

Student-Created Group Discussion: An Oral Assessment Tool

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INTRODUCTION

This article explains the development and use of a student-created group discussion for oral assessment of students in an Asia University “Pre-AUAP” course. This course is a weekly English preparatory course for students planning to attend the Asia University America Program (AUAP). Most students in this course will spend 5 months studying at one of three universities in Washington State, U.S.A. The discussion assessment described here required two 90-minute class sessions, one in which the students, as a group, devised the structure of the discussion, and one for the group discussion itself.

This year’s class was quite small (seven students). They had a wide range of language levels, varying from ACTFL levels novice-mid to intermediate-low (Breiner-Sanders, Lowe, Miles, Swender, 1999). When it came time for an evaluation of the students’ oral proficiency at the end of the first semester, I decided to implement a group discussion format for oral assessment. This seemed to be the most appropriate method for assessing the success of the students’ communicative abilities (Underhill, 1987). The small class size provided me with an opportunity to experiment with this type of test, in just one group of a manageable size.

BENEFITS OF THE PROCESS

I chose to involve the students in the creation of this assessment for several reasons. Allowing the students to work with me as a group, in English, to choose the discussion topic, and to develop the required points of discussion, would provide a useful group speaking exercise. It would afford the students practice with Western-style brainstorming as a method of generating ideas, and result in a discussion assessment design that was acceptable to all members of the group. This would require group collaboration. In addition, being involved in the planning process would give the students a sense of ownership of the assessment that they would not have had with a standardized or teacher-designed test.

ASSESSMENT GOALS

Many of the speaking activities in this course were designed to help the students develop the daily conversation and group discussion skills that will be useful to them when they attend university in the United States. The primary goal for this oral discussion was to

assess the students' achievement of these skills. The focus of the assessment was on the students' ability to communicate their ideas to the group.

CREATING THE STRUCTURE OF THE GROUP DISCUSSION

a) First, we reviewed the Western-style brainstorming techniques that we had used earlier in the semester. I explain brainstorming by giving the students two rules: First, all ideas are good ideas. Second, no editing, either "internally" (in their minds), or "externally" (spoken out loud), until a list of ideas of an acceptable length has been generated. I note that editing too soon limits the creative process necessary for generating ideas.

The students brainstormed a list of potential topics of daily conversation that they might expect to discuss on a university campus in America. I listed these topics on the blackboard. They then chose one of these topics that they all agreed would be relatively easy for them to discuss. The students chose "hobbies." This familiar topic allowed the students to focus most of their energy on communicating their ideas, rather than on unfamiliar subject matter. The simple topic of hobbies was also one that they would be likely to discuss some time during their stay at an American university.

b) We then reviewed the conversation strategies we had practiced in class. First, we reviewed the creation of questions in English. I listed English question words such as: who, what, when, where, etc., on the blackboard, and the definition and use of follow-up questions. I define a follow-up question as "a question about your partner's last answer" (Nattress, in press) (see Appendix A).

We then reviewed what I refer to as "help language," which are phrases used to check for understanding and to ask for clarification during a conversation. I listed these phrases on the board:

- I'm sorry, I don't understand.
- Could you please repeat that?
- Could you explain that?

c) I then gave the students an example of one of my hobbies. I chose a hobby that I knew none of them participated in: scuba diving. I asked them what they would like to know about my hobby, and what questions they could ask to learn more about it. I wrote these questions on the board.

d) Using this list of questions as a reference, the group chose “Eight Main Points” and associated questions that one could ask to learn the basics of most hobbies. They chose these Eight Main Points, written in question form:

1. What is your hobby? Please describe it.
2. Why did you choose this hobby?
3. When do you do your hobby?
4. Where do you do it?
5. With whom do you do your hobby?
6. Is there any special training required?
7. How much money do you spend on your hobby?
8. Would you recommend your hobby to anyone else?

e) Next, the students chose one of their hobbies that they felt they could describe to the group, and answer questions about, in the following week’s class. I listed these on the blackboard.

f) I then explained the details of the discussion: The students must tell the group about their hobby, including all of the Eight Main Points that they had decided upon. I would list the Eight Main Points on the board on the day of the discussion for their reference. They would not be allowed to read their descriptions. They must be prepared to explain their hobby using only the Eight Main Points listed on the board as a reference. They would then answer the questions and follow-up questions of two of their classmates. Each student would be required to ask at least one question and one follow-up question of two different students.

g) I then assigned preparation homework. Students copied the Eight Main Points and the list of student hobbies from the blackboard. The homework was to prepare to tell the class about their hobby by covering these Eight Main Points. They were also to review the hobby list during the next week and think of potential questions about these hobbies that they could ask their classmates.

THE DISCUSSION ASSESSMENT

On the day of the discussion, I placed the students’ chairs in an arc, with my chair at one end. I wrote the Eight Main Points on the blackboard. Students took a copy of the Instruction Handout (see Appendix B), and drew numbers to determine speaking order. I then gave them ten minutes to review, on their own, English questions and help language, and to think of potential questions they could ask their classmates.

Before we began, I explained to the students that there was an advantage to asking their questions early in the discussion. All students must ask questions of two classmates. If they waited until the end of the discussion, they might find it difficult to think of questions for the remaining topics. It was therefore to their advantage to raise their hands early and not wait until the end of the discussion session. Also, those who asked their questions early could then relax and ask no further questions for the rest of the discussion, if they so chose. They could, however, ask additional questions for bonus points.

We then began the discussion with the first student describing his hobby. When he was finished with his explanation, he then chose the students who would ask him questions, in the order in which they raised their hands. I monitored this to make sure that by the end of the discussion, all students had questioned at least two classmates. We continued the discussion in this manner until all of the students had explained their hobbies, answered questions about them, and asked their own questions of other students.

GRADING

As the students spoke, I marked the Grade Sheet (below). Each Main Point, question, or answer was worth up to two points. Eye contact and speaking clearly were also worth up to two points each. I allowed up to four extra points for extra questions asked or answered. I limited the number of extra questions to two for each student, to allow enough time for all students to speak.

Grade Sheet

Name	Discussed 8 Main Points 16 Points	Eye Contact 2 points	Spoke Clearly 2 points	Answered Questions 8 points	Asked Questions 8 points	Bonus Points Questions Asked Max. 4 Points	Bonus Points Questions Answered Max. 4 Points
Student 1							
Student 2							

Score: _____ + Bonus Points: _____ = _____/36

THE CHALLENGE OF A MIXED-LEVEL CLASS

One challenge of using this assessment in this class was the wide range of student ability levels. This made it difficult to set speaking and question asking requirements that were attainable for the lower-level students, yet still a challenge for the higher-level students.

For the most part, students seemed to take the discussion seriously and tried to communicate their ideas at their respective levels. The requirements were open enough, however, that an unmotivated, higher-level student could simply touch on the Eight Main Points, ask two simple questions of two classmates, and thus still meet the requirements of the assessment. Completion of these requirements would, in itself, constitute a success. However, that would not necessarily be an accurate demonstration of a higher-level student's true capabilities.

To cope with this challenge, I used a point range for each of the discussion requirements. The 0-2 point range allowed me to adjust the points given for each requirement. I was able to reward those more motivated students who asked complicated questions, who offered more than the minimum required information, or who conveyed interest in the speaker's responses. I also considered the students' English levels and whether or not they were challenging themselves. A larger point range could be used on the grading sheet for each requirement. The larger the point range, however, the more difficult it is to score such an assessment as it is taking place (Underhill, 1987).

CONCLUSION

Using a panel discussion as an oral assessment tool worked quite well in this class. The basic format explained here could be adapted to fit higher- or lower-level students by varying the discussion requirements and the amount of structure provided to the students. It could also be used for larger classes by dividing the class into groups that each met with their teacher in separate assessment sessions. Involving the students in the development of the discussion material seemed to be beneficial to the students. I will continue to use refined versions of this oral assessment tool in future classes.

References

Breiner-Sanders, K. E., Lowe, P., Jr., Miles, J., Swender, E. (1999). ACTFL proficiency guidelines – speaking. Foreign Language Annals, 33, 13-18.

Nattress, J. (in press). Creating questions: Progressive exercises for building speaking confidence. CELE Journal, 11.

Underhill, N. (1987). Testing spoken language: A handbook of oral testing techniques. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Appendix A

Follow-up Questions Handout

Follow-up Questions

A Follow-up Question is a question about your partner's last answer.

Which conversation do you think is better, Conversation 1, or Conversation 2?

Potential questions for a discussion on Sushi:

1. Do you like sushi? 2. What is your favorite kind of sushi?

These may be good questions to ask your partner about sushi. What if the conversation goes like this:

Conversation 1:

A: Do you like sushi?

B: No, I hate it.

A: What is your favorite kind of sushi?

B: ?????????

Reminder: In real conversation, we think of our questions as we listen. Then, we ask a question about the answers we hear.

Another real conversation might go like this:

Conversation 2:

A: Do you like sushi?

B: No, I hate it.

A: What kind of food do you like?

(or Really? Why don't you like sushi? etc.)

Sample Conversation 2 makes much more sense because the Follow-up Question was about B's last answer.

Appendix B

Student Instructions for Discussion

Pre-Auap Semester End Discussion, July 9, 2002

1. Draw a number to decide who will speak first.
2. Take 10 minutes to think about questions you could ask the other students about their hobbies. Someone else may ask a question you were thinking of, so be prepared to ask a different question. Remember, "Follow-up Questions" must be about the topic of the speakers last answer. Hint: Remember Your Question Words.
3. Begin the discussion. #1 goes first. Tell the group about your hobby. Be sure to talk about the Eight Main Ideas.
4. When #1 is finished talking about his hobby, raise your hand to ask your questions. The speaker will then choose the person to ask questions.
5. Ask a question, then ask a Follow-up Question about the answer you hear.
6. Each person must ask at least 2 questions about 2 students' hobbies. You may ask more questions. The more questions you ask, the more points you get!