Nature of Discussion by Japanese University Students: Lack of Argument and Its Features

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Introduction

Recently, in the field of higher education, the effectiveness of active learning is highly regarded. A number of studies have demonstrated how active learning is adequate for better learning in universities (Chickering and Gamson, 1987; Bonwell and Eison, 1991; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991; Prince, 2004; Kuh et al., 2005). The Central Education Council of Japan (2012) submitted a report on “quality change” in university education, which claimed that the ability of problem finding and solving in unexpected situations should be fostered in higher education and to this end, active learning should be focused on.

Active learning is especially facilitated in certain types of courses such as seminars, laboratory courses, practicums and interactive courses including class discussions (The Central Education Council of Japan, 2012). While active learning can take various forms such as active listening and active writing, Kuh et al. (2005) show that students learn more through class discussion than from just listening in class. Pawk and Owens (2011) also verify that discussions encourage active learning. Especially, they say that discussions provide a chance to “reflect on ideas through the perspectives of multiple minds instead of just your own” (p. 338). In other words, discussion is not supposed to be just a chance to present each participant’s opinions. It should be a chance where they should look at one issue from various viewpoints and discuss it critically and multilaterally.

As mentioned above, the ability undergraduate students need to foster is to specify problems and solve them. One of the ways to achieve the goal is using critical thinking (The Central Education Council of Japan, 2012). Discussion can help them develop the critical thinking skill as well. Critical thinking does not mean to criticize others or to have a quarrel. According to Brookfield (2003), critical thinking is “a process of hunting assumptions — discovering what assumptions we and others hold, and then checking to see how much sense those assumptions make” (Chapter 1, “Summary,” para. 2). Critical thinking is, at the same time, a social learning process (Brookfield, 2003). Since noticing the assumptions is “a puzzling and contradictory task, very few of us can get very far doing this on our own” (Brookfield, 2003, Chapter 3, “Critical Thinking is a Social Learning Process, para. 2). That is, discussion is a good place for us to be aware of our assumptions and examine them by rubbing them against other opinions. In this respect, we strongly believe that “good” discussion should be “argumentative” to some extent.

Although discussion is effective for active learning and developing critical thinking skills as stated above, in Japan it is not a popular method of learning yet. Most university students need to show their skills of problem-solving, communication, or collaboration through group discussion when they seek for jobs. Yet, many Japanese students consider themselves poor discussers even in Japanese. A study shows that half of the students attending a career development program answered they were not good at discussion (Yoshida and Fukuda, 2014). Thus, English instructors of universities find it challenging to employ discussion as a teaching method in their classrooms although they know it is a good method. The possible reasons preventing Japanese students in English courses from taking advantage of discussion to learn further are twofold. 1) Japanese culture is not very suited for discussion. Some of the features of Japanese culture are: high-context, harmony, collectivism, and inter-dependency (Okabe, 2001). They are preventing Japanese students from discussing argumentatively with others. 2) Most of the textbooks of English used in Japan do not teach explicitly how to make discussions in English (Kaneko and Kimizuka, 2007). To facilitate students’ good discussion, we need to know the reality of classroom discussion in addition to considering the two features above. Detailed research of actual discussion in a college classroom is needed.

This study was carried out in order to describe college classroom discussions in Japan and specify the features in the discussions that could characterize what was happening.
there. The results of this study may lead the educators to find effective ways to teach the students how to make discussions.

The Study

Participants

In this study, participants were seven EFL students who registered for a third-year English course at a private university in Japan. All of them are native speakers of Japanese. Although it is an advanced level course, the participants’ English proficiency level varies from lower-intermediate to advanced. They are all in Faculty of Arts and major in photography, imaging art, interactive media, design, to manga.

Data Collection

The participants were divided into two small groups. Group 1 has three students, two males and a female, and Group 2 has four, two males and two females. Each group has a thirty minute discussion session which was recorded.

After recording the discussions, all participants were asked to answer questionnaires about their self-evaluation and background information. Then, we interviewed some of the participants to ask about our analysis of the discussions.

Discussion Topic

The discussion topic used in the discussion session was “should university students work part-time?” It was chosen based on their English proficiency, their current interest, and the level of difficulty of the issue.

In order to make good discussions in an EFL classroom, most importantly the topic should suit their proficiency level. There is an advanced-level student in the group who lived in the U.S. during high school. The others’ English proficiency varies, but most of the students are at the pre-intermediate level and they might have difficulty of using abstract words or technical terms spontaneously in English discussion. Certain political issues or topics about science and technology would not be appropriate to the participants. They are, however, university students at the same time. The topic should also satisfy their intellectual curiosity to motivate them. Thus, we did not pick a topic such as “about today’s dinner,” but chose a value-judging type topic.

Pre-discussion Activities

Pre-discussion activities were conducted in two class periods in order to give them examples of a good discussion, make up for their knowledge of vocabularies and phrases that can be used in discussion, and provide background information of the topic. The contents of the pre-discussion activities are as follows.

Day 1: Brainstorming about part-time jobs
Elements of a good discussion
Useful phrases for discussion
Assignment: vocabularies and phrases for the topic

Day 2: Listening and reading about part-time jobs
Showing their opinions briefly
Assignment: preparation for the discussion

Day 3: Discussion Session <a 30-minute discussion>

Students spent sufficient amount of time to prepare themselves for the actual discussions so that their proficiency of English would not be the only source of their performance.

Data Analysis

There are three stages in data analysis. The first stage was for data collection including voice-recording of participants’ discussions, conducting questionnaires, and holding interviews, which were also voice-recorded. Their discussions were transcribed by the authors. After the first examination of their discussions and answers to questionnaires, we asked six participants to come to interviews individually. In the next stage, the authors figured out structures of their discussions and identified some features in them. The purpose of this stage was to have a broader picture of the flow of their whole discussions to see if there is any “argument” and then to have a closer look at the characteristics of their discussions. Our focus of analysis was mainly checking whether their discussion was argumentative or not, based on our belief that in order for discussion to be a more effective method to facilitate their critical thinking, students should organize their discussion so that it consists of “argument”. Our definition of “argument” is based on that of Hitchcock (2002): “An argument is a spoken discourse or written text whose author (the arguer) seeks to persuade an intended audience or
readership (the Other or the Others) to accept a thesis by producing reasons in support of it. In addition to this illocutionary core, an argument possesses a dialectical tier in which the arguer discharges his dialectical obligations” (p. 289). He adds that “dialectical obligations” mean “responses to objections and consideration of alternative positions” (p. 289).

Finally, those features found in the second stage were analyzed more closely to find “categories” in the third stage.

Results

The discussion structure of each group has been identified, which shows that both groups failed to develop their arguments. Then, through the coding procedures, we have found that each discussion had several features which characterized the discussion and also explained how their arguments stayed undeveloped.

Discussion Structures

In Group 1, two out of three students were mainly giving their opinions and answering to each other in this group. The PRO student thought university students should work part-time, and the CON student did not agree. Their argument went round in circles and got nowhere. Underlines 1 and 2 show this student repeated the same argument and did not develop it any more. They kept talking about “buying or borrowing equipment for doing their assignments or creative works.” It depends on each department if they can borrow equipment, so they should have come up with something else as a reason to work, such as social experience or career development.

In addition, although they were supposed to talk about life of university students, as Underline 3 shows, they ended up talking about the situation after graduation. It is assumed that this was because they did not raise another reason to work.

Group 1: Structure of the discussion

Pro: We should work to buy our own art equipment.
Con: (1) We can borrow the equipment from the department.
Pro: We cannot borrow it in our department.
Con: You can buy used equipment from seniors.
Pro: Teachers said we should buy “good” ones.
Con: (2) We can borrow the equipment in our department.
Pro: We need our own equipment (3) when we have jobs after graduation.
Con: We can use the equipment of the office.

While Group 1 stuck to “buying or borrowing art equipment” among the whole discussion, Group 2 talked about various opinions and all the members were able to express their opinions. However, they failed to develop their arguments. Underlines 1 and 2 show repetitive comments and Underline 3 shows emotional reaction. Both sequences of the discussion indicate the argument was not developed any further.

Group 2: Structure of the discussion

S2 Pro: We should work part-time for social experience.
S4 Con: (1) We have to study and see a lot of artwork.
S3 Pro (w/ condition): We should work short period. Need money for making works of art independently.
S1 Pro: We must work part-time for social experience and preparation for future jobs.
S3 (to S4): Too personal.
S4 Con: (2) We have to study and see a lot of artwork.
S1 (to S4): Disagree. We can learn more outside university.
S3 (to S1): (3) I don’t understand what you are saying. (emotional)

S4 was well prepared to talk about her own view, “students must study before working”. However, when S3 challenged S4’s view, S4 just repeated her previous statement word by word. On the other hand, S3 tried very hard to understand other students’ views and challenge others’ opinions, but her English skill was not good enough to understand details of other students’ utterances and she had an emotional reaction.

Features in Undeveloped Arguments

The transcripts of the discussion were carefully reviewed from the perspective of “undeveloped arguments” by the authors and several features were identified. Words in parentheses in the transcripts describe participants’ behavior or attitude.

[Group 1]

1. Playing their parts

In Group 1, each member plays his or her part and never changes it. S1 is a topic presenter. She always starts to discuss some topics and controls the discussion. S2 is a follower. He reacts to the topic that S1 presented, and never starts from him. S3, on the other hand, is a cheerleader. He rarely shows his own opinions. He looks up words in the dictionary and checks if the discussion goes to the right direction. He is more a cheerleader than a participant. Although for a good discussion, members should give opinions from different perspectives to each other, their roles show they fail to do it.
2. Laughing

The second feature is "Laughing." This is the very first part of the discussion. S2 starts his turn by laughter, not by giving his opinion. According to the follow-up interview, at that time, S2 was embarrassed to speak in English and felt awkward among new people.

As Hayakawa (2003) points out, Japanese people often laugh when there is nothing funny. She calls it “meaningless laugh” and classifies it into three types. One of the types is called “laughter for easing tension”. This laughter eases their tension at the beginning of their discussion.

S2: Ha ha ha... (laughter) Should university students work part-time.
S3: Yes.
S1: Yes.

The following utterances also show an example of laughter for easing tension. All the participants laughed for easing tension because S2 could not answer to the previous question from S1 and remained silent. Instead of accusing him of his silence, they laughed all together to maintain the harmony among them. This could also imply that they put more emphasis on keeping harmony than developing their argument.

S2: Yes.
S1: Why?
S2: ... (silence)
All: Ha ha ha (laughter)
S2: Ah because ahhh... mmmm...ah...ah...students hmmm.

3. Use of Japanese

"Use of Japanese" is often observed in the discussion of Group 1. They used Japanese for several reasons. One reason is to check the flow of the discussion.

S3: We were talking about jobs. How is it flowing?
S2: So, they have to work. Why? They need money for things. They buy various stuff.
S1: I said, “Don’t you need money?”
S2: I said that we could borrow things, so we didn’t need money. The point is, “it depends”. What I was trying to say from the beginning is “it depends”.
S3: I didn’t realize you guys were going that far...

In the discussion above, S3, the “cheerleader,” often spoke in Japanese to see if the discussion is going to the right direction. He said, “how is it flowing?” to ask about the content of the discussion. Then, after hearing what the others were talking about, he was surprised and said “I didn’t realize you guys went that far...” It is also interesting that the other two participants did not stop him using Japanese. This could be also because they tried to maintain the harmony. Another reason to use Japanese was to check the vocabulary. In the following utterances, S2 asked S3 how to say something in English, and S3 looked up the word in his electronic dictionary.

Out of 131 total turns, 46 of them were uttered in Japanese. That accounts for 35% of the total. Use of Japanese could intervene their discussion and prevent it from developing further.

S2: Graduation...(laughter)
How do you say "Shushoku" in English?
S3: Shushoku? Shushoku...
S2: Sorry, (to S1)
S3: Shushoku, shushoku, shushoku...(checking the dictionary)
A job. Get a job.

4. Sticking to their own situation

Feature 4 is sticking to their own situation. They often think about the discussion topic from their own circumstances, and cannot leave them. They were talking about buying or borrowing the equipment for study, but the choice actually depends on each department. That is not very good evidence to support their opinion. In S2’s department, interactive media, they can use the equipment in the university, such as video cameras or computers, but in S1’s department, design, they cannot borrow pens or paints. They have to buy them. They should have come up with other evidence to support their views, not just about buying or borrowing the equipment.

S2: Ah, mg ( ) is Interactive media.
But...ah...need...so...I need...subject office? ( ) subject office rental video camera and more. I don’t pay money. I don’t buy acryl pen...
S1: You don’t use ... but I need conse... goods.

subject office=department office
acryl paint=acrylic paints

[Group 2]

We found two features in the undeveloped arguments of Group 2: gap among participants (number of utterances, English level, attitude) and lack of critical thinking.
1. Gap among participants
   1) Number of utterances
      There are some gaps among the participants of Group 2. One of the gaps is the ratio of utterances. While the ratio of S1’s utterances (based on the number of words uttered) was 58% of the total, S2, on the other hand, talked only 4%. The other two members’ number of utterances are between S1’s and S2’s. S1 talks more than half of the discussion. S1 in this discussion is considered as a dominant talker. According to Howard (2015), only 30% of all students attending a class ever speak up in a college classroom. This was observed even in discussions in small groups. Howard says that there is some kind of “love and hate relationship” between dominant talkers and other students. That is, other students feel “hate” toward dominant talkers because they are talking too much. At the same time, they feel “love” to them because they do not have to speak in class and feel safe.
      We also observed some kind of tense between a dominant talker (S1) and non-dominant talkers in this group.

S1: How about you? You didn’t say anything after your opinion. Are you have any argument to other people?
S2: Me?
S1: Yeah.
S2: My major is...
S1: Do you have any argument? Do you have any things to say about someone...
S2: Ah, ah. Yes, yes.
S1: Do you have anything to say? That’s all? Your opinion?
S2: Yes, I don’t think change that question. Yes.
S1: How about... Do you have anything to say to other people, like I disagree to your opinion, or I’m agree to your opinion.
S2: Oh, it is yes. I...

This example shows tense between S1 and S2. As mentioned above, S2 talked only 4 percent in the whole discussion. S1 seems to accuse S2 of not contributing to the discussion. S1 pushed S2 to speak up so hard that he didn’t let him speak.

According to the follow-up interview, S1 was eager to conclude the discussion as a leader, and he wanted S2 to be more co-operative. S2 was quiet, but not actually a poor student of English. He rather is a good at English written exams. S2’s modest personality could influence his utterances.

2) Attitudes and English proficiency
   Another gap among participants was about their attitudes and the level of English. S3 showed her own view at first. In response, S1 started to clarify her argument and ask questions. S3 did not understand him quite well, and could not answer his questions. As a result, she seemed intimidated and reacted emotionally. This example shows the gap of attitudes and English proficiency between S1 and S3.

S3: Expensive. Because, but, my university, uh... School expensive... expensive? My parents, but I’m very, uh... my challenge is myself, I want to and...
S1: So you mean, the, the tools of photography is very expensive, and parents are feed you by their money, but it’s not matured... it is not a good way to mature yourself? So some students have to, work at part-time job, have own money and, and useful your learning?
S3: Umm...
S1: This, free from this? So to work part-time jobs and feed yourself by own? Like buy expensive tools by yourself? It’s more matured. Matured? You want to say?
S3: Sorry, no understand (emotional). Simple, very simple talk... I talk. And my artwork is my, my work, uh, I make, uh...

2. Lack of critical thinking
   Another feature of Group 2 is lack of critical thinking. S4 was well prepared to talk about her own view; that is, “students must study before working”. However, when S3 challenged S4’s view, S4 just repeated her previous statement word by word. She could not refute the counterargument. This shows she did prepare her own opinion, but did not prepare for evidence to support it more strongly in case others showed counterarguments. If she had the ability of critical thinking, she could have thought of other strong evidence to support her view.

S4: But we should learn a lot as a university everything. For example, watching the movies, reading the books, they can do that our heart is very rich. We are learning to art. So we should feel every art. It is more important than a part-time job. That’s all.
S3: Excuse me. Excuse me, sorry... This, this, your story. It is your story. Not students, not students...
S4: No, but we should learn a lot as a university everything.
S3: For example, watching the movies, reading the books they can do that our heart is very rich.
Discussion

The detailed features explained in the previous section clearly showed what was happening in Japanese students’ discussions. As a whole, these features allowed for a claim that our participants’ discussion lacked argument. To identify what are the causes of these features and how we could prevent them, the features were categorized into four: personality, English level, limited perspective, and culture.

Categories of students’ undeveloped discussions

*Personality*: playing their parts, gap among participants

*English level*: use of Japanese, playing their parts, gap among participants

*Limited perspective*: sticking to their own situation, lack of critical thinking

*Culture*: laughing, use of Japanese, lack of critical thinking

1. **Personality**

Features of playing their parts and gap among participants are categorized in personality because these features are mainly derived from participants’ own personalities. For example, there was a participant who was almost always leading the discussion. We could assume that this participant has rather positive personality to express her opinions to others. In fact, it was observed by their teacher that this participant rarely hesitated to speak up in classes. On the other hand, there was a participant who was almost always following the leader. It can be speculated that this participant is comparatively shy and feels comfortable with reacting to what others say rather than starting with his own views.

Gap among participants was also categorized in personality because the authors consider that especially the gap between the participant who dominated the discussion and the participant who could not react very well to others and showed some emotional reaction was due to the difference of their personalities. The dominant participant actually answered in the interview that he felt eager to show good performance because of being voice-recorded. This participant was rather active and sometimes assertive according to their teacher. In contrast, the other participant was very serious about every action she took. She did not intend to make “good performance”. She rather focused on finding her own words in her and express them thoroughly.

It seems that there is nothing teachers could do about their personalities. However, there are some possible measures they could take. For example, instead of having students make groups, teachers could manipulate grouping of the students. In doing so, they should consider students’ personalities as much as possible so that a student who is too shy to make discussion will not join a group which has a very strong and dominant talker. On a positive note, the participant who showed an emotional reaction later told their teacher that she appreciated such an experience to express their ideas in English so intensely. Such an experience in English courses could have some influence even on their personalities.

2. **English level**

Use of Japanese, playing their parts, and gap among participants are features in the category of English level as it must be admitted that these features are largely influenced by each participant’s level of English. When they could not construct English sentences very well, they easily depended on using Japanese to avoid halting their discussion. Although enough amount of time was spent for vocabulary building and brainstorming before discussions, a few participants found it still difficult to use only English during the whole discussion.

Also, participants’ playing their parts such as Topic presenter, Follower, or Cheerleader could stem from their different English levels. Obviously, the participant who was Topic presenter was the strongest English learner. One of the roles of Cheerleader was to look up some words in the dictionary for other participants, not for themselves.

Gap among participants in terms of their contribution was due to gap of their English levels as well. The participant who mostly dominated the discussion had some experience of staying abroad and had confidence in his English. On the other hand, according to the interview, the participant who showed an emotional reaction could not study English so much as other students in the secondary education, which could be causing her low proficiency of English.

Again, to avoid such a big gap of English levels among participants, teachers could manipulate grouping of the students. However, by having more sufficient pre-discussion sessions in quality and quantity, this gap would be averted. In this study, pre-discussion session focused on stating their opinions clearly, but it lacked exercises of making arguments and offering counterarguments. Also, when they
integrate discussion in classrooms, teachers have to confirm that students should not use Japanese. It might be acceptable to use Japanese in pre-discussion sessions depending on the level of students, but while they are having discussions, they should concentrate on using only English. We believe that the key might be each participant’s confidence in speaking English. Sufficient amount of preparation and exercises will nurture participants’ confidence, which will trigger their better performance of English.

3. **Limited perspective**

This category includes sticking to their own situation and lack of critical thinking. These features are closely related to each other and are main reasons why our participants could not have good argument in their discussions. As for sticking to their own situation, as explained above, they were only talking about their own situation, which was in this case about their own university. To be argumentative, one should be more objective and consider the topic from diverse perspectives. In our case, since all the participants study in the same faculty of the same university, it might have been difficult to talk about other cases. However, they should have had different positions of students from other universities by scrutinizing the topic more carefully and minutely. The other feature, lack of critical thinking, was especially observed in response to counterargument. Although one participant challenged against a view, the other participant could not offer proper rebattles. Instead, she solely repeated her view. Unfortunately, the one who tried to make counterargument did not go any further and withdrew from the prospective argument. Argumentative discussion will be provoked when participants disagree with each other, provide others with better evidence to support their positions, and convince them. Even when they do not disagree with each other, they could play “devil’s advocate” to develop their discussions more effectively and argumentatively. If our participants had broader and wider perspectives about the topic, they could have succeeded in causing argumentative discussions, which would lead them to fostering their better critical thinking skills. To develop students’ critical thinking, teachers could show them a model of good discussion and make them discuss even in Japanese for getting used to it.

4. **Culture**

The category culture accounts for three features: laughing, use of Japanese, and lack of critical thinking. It was clearly observed that some characteristics of Japanese culture mentioned in the introduction (Okabe, 2003) were sources of these features. Especially, our participants were trying to maintain harmony among themselves by avoiding conflict whereas certain conflict is inevitable in making argument. By laughing together to ease tension to discuss in English, using their common native language, and not disagreeing with each other strongly, our participants kept nice, comfortable harmony in discussion.

Japanese culture being mostly homogenous, educators could at least be aware that their students have tendency to avoid “argument” in their discussion in order to maintain harmony. The authors suggest that using debate could be a good solution for this problem. In debate, each participant is assigned their position, Pro or Con. This is usually not based on their own opinions. Thus, participants might be able to express their opinions without being too considerate about hurting others or provoking some conflict. Yet, we need further research to prove the effectiveness of debate.

**Conclusion**

This research examined the nature of English discussion of Japanese university students. Although it only analyzed those discussions by students of the same art university, we believe that it could bring about a better understanding of discussions of Japanese students as a whole. Our analysis revealed several features of their discussions such as personality, English level, limited perspective, and culture. One of the most important findings was that their discussions failed to have argument, which the authors believe is necessary for facilitating their critical thinking skills. Discussion is a way of teaching not only English as a language but also English as a tool of critical thinking. Discussion requires participants to think critically, and at the same time fosters their critical thinking skills. Also, we discussed that in the process of pre-discussion activities, teachers need to help their students develop their English skills for having discussions in English, and at the same time be accustomed to the form of argument. We believe that it will encourage them to overcome their barriers in personality and culture, while it fosters their critical thinking skills.

Further research is necessary to find how educators could encourage their students to make argumentative
discussion.

References


