

# **ACTION RESEARCH REPORT SUMMARY HOW TO IMPROVE STUDENTS' FORMAL DISCUSSION SKILLS THROUGH A SERIES OF PREDISCUSSION ACTIVITIES**

*Course No.: ES941*

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## **Problem Identification**

Speaking is important as a means of social interaction; however, it is often overlooked by teachers of English in local schools. In order to finish the syllabus according to schedule, many teachers tend to dominate the lessons and deliberately spend most of their time in class teaching grammar. Without sufficient practice, students perform badly when it comes to speaking even though they have a sound knowledge of grammar and vocabulary.

There is a need for students to interact with one another in order to encourage language production. Students can contribute more to a speaking activity if content closely related to real life situations is provided. Consequently, we decided to adopt a systematic approach to teach formal discussion skills. We anticipated that our target students would have a fundamental concept of how to present and respond to views in a formal discussion after a series of well-structured prediscussion activities.

## **Experimental Teaching**

We set our target on Secondary Four students as they could be the first group affected by the syllabus change in 1996 when role-playing and discussion activities are incorporated in the Oral Paper in the Hong Kong Certificate in Education Examination. The school we chose was Tang Shiu Kin Victoria Technical School in Wanchai. Most of the students of the school are from Band 2 and the remaining is a mixture of Band 1 and 3. As we assumed that they were not used to formal discussions, we had four major objectives in carrying out the experimental teaching:

- i. To develop language enrichment materials to try out in class;
- ii. To illustrate to students the basic discussion skills they need in a formal discussion;
- iii. To find out to what extent the students can improve their abilities in discussion after language input is provided and a structured prediscussion programme is organized for them;



- iv. To help them overcome any feelings of fear, embarrassment and insecurity which might arise due to a lack of practice.

### *Plan of activities for experimental teaching*

<u>Day One</u>	one lesson
Activity one:	guessing game on a variety of noises for stimulation
Activity two:	questionnaires on how noises affected the students
Activity three:	pair work—a small-scale discussion about noise problems
Activity four:	mini reports on what each pair had discussed
 <u>Day Two</u>	 one lesson
Activity one:	teach basic discussion skills used in a formal discussion
Activity two:	play a video showing a model discussion
Activity three:	expose students to common expressions used in a formal discussion (using flash cards)
 <u>Day three</u>	 double lesson
Activity one:	consolidate students' language skills (sample tape of presentation skills played)
Activity two:	group discussion (students formed groups of 4 or 5)
Activity three:	group reports by group secretaries
Activity four:	feedback from teacher (using flash cards)
Activity five:	prize giving (for encouragement)

### **Overall Evaluation**

We evaluated whether the objectives of our Action Research had been achieved through lesson observation. An "Observation form on students' performance during group discussions" and a "Students' self-evaluation form" were used during and after the lessons. (Please see Appendices 1 & 2).

In general, we found our students co-operative and attentive. Most of them showed enthusiasm and were willing to use English for classroom discussion.

The teaching aids prepared were useful as students used some of the expressions they had learnt during discussions and the video was successful in arousing students' interest. The guessing game and pair discussions also played an important role in preparing the students for the group discussions. In the report session, some students tried to challenge one another.

The students' self-evaluation shows that they enjoyed the discussion and gained more confidence in involving themselves in similar activities.



## Recommendations

1. Audio-visual aids, like videos, audio tapes and flash cards provide a good source of sensory stimulation for language input. Teachers need to be familiar with their use to avoid any unnecessary technical problems.
2. As small classroom space might affect the overall smooth running of the lesson, it is better to conduct discussion activities in larger rooms like the hall or gymnasium. Students will be more enthusiastic about sharing their views if they are allowed to move about more freely.



## Appendix 1

### Observation Form on Students' Performance

Put a tick ( ☐ ) in the space provided to show if a student has performed the following actions:—

1. contributed an idea
2. encouraged others to say something
3. did something else while someone was talking
4. interrupted others so as to state one's own opinions
5. tried to smooth out problems
6. summarized what other people had said
7. refused to talk in English
8. led the discussion
9. asked people to explain what they meant
10. talked about something irrelevant to the topic
11. didn't listen to other people's ideas
12. any other comments



## Appendix 2

### Students' Self Evaluation Forms

*How far have you contributed to the discussion?*

1. Did you enjoy the discussion?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ no \_\_\_\_\_

2. Did you remain silent?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ no \_\_\_\_\_

3. Did you contribute any ideas?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ no \_\_\_\_\_

4. Did you give your classmate a chance to say something?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ no \_\_\_\_\_

5. Did you interrupt anyone?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ no \_\_\_\_\_

6. Did you find the materials for discussion a bit too difficult for you?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ no \_\_\_\_\_

7. Is there any way you could help the discussion to run more smoothly?

—by actively participating in the discussion: \_\_\_\_\_

—by not interrupting? \_\_\_\_\_

—by listening more carefully to others? \_\_\_\_\_

—by encouraging others to contribute? \_\_\_\_\_

8. In what way(s) do you think you have improved after the four lessons on discussions skills?

—you are more willing to talk. \_\_\_\_\_

—you understand the importance of using gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, etc to reinforce your points.

—you are more confident to express ideas and respond to others' opinions.

—others, please specify



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