existing practices to teach group discussions are not helping the participants to perform efficiently. This paper is an attempt in making some modest contribution to this gap identified. The purpose of this paper is to shed light on how a course on group discussion can be designed to develop employability skills in tertiary level students.

Key words: Group Discussions, Sociocultural Theory, ESL, Needs Analysis, Employability

INTRODUCTION

Everyday communication commonly takes place in groups, whether in workplace or at home. In workplaces, most of the complex decisions are apparently made through discussions. It is also customary for workplaces to hold discussions for planning tasks, sharing responsibilities and solving problems. In these Group

Discussions (GDs) and other work related tasks the employee is expected to behave as a team worker with good communication skills in English. Therefore in the process of recruitment, the employers conduct GDs to assess the language and team playing skills of a job seeker. In order for job aspirants to be successful in recruitments it is important for them to possess the skills the employers look for. Making students job-ready in terms of communication, in the Indian context, is deemed to be one of the responsibilities of English teachers at the tertiary level. Therefore, it becomes imperative for English teachers to adequately prepare students to confidently tackle assessing processes of recruitment as well as communication related workplace challenges after joining the service.

This paper is a modest attempt in reporting a work-in-progress research on teaching group discussion skills to undergraduate students with a view to preparing them for one of the components of recruitment process. It is, therefore, important to understand how the concept of group discussion is understood in the academia and the industry. In order to understand academic perspective, a review on teaching GDs was done. To understand employers' perspective, a needs analysis was conducted with a few recruiters. Based on the findings of the review and needs analysis, a course was designed to teach group discussion skills, which is informed by the principles of socio-cultural theory.

GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Group discussion is a communicative event in which participants share their ideas on a given topic in a cooperative manner for different purposes. While sharing their opinions, participants may agree, disagree, and negotiate meaning among themselves. During this process the participants need to explore different sides of an issue, express their points of view and support and counter different opinions by bringing appropriate evidences to reach a logical conclusion on the topic of discussion.

Owing to the importance of GDs in professional environments, jobseekers are expected to possess the skills required for the efficient participation in GDs to get employment. Su Pinnell (1984) observes that "group discussion is not a simple collection of listening and speaking skills; it is a dynamic event which requires participants to orchestrate a number of language skills, all used simultaneously" (p 249). And he further states that "being successful in group discussions requires using both knowledge of the topic and of social situations to determine what to say, how to say it, when to say it, to whom to address it, and when not to say it" (p 249). Many students fail to perform effectively in GDs in spite of being proficient in language and well-informed about the topic of discussion.

There appears to be a little research on teaching GDs in general and on teaching GDs for recruitment in particular. This claim is asserted by Jones (1999), "since the advent of EAP and ESP as approaches distinct from general English, relatively little research appears to have been published on the oral skills required in professional and academic discussions" (p.243). Su Pinnell (1984) gives an account of goals of discussions and skills used in discussion through interaction analysis. Maesin *et al* (2012) observe the effect of explicit language instruction on group discussion performance. Lam and Wong (2000) explore the effects of strategy training on developing discussion skills in ESL classroom. Flowerdew (1998), Jones (1999) and others explore the cultural perspectives and cross-cultural ideas in academic discussions.

TEACHING GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Group discussion seems to have received emphasis in English classrooms as early as 1980s with the advent of Communicative language teaching. In order to promote authentic interaction among students, different tasks such as pair work and group work have been used as techniques by the teacher. Su Pinnell (1984) observes that when the paper and pencil measures of achievement were predominant (Silberman, 1970; Goodlad, 1984), language experts (Brotton, 1970; Pradle, 1982) suggested that part of assessing learning should include observing how well students are able to discuss the content of a particular topic. Though this argument is related to assessment, it is an obvious fact that if something is a part of assessment it would surely find its way into instruction.

Research related to teaching GD appears to have focused on three perspectives i.e. (a) Teaching the language phrases useful in GD (for example Maesin, Mansor, Nayan, Osman & Shafie, 2012; Lam, 1995; Hargreaves & Fletcher, 1981), (b) Strategy Training (Lam, 1995; Lam & Wong, 2000; Bejarano *et al,* 1997) and (c) Cultural perspectives and cross-cultural aspects in GDs (Jones, 1999; de Moraes Garcez, 1993 and Flowerdew, 1998).

(a) Teaching language phrases useful in group discussions

During the late 1970s and early 1980s (around the same time when functional and formulaic language instruction started in ESP) Group Discussion instruction made its entry into English classrooms. But the reluctance of students to participate in such discussions and negative experiences of teachers who attempted it subdued the focus on instruction of GD skills (Green, Christopher, Lam, 1997). But since the GDs are a part of assessment, teachers resorted to introducing "students to a set of formulaic phrases and expressions for use in academic discussions" (Lam,

1995). Some Teachers adopted the use of structured and guided discussions, which provided a framework for students (Wallace, 1980; Hargreaves & Fletcher, 1981; Heyworth, 1984; Ur, 1981). This kind of guided approach may be of some help to some students in terms of language and a pre-set framework to fall back on. However, in the long run this will not make the student self-sufficient and may lead to boredom at some point due to the repeated practice of frameworks in non-heuristic approach.

(b) Strategy Training for discussion skills

During GDs, at different phases, participants employ different strategies to initiate, interrupt, agree, disagree and conclude. Strategies used by participants who performed effectively in GD may be adopted by others in order to do well in the discussions. There has been much research on use of strategy training in teaching and learning vocabulary, receptive skills like reading and listening comprehension (Lam, 2000). Relatively little research was reported on productive skills, such as speaking and writing. One significant study on use of strategy training in interactive speaking was done by Bejarano *et al* (1997).

A study conducted by Lam and Wong (1997) used the strategy training approach to instruction of discussion skills and found an increase in incidents of strategy use by students in discussions though the effectiveness of strategy use was found to be minimal. Their study suggested a lack of peer help and co-operation among participants as a possible reason for the ineffective strategy use.

(c) Cultural perspectives and cross cultural aspects in group discussions

When students from different cultural backgrounds participate in a discussion, their perceptions of interactive norms and assumed roles in communicative events specific to their respective cultures may differ from one another. This difference in cultural perspectives and other aspects of culture may affect the performances of participants. These aspects of culture in language learning with a specific reference to GDs were explored by many researchers like Flowerdew (1998), Jones (1999) and Gumprez (1990). These studies mainly focused on the cultural differences, intercultural communication, cross cultural apprehension faced by non-native speakers of English during discussions in international classrooms in universities. Some of the essential problems faced by non-native speakers during discussions with native speakers were found to include fear of entering a discussion or using inappropriate strategies while entering a discussion (Micheau & Billmyer, 1987), failing to attain the 'common ground' (Brown & Levison, 1987), and lack of cooperation or empathy from native speakers (Jones, 1999).

Studies in western contexts suggest that teachers should raise cross-cultural awareness among students, sensitize non-native learners to the nature of classroom activities in English speaking universities and train students in interactional skills required for active participation in discussions (Jones, 1999; de Moraes Garcez, 1993; Jones, Bell, Bush, Carton, Galloway, 1993). In Indian context, Vishwanathan (2014) suggested some inclusive measures to address the non-participation of Indian students in GDs in ESL classrooms. Similarly, Chakravarthy (2017) tracked the progress of learners in terms of non-verbal parameters and highlighted the importance of feedback immediately after GD.

These three trends in GD instruction can be mapped to three major theories of second language learning. While teaching formulaic phrases corresponds to behaviouristic view that looks at language learning as habit formation, strategy training is rooted in cognitive approach which emphasises conscious thinking about one's own learning and thereby improving the way one learns. Instruction focusing on cultural aspects is related to sociocultural approach which stresses the meaningful interaction to promote language learning.

When we consider teaching GDs at tertiary level especially for employment, the focus needs to go beyond linguistic features to include cooperation, managing emotions, body language etc. In addition to this, teaching GDs for employment should include the learner needs i.e. what they don't have now (lacks) and what they are expected to have by recruiters (needs). Furthermore, it is also important to consider learning context that provides opportunities for learners to engage themselves in meaningful practice.

NEEDS ANALYSIS ON GROUP DISCUSSIONS FOR EMPLOYABILITY

According to Dudley-Evans & St John (1998), needs analysis is carried out to establish *what* and *how* of a course. They define needs as 'identifiable elements in students' target situations' i.e. in this case the recruitment situations. In general practice needs analysis starts from looking at available literature and then consulting people who are part of the target situation. But in this context, published literature available on GDs for recruitments appears to be scarce. The aspiring students generally have very limited exposure to the target situation (recruitment). All that they might know is what they gather from their seniors and other sources. Therefore, there arises a need for consulting recruiters to know their expectations about the candidates' performance in GDs and to gain an insider's perspective to the target situation needs.

In order to carry out needs analysis, six HR personnel from three different companies were interviewed. These interviews were semi-structured and included

questions that focused on the following aspects:

a.   How are GDs conducted for recruitments?

b.   What are the skills expected to be possessed by the participants?

c.   What are the reasons for failures in GDs?

d.   What kind of rubrics (if any) do they use while assessing candidates' performance in GDs?

Interviews with recruiters revealed that GDs conducted for recruitments may vary in terms of topics given for discussion but the objective is to select candidates who have the attributes required to work in teams. Participants are expected to demonstrate their skills as team players and express their views on the topic in a coherent manner. Though there are no standard rubrics to gauge the performance of the candidates, the recruiters indicated that they identify good performance in GDs by observing traits such as initiating the discussion with an appropriate point, bringing relevant points to the discussion, handling the contradictions in a cooperative manner and maintaining emotional balance. The recruiters gave some instances of undesirable performance such as initiating the discussion with an irrelevant point, becoming too emotional when countered, and interrupting others without listening.

Having understood what GD is and how it has been taught in the classroom through literature review and having gained insider's perspective from needs analysis, it is necessary to incorporate theoretical underpinnings relevant to GDs in order to develop GD skills.

MEDIATION: REFLECTION, COLLABORATION AND SCAFFOLDING

Since effective participation in GDs calls for the effective use of language and social skills, it is important to engage learners in a meaningful interaction that would provide opportunities to observe and use skills necessary in a GD. Such a meaningful interaction can be better fostered through mediation which is central to sociocultural theory (SCT) (Vygotsky, 1978).

Wertsch (2007) views mediation as human contact with the social world through psychological tools, most important of those being language. Linguistic tools are directed outwards to influence or regulate the mental or social activity of other individuals. They are also inwardly directed with the goal of self-regulation (Harvey, 2011). While linguistic tools directed outwards would help GD participants in influencing each others' thinking and behaviour, linguistic tools directed inwards would help GD participants to self-regulate their emotions, language use and behaviour.

Other-regulation is achieved through 'collaboration' and 'scaffolding'. '*Collaboration'* refers to a situation in which a learner is offered "some interaction with another person in relation to a problem to be solved" (Chaiklin, 2003). '*Scaffolding'* refers to any form of adult-child (expert-novice) assisted performance that 'enables a child or novice to solve a problem or carry out a task or achieve a goal which would be beyond his unassisted efforts' (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). Collaboration plays an important role in GDs as participants are required to support one another to arrive at a consensus/make a decision/find a solution. In order to develop collaborative traits in GD participants, it is important that the teacher provide necessary scaffolding wherever required.

Self-regulation is achieved through 'reflection' which is not just being thoughtful but is an intellectual and affective activity through which individuals create and clarify meaning through experience resulting in a changed conceptual perspective (Dewey,1933; Boyd & Fales,1983; Boud *et al,*1985). In order to cultivate self-regulating behaviour, it is necessary for students to develop reflective abilities while preparing for GDs. Such practice would gradually make them self-regulate their own behaviour in GDs.

TEACHING GROUP DISCUSSIONS USING SCT

Since group discussions are socially situated activities, sociocultural theory is found to be suitable to develop skills required for effective participation in GDs. Therefore, a course on GD skills for employability was designed incorporating principles of sociocultural theory: reflection, collaboration and scaffolding. Course design followed a functional approach based on the findings of needs analysis. Functions such as initiating, giving opinions, (dis)agreeing concluding were included along with the resources on contemporary topics for GDs with a view to engaging students in pair and group tasks to prepare for GDs and participate in GDs during the classroom instruction. In classroom, the teacher facilitates the learning experience of the students by raising their awareness on functions of GDs, providing inputs during preparation and feedback after they participate in GDs (scaffolding).

Given the space and scope of the present paper, only a sample lesson on expressing opinions in GDs is presented to illustrate the nature of the course designed. The contents of the course are delivered in terms of presentation, practice and production. The tasks used in the class are given under each stage.

PRESENTATION

In the presentation stage, the teacher raises the awareness of students on language functions useful in GDs and provides them with resources (texts, videos, websites,

etc.) on specific topics. The following is a sample task in which students are shown a video followed by a whole class discussion. This task is intended to make students understand how opinions are expressed on a topic.

Task

Step 1: Watch the video played to you and observe how the presenter expresses his view.

Step 2: Participate in a whole class discussion to answer the following questions.

How are GM foods made?

How are they different from traditional crops?

What are the advantages and disadvantages of GM food?

What is the view of the presenter in the video about GM foods?

(https://video.search.yahoo.com/search/o?fr=tightropetb&p=GM+foods+video#id=1&vid=eefca12307bd286c327ed6b241de7c1d&action=click)

Practice

In practice stage, students are divided into pairs or groups (collaboration) to prepare for a discussion on the topic using the resources provided by the teacher. They are also supported wherever necessary by the teacher who monitors the practice activity (scaffolding). The following is a sample task intended for making students practise identifying different opinions presented in the source texts and organising their ideas about the topic.

Task

Step 1: Form pairs and read the text provided to you to identify the opinion in it.

Sample Text A

The reason for modifying genetic structure of food crops is to increase the production from the available land resources. Increase in food production is made possible by improving the immunity of the plant and amplifying the produce. The improved immunity not only makes the plants more resistant to pests and diseases but also leads to high quality food production. The higher the production of food implies the greater number of options at the disposal of the end user.

Sample Text B

Cultivators also have to bear the brunt of GM foods. As GM plants produce non-fertile seeds that will not be able to germinate, farmers cannot use them for next crops. As a result, the farmers are compelled to buy the seeds from the company that produces GM seeds. Since the company has the patent on the seeds, farmers cannot buy the seeds elsewhere. Cashing in on this situation the company charges higher prices. In other words, growing GM foods costs a fortune for farmers, which was not the case with traditional farming.

Step 2: Form groups with the pairs that found similar opinions as that of yours and complete the worksheet given below.

Production

In the production stage, a group of students are made to participate in a GD on a given topic and other students play the role of audience. While the students participated in the GD assess their own performance (self-assessment), the rest of the class assesses the participants' performance as their peers (peer-assessment). Finally, the teacher provides feedback and involves students in reflective journal writing. The following is a sample task in which participants for a GD are randomly picked up from different groups formed in practice stage. This task is intended for students to use the awareness gained about the language and social skills required for GDs in the presentation and practice stages.

Task:

Step 1: Form into a group the first 10 students with odd roll numbers in the class and discuss the topic:

Genetically Modified Foods: Boon or Bane?

Step 2: a) Assess your own performance using the rubric provided (for participants).

b) Assess the participants' performance using the rubric provided (for the rest of the class).

c) Reflect on the whole learning experience and write about it in your journal.

Similar to the lesson illustrated above, the course comprises lessons on various functions of group discussions which raise awareness of the students, engage them in practicing the skills through tasks and facilitate the application of skills by making them participate in GDs in class.

CONCLUSION

Group Discussions have a significant role to play both in academic and professional settings apart from their regular role in day to day life. Though there are some studies that contributed to the understanding and conceptualisation of GDs in academics, a scarcity in the available literature on the GDs for recruitments is observed. Previous studies on GDs focused on teaching language phrases, strategy training or cross-cultural aspects and have contributed to the pedagogic practices. Based on the review of existing literature and findings of needs analysis, a course on GD skills for employability was designed using the principles of sociocultural theory. A sample lesson was presented to illustrate the course design. Offering such a course can help learners develop the skills necessary for employment in modern workplaces.

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