

In Praise of Whole-Class Discussion

By Karen Harris

While the use of pair work and group work in classroom teaching is widely advocated these days, especially in language teaching, this article presents a useful perspective on getting students engaged in discussion as part of whole-class teaching in language classes

Current teaching practices tend to put great emphasis on work carried out in pairs or small groups. Whole-class activities are often restricted to the initial presentation of new material (grammatical or lexical) and a final quick feedback session which sometimes exists merely for stylistic reasons, to give the lesson a tidy finish, rather than impart anything of use to the students. In this article, I will argue that whole-class discussion, although currently out of favour, is in fact an interesting, enjoyable and worthwhile practice, which can help facilitate learning in several ways.

I expect that the most obvious argument against the notion of the whole-class discussion will be based around

the issue of Student Talking Time (STT). Detractors will argue that if STT is to be maximized, then pair work is the best possible format: in a class of, say, 10-14, each student will have far less time to express his viewpoint if the format is that of whole-class discussion. Yet this begs the question: why the obsession with maximizing STT in the first place? Surely we can learn better by listening to others, absorbing and reflecting, than by feeling pressurised to speak at every available moment, even when we do not have anything relevant to say?

Whole-class discussion also – at least partially – removes the need for one of the most difficult aspects of a teacher's job: monitoring a speaking activity. Firstly, it is physically impossible

to monitor the entire class simultaneously when they are working in pairs. Secondly, I have often found it to be the case that a pair who appear to have been conversing enthusiastically will dry up and become awkward and embarrassed when the teacher approaches. Neither of these problems feature during a whole-class discussion: a student needn't speak extensively in front of the teacher – and his peers – until he feels comfortable in doing so. Seeing and hearing their more confident peers venture their opinions can inspire and motivate the more reticent ones to formulate their own responses, being gently encouraged, rather than pressurised, to do so.

The lack of pressure is indeed instrumental in my advocacy of this approach. If a student wants to address the whole class, that is fine. If his friend prefers to keep quiet and listen, that is also not a problem. The latter student is not being passive; he is being receptive. He will speak up in his own time when he is ready. This approach allows for the fact that some

students are naturally more quiet and reserved than others, whether due to cultural differences or sheer personality. A weakness of the popular communicative approach is that it fails to recognize this and assumes that every student is an innate extrovert, or that gregariousness can be turned on like a tap.

When I have given my students the option of discussing a topic either in pairs or as a whole class, they have often been in favour of the latter. They enjoy having the opportunity to listen to a whole wealth of ideas

they are separated.

What kinds of subjects are suitable for discussion? While being sensitive to cultural differences, the topics need not be anodyne and banal. If we are to motivate students into offering their opinions, the subject should be one on which they can be reasonably be expected to have opinions. In my Level 2 and 3 ESOL classes we have discussed, among other topics: women soldiers, employment practices, sexism, racism, treatment of asylum seekers and personal freedom. Students – and teachers – can find it deeply rewarding to

produce greater fluency in the long term.

The role of the teacher in all of this is a challenging one. At which point should a student's English be corrected? Should the teacher restrict himself to the role of impartial chair or join in the discussion by offering his own opinions? It can be tempting and students are often very keen to know what the teacher thinks! How can one best pose provocative questions without causing offence? How can a potentially explosive disagreement be defused? How can the teacher ensure that all are given the opportunity to have their say without one student dominating the entire discussion? How can the quieter ones be gently encouraged to offer their ideas without being coerced? If subject knowledge and an analytical mind are desirable qualities in the teacher-as-chair, a sense of diplomacy and fair play is essential.

I am not opposed to pair-and-group-work per se: indeed there are times when these methods are the most dynamic, and not all groups will necessarily respond well to the approach I have just outlined. I am merely suggesting that, given its potential for generating students' interest and more holistic, wider-ranging concept of what education is all about, whole-class discussion need not always be squeezed into a cursory warm-up at the beginning of the lesson or a rushed feedback slot at the end.

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Surely we can learn better by listening to others, absorbing and reflecting, than by feeling pressurized to speak at every available moment, even when we do not have anything relevant to say?

and opinions, particularly in a multicultural class where students often take on active interest in each other's backgrounds. Confident, talkative students enjoy the challenge of speaking in front of a class full of their peers as well as the teacher; quieter students enjoy the chance to listen and reflect without the pressure to respond. They enjoy having the teacher as chair, somebody who can prompt them with interesting, pertinent and provocative questions. Not least, there is the camaraderie that comes about when they are engaged in a task with all of their classmates, rather than the fragmentation that comes when

compare their experiences and the prevalent attitudes both in Britain and in other societies.

Discussion in the classroom is very much about education as the development of ideas and learning more about those with a different set of beliefs – this latter point being especially applicable to multicultural classes. In a reversal of the usual order of priorities in ELT, the subject being debated is the important thing, whereas the language used is simply a means to an end. Unselfconscious, unhindered use of the language – without feeling pressurized to operate within a certain grammatical model or other constraint – is likely to