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## Improving student involvement in discussions

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## Improving Student Involvement in Discussions

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### ABSTRACT

“Active learning” and communication skills in a context of globalization have been emphasized by MEXT (MEXT, 2012) and activities such as presentation, debate and discussion has become main activities in university speaking classes and have gradually replaced daily conversation activities. However, discussion activities often seem to be not working well in English classes. In this research, some materials, preparations and structure of discussion from our university English classes will be introduced, along with how each activity worked or did not work, what changes would be required, and the students’ reactions toward the activities will be introduced.

Keywords: Active learning communication skills discussion  
involvement willingness to communicate

# Improving Student Involvement in Discussion

Takara K. ALLAL-SUMOTO

## 1. Introduction

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, (MEXT) promoted “Active learning” and communication skills in the context of globalization in 2012, leading to activities such as presentation, debate, and discussion gradually replacing daily conversation activities in university speaking classes as a result. However, discussion activities often seem to not work so well in English classes (Kaneko & Kimizuka, 2007). For instance, the same students may always talk while there are some students who seldom talk, resulting in discussions that cannot be carried on for long and ending without deep discussion. There might be some reasons for this, such as the lack of experience in having discussions both in English and Japanese, language proficiency, and lack of confidence.

The purpose of this research is to identify some weaknesses in the discussion activities and suggest a better approach for teaching discussion. First, some weakness of discussion activities in the Japanese education context will be introduced. Next, some materials, instructions, and structure of discussion of our university English classes will be outlined and the outcomes of the activities will be introduced. Then, some changes we made, how the changes worked or not, and the students’ reactions toward the activities will be introduced. Finally, the effects of the changes and students’ reactions towards the activities will be analyzed.

## 2. Discussion in English Class

According to MEXT (2012), active learning aims to foster the students’ ability to find problems and cooperate to actively work towards solving the problems. Therefore, discussion is one of the effective activities as a part of active learning. Some companies even assign discussions as part of the process of job applications (Tomoyori, 2011). However, discussion activities often seem not to work well in English classes (Mohr & Mohr, 2007).

As some potential reasons for this, Kaneko and Kimizuka (2007) listed: students speaking Japanese; discussions turning into free conversation; and students unable to continue discussions and maintain silence where necessary. Moreover, many teachers often ignore students who are quiet or whose English proficiency is not high (Mohr, & Mohr, 2007). Kaneko and Kimizuka (2007) posited that the students' lack of English speaking proficiency, personal factors, and lack of knowledge about discussion structures may contribute to such situations. Some students may be anxious to participate in discussions because of their English skills and do not feel ready to join discussion. Moreover, some Japanese students seem to be uncomfortable to voice their opinions since they feel that other students might judge who rather than what they said (Yamanoue, 2000).

However, although the lack of discussion experiences and less familiarity with the procedures are often suggested as roots causes in Japan, difficulties of facilitation and teaching discussion have been an issue in other countries as well. Discussion requires a lot of practice to acquire and improve a particular set of skills that a lot of students have not yet developed (Schlick Noe & Johnson, 1999). To conduct a discussion, students need to identify the issues, search and select appropriate information, apply knowledge, convey information, analyze, organize opinions, and make decisions. These skills are critically important for discussions, but may be difficult to develop in the students' second language. The discussion materials and procedures can be simplified, however, and adjusted to the students' level of English proficiency. In turn, a well-organized and active discussion activity could motivate students to speak English, leading improvement of proficiency (Kaneko & Kimizuka, 2008).

Dubin and Olshtain (1988) categorized 10 speaking practice activities; Operations/Transformations, Warm-ups/Relaxers, Information-Centered Tasks, Theater Games, Meditations/Interventions, Group Dynamics Activities, Experiential Tasks, Problem-Solving Tasks, Transferring/Reconstituting Information, and Skill-getting Strategies. Meditations/Interventions is for interacting with others by exchanging opinions or providing consultation for personal difficulties. Problem-Solving Tasks refers to discussion about current issues and trying to find solutions as a group. In the course selected for the research experiment in this paper, students were required to talk about current issues and exchange opinions but not aiming to find solutions.

### 3. Previous Activities: Student-led Discussion

#### 3.1 Materials and procedures for student-led discussion

First, basic information of the students and discussion activities that were conducted until the last year will be introduced. All students in the class were first year students in the Management program. The course entitled 'Discussion and Debate' was taught in the second semester. The individual classes were not organized by the students' English levels.

There were five students in one discussion group and a leader in each group. The leader had to choose an article for the discussion and think of some possible discussion questions, approved by their teacher at least one week before the discussion day. Instructions for choosing an appropriate article were given in the first lesson. The leaders then prepared three comprehension questions, which included one question asking to describe the main idea of the article and two questions about detailed information, as well as three open-ended discussion questions with their own respective answers.

Next, leaders conducted two rounds of discussions in class. The first round was a practice. In the second round of the discussions, participants read and summarized the article, then forming three clarification questions in 20 to 30 mins. After the participants were ready, the leader restarted the discussion. Finally, after discussions, both leaders and participants wrote reflections.

#### 3.2 Weaknesses of the student-led discussion activities

By conducting the student-led discussion activities, some weaknesses of discussion materials and procedures were found. In regards to the preparation, it seemed to be difficult for students to find an appropriate article due to language proficiency. Many students seemed to choose an article based on their interest, but not many students could find an article which were easy to understand and debatable. Teachers thought letting students choose articles may be able to motive students since students can choose an article and discussion topics based on their interest, and also foster media literacy, which is being emphasized these days as a critical capacity. However, it may be true that finding appropriate materials is very difficult even for English teachers. Another issue in preparation was not having enough time to read and comprehend the contents of the article and prepare the discussion. Because of less preparation

time, students may not have had time to actually imagine how the discussion would go with their articles and questions, and what kinds of answers may be provided from their group members. However, this may be one of the most important part of the discussion preparations

Secondly, there were some issues during the discussion. First of all, when leaders asked some questions, participants answered one by one in order and those answers tended to be very short. All participants waited until they were asked questions by leaders and no one jumped in or interrupted. Moreover, when somebody was answering a question, few students reacted to him or her, and even leaders did not react or ask follow-up questions. Even though some phrases that can be used during discussions were taught explicitly to the students, it may be difficult to actually use them during the discussion. Thirdly, some students did not participate the discussion at all. Those students were reading the article and smiling at group members, but did not talk. When the leader asked questions to them, they inclined their heads and did not say anything.

Finally, in regards to the reflections after the discussions, students wrote the same comments every time, such as “I enjoyed the discussion” or “I could not speak because of my English skills”, and they did not mention of what, why, and how to improve. It may be difficult for students to analyze and reflect on how they performed in preparation for and during the discussion in their second language, especially if students did not pay careful attention to each process of the preparation and discussion.

#### 4. Discussion Circles 1

Because of the weaknesses and issues raised, the materials and procedures of the discussion activities was changed and “Discussion Circles 1” was adopted to the new class. In this section basic information of the students, the changes from the previous activity, and new materials will be introduced.

##### 4.1 Materials and procedures of discussion circles 1

Discussion activities called ‘Discussion Circles 1’ were newly adopted for the class ‘Speech and Discussion’, which was held twice a week class for the freshmen’s first semester. This class was also not streamed by students’ English proficiency.

The first change from the previous lesson plan was that the teachers choose the articles that students have already learned about in other English classes, and there were five groups in each class, but all groups used the same reading material on the day. The topics for the discussions were; “Malala’s Diary”, “Ecological Footprint”, “Academic Success”, and “Population growth”. Each article was given to students at least one week before the discussion. Preparation was scheduled to start soon after the materials were taught in other classes.

Another change was that there were five students in one discussion group, with each student assigned different roles such as leader, summarizer, connector, questioner, and vocabulary checker. In terms of the tasks of each role, leaders prepared five discussion questions and in the discussion, leader were tasked in not only asking their own questions, but also the other members’ questions, opinions and follow-up questions, and also giving opening comments such as what they are going to talk about, and closing comments such as their impression of the discussion. The leaders’ task was to help people talk about the article and share their reactions. Secondly, the summarizer read the article carefully and summarized it to find key points, and shared that information during the first part of the discussions. The connector’s task was to connect the article to other similar news or their own experiences and share them in the discussion to broaden the discussion and to deepen the topic. The questioner prepared five discussion questions and asked these questions to their group members.

The preparation of the leader and questioner was the same, but during discussions, the leader led the discussion rather than expressing their own opinions. Lastly, the vocabulary checker checks definitions of difficult or key vocabulary and phrases, and prepared some questions about them, such as “Why is this word repeated many times in this article?” and “What is the definition of this word in this context?” For more support, students were explicitly taught some discourse markers and useful phrases in the first lesson and at the beginning of each discussion lessons. Finally, the members of the discussions were decided based on students’ English proficiency by the teacher and the students worked with the same members every time.

In class, students who have the same role sat together to share what questions or preparation they did, and what were the difficult parts and how they are going to

contribute to the discussion with their preparation. Secondly, students sat with their group members and leaders opened the discussion.

In terms of the reflection, students wrote what worked well, what did not work well, and what would help improve the discussion and shared their thoughts in the group. Finally, regarding grading, preparation and reflection were graded every time, and performance during the discussion was roughly graded by the instructor. Groups also conducted discussions one by one in front of the other classmates, who were observing the discussion and the teacher graded carefully based on language use, the amount of English they used, activeness, and how leader led the discussion and how other students contributed with their preparations to the discussion, and how they supported each other.

#### 4.2 Improvements and weaknesses of discussion circles 1

Problematic speech rate was the most frequently cited problem faced by the ELF (English as a Lingua Franca) speakers in the study.

Compared to the previous activities, this “Discussion Circles 1” led students’ to more actively participate. First, since the content of the article had already been taught and each preparation for the discussion was scheduled to start soon after the materials were taught in other classes, the students could still remember the content well. Secondly, since students always worked with the same members, they understood each person’s strength and weakness and thus could support each other.

As the students got familiar with each other, they started to become encouraged to speak more and use only English. Next, since everyone had different roles, each student had to talk during the discussion. In class, as students shared their preparation with the other students who had the same role, they could check whether their preparation was done correctly or sufficiently. Finally, as for the grading, since there was a day on which teachers could concentrate and check each groups’ discussions one by one, teachers could check each student’s performance carefully and were able to evaluate in a precise manner.

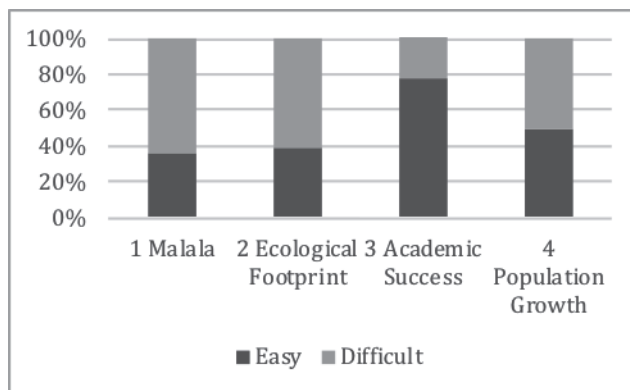
In terms of the weakness or issues raised regarding discussion circle activities, firstly, during the discussion, although everyone has a different role, some students did not



talk after they contributed with their preparation. For example, the summarizer shared the article summary, but did not actively participate the discussion or could not answer discussion questions and just said “I agree” without giving any reasons. In addition, some groups of students still asked questions while the other members answer it one by one in order, and did not react to others’ opinion or ask follow-up questions. Compared to the previous lesson, this was improved but still about one third to half of the students seemed to have difficulties to conduct discussions. Finally, in terms of the reflection, many students tried to write a lot, so the quantity of writing had improved, but usually the contents were the same every time.

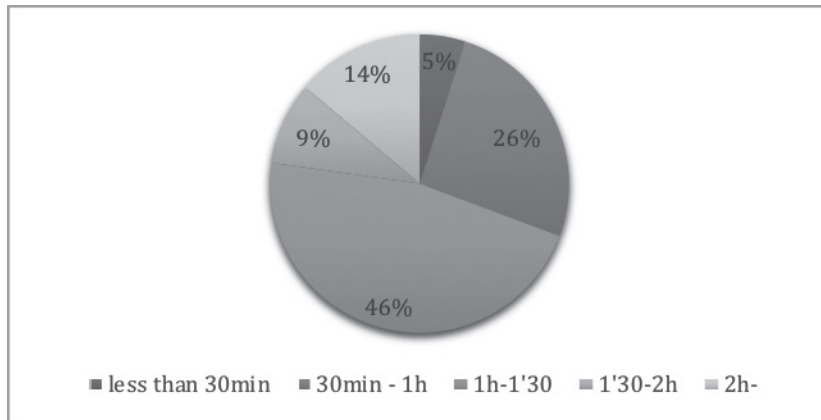
#### 4.3 Students reactions to discussion circles 1

The students of two classes that the author taught answered questions for this portion of the research. First, to analyze the students’ attitude and performance, it may be significantly important to know the students’ previous experience of discussion. Therefore, students were asked whether they had previous discussion experience in both English and Japanese, and how often they had discussions. In terms of the students’ previous English discussion experience, 82% of students had never conducted discussions in English before. In terms of discussions in Japanese, 39% of students answered “never”, and 43% of them answered once or twice a month. Thus, many students did not have opportunities to do discussions in both English and Japanese. Secondly, as the students’ performance and motivation may be affected by the discussion topics and difficulties, students indicated which types of topics they found easy or difficult to discuss (Figure 1).



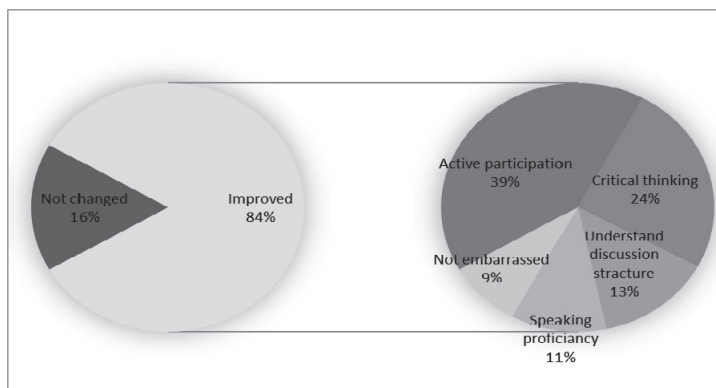
**Figure 1. Difficulties of discussion topics for discussion circles 1.**

About 80% of students felt “Academic Success” was easy to discuss because it can be easily connected to their lives. On the other hand, about 60% of students felt “Malala’s Diary” and “Ecological Footprint” were difficult. Some students mentioned that Malala’s story is difficult to reflect to their lives. Third, since out-of-class preparation by all students was newly adapted to Discussion Circle 1, the students’ preparation time for each discussion was examined.



**Figure 2. Preparation time for discussion circles 1.**

As shown in Figure 2, about half of students spent an hour to an hour and a half, which would be reasonable to read the article carefully and think of questions. Fourth, students were asked whether they felt an improvement in their discussion skills (Figure 3).



**Figure 3. Improvements of discussion skills in discussion circles 1.**

An 84% of students felt that their discussion skills had improved. The reasons for it were: 39% of students stated that they became able to voice their opinions actively through this activity; 24% of students claimed that their critical thinking abilities were fostered; 13% of students noted that they understood better how to prepare and conduct discussions; 11% of students stated that their speaking proficiency has been improved and they could learn some useful phrases from discussions; and 9% of students claimed that they were now not embarrassed to speak English.

Since each student had different roles, everyone must read the article and prepare for discussions carefully, and this forced all students be more actively involved in discussions. However, although “Discussion Circle 1” seems to be very effective to foster the students’ English abilities of output, critical thinking, organization of discussion, and positive emotion, one limitation and difficult point that many students mentioned was that the timing for intervening in discussions and asking new questions were still difficult to grasp. This may be because students felt that they were restricted by their roles to some extent. It was also difficult to teach those timing explicitly. Discussions do not always move as expected. Regardless, it was a very positive sign that students were seeking the natural timing to share their questions and opinions.

## 5. Discussion Circles 2

Because of the first set of changes to the discussion materials and procedures, the discussion activities seemed to have been greatly improved, but there were still some weaknesses. Since the students had learned the structure of discussions, some further readjustments to the materials and procedures could be made to foster their discussion and English skills. In this section, some adjustments will be outlined, and the outcomes of the changes and the students’ reactions will be introduced.

### 5.1 Materials and procedures of discussion circles 2

In the new course, discussions were divided into two parts; first round and second round. The new Discussion Circles 2 format was adopted for the first round.

The first change from Discussion Circle 1 was that the teachers chose articles again, but this time it was the first time for students to read them. The articles that were used were: 1. “Grades at university graduation linked to grades at end of first year”

study; 2. “Today's teenagers growing up more slowly”; 3. “Japan attempts to ease working hours”; 4. “Mixed-gender events added to 2020 Olympics”; and 5. “Number of foreign students at public schools who lack Japanese language skills hits record high”. Most of the articles were chosen from Internet news sites for English learners so the language used in the articles were relatively easy and at the right level for the students.

Secondly, some changes were made to the preparation sheet for each role. Leaders prepared comprehension questions regarding the main idea of the article and two on details, as well as three discussion questions along with their own answers. To lead the discussion, detailed procedures with example sentences were provided. The Summarizer was required to write not only a summary with key points, but also had to explain the purpose of the article (Why did the author write the article?) and describe the author's attitude in the article (positive, negative, subjective, objective, etc.) and organization or structure of the article. In addition, the Summarizers had to take notes during the discussion and give a summary of the discussion at the end of the discussion. Vocabulary Checkers not only had to look up definitions of difficult or key vocabulary and phrases, but also synonyms and antonyms, and clarify some references of ‘it’ and ‘they’ in the article. Finally, all students except Leaders wrote one or two clarification questions if they had any follow-up questions. To support the students, some useful phrases for each role were taught explicitly and the list was given to the students in each class. When students were able to use any of the phrases on the list, they put a check mark besides the phrase.

Since leaders were given detailed procedures for the discussion, all groups conducted the discussion in the same way: 1. Leader greet and give an introduction; 2. Summarizers invited to speak; 3. Vocabulary Checkers invited to speak; 4. Clarification questions checked; 5. Comprehension questions asked; 6. Discussion initiated with leaders' discussion questions; 7. Questioners' discussion questions asked; 8. Reflectors invited to speak (Steps 7 and 8 can be repeated); 9. Summarizers summarize the discussion; and 10. End of discussion.

For reflection, students had to assess their own and group's performance on a 1 to 10 scale, and note what worked well and what didn't, as well as what would help improve the discussion, and share their thoughts with the group.

Preparation and reflections were graded, and the students' performance during the discussion was roughly graded by the instructor walking amongst the groups. The students' performances were to be graded more carefully in the second round.

## 5.2 Improvements and weaknesses of discussion circles 2

As the students learned the structure of discussions, they gradually became more comfortable to conduct discussions. Although the articles were a first-time read for the students, they had learned they could now read and prepare effectively for the discussions. When students prepared questions, many tried to think of questions that could be controversial and lead to active discussions. The students understood the purpose of each role and importance of preparation. Discussions were also conducted more naturally order compared to Discussion Circles 1.

Many students no longer seemed to feel that they were restricted by their roles, and that everyone could offer their opinions to the discussion questions of leaders and questioners. Moreover, more students no longer waited until they were asked questions and were able to jump in and share their opinions in a natural way. Many students also could react to each other's opinions quickly and thus led more active discussions. Some leaders, however, could still improve their reactions and their way of responding to their group members' comments regarding discussion questions.

In terms of the weaknesses or issues raised on Discussion Circles 2, some groups were more willing to discuss only in English than other groups. This was not always because of their English proficiency but more likely to be motivation and willingness to speak English. Secondly, since leaders were provided with detailed discussion procedures and example sentences for leading the discussions, most of the leaders used the handout as a script and just read it. The handout should have been used as a reference and not a script, however, as this is the first time to learn the details of the procedures which was strictly structured, the students were allowed to read the handout and were encouraged to understand and learn the procedures so that they should be able to lead the discussion without the handout for the second round.

Other challenges include the possibility of leaders having difficulty to write more than 50 words of their answers to their own discussion questions. This may be because the questions were not good to expand their thoughts, or because students

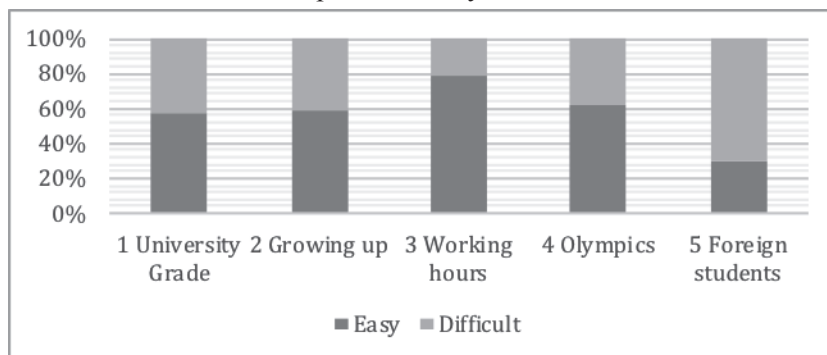
were not able to think over the issues deeply enough, or did not have time to carefully read the articles and think. Some summarizers also seemed to have difficulties to write about the author’s attitude toward the articles and the structure of the articles. This may require more explicit directions and extra practice.

Over time, the students gradually understood what they should write through the preparation sheet sharing session with other students who had the same role. Usually a few students understood and wrote their answers so others could learn from their classmates. This might be a very important aspect since students can identify what they understand and do not, and ask for help independently. In term of the vocabulary checker’s role, some students were not able to or did not pay careful attention to find definitions of vocabulary for the particular article and wrote the wrong definitions. Some definitions were too difficult for other group members to understand or some explanations were given with different word class. (e.g. “*engineering*” means “the work of an engineer”).

As for the phrase handouts, some students were trying to use the phrases and were able to actually used them, but some students forgot to use or struggled to catch up with the discussion and did not reference the phrases. Some students, especially leaders, were not able to react to other students’ opinions and some only said “OK” and simply moved on to the next person or question. This may have been because some students could not understand what other students said or did not know the words to react.

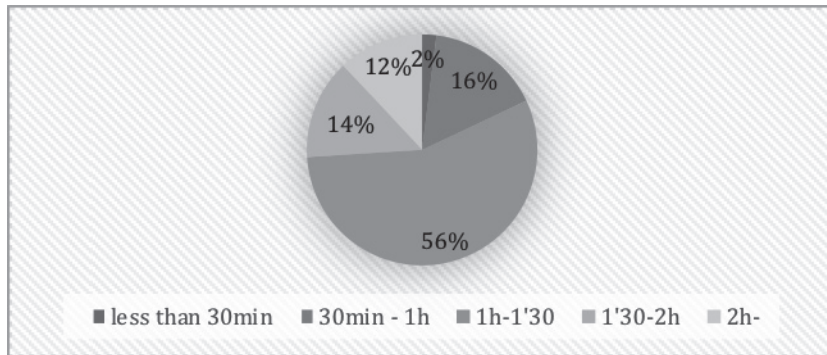
### 5.3 Students’ reactions toward discussion circles 2

First, students answered which topics were easy or difficult to discuss.



**Figure 4. Difficulties of discussion topics for discussion circles 2.**

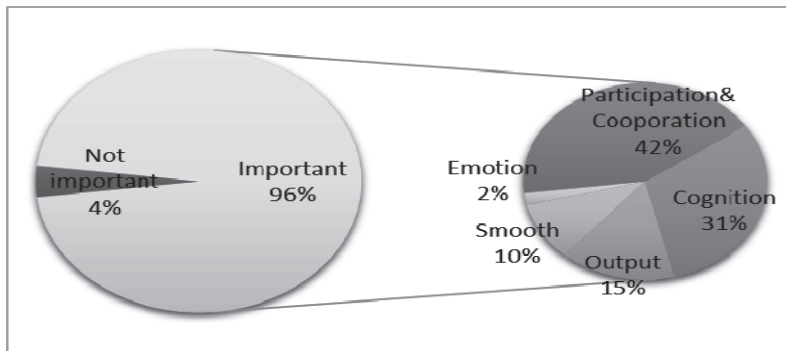
As shown in Figure 4, about 79% of students felt “Japan attempts to ease working hours” was easy to discuss. On the other hand, about 70% of students felt that “Number of foreign students at public schools who lack Japanese language skills hits record high” was difficult because some students did not know that there was such a situation in Japan. Compared to the results from Discussion Circles 1, in average, 7% more students felt that the articles were easy to discuss. As for the preparation time, 56% of students spent one to one hour and a half, which was 9% more than the students in Discussion Circles 1 (Figure 5).



**Figure 5. Preparation time for discussion circles 2.**

In the previous research 31% of students spent less than one hour for preparation, but now only 18% of students spent less than an hour. Thus, as more students spent more time for preparation, this may have lead students to feel that some articles were easy to discuss even if they had newly encountered the content.

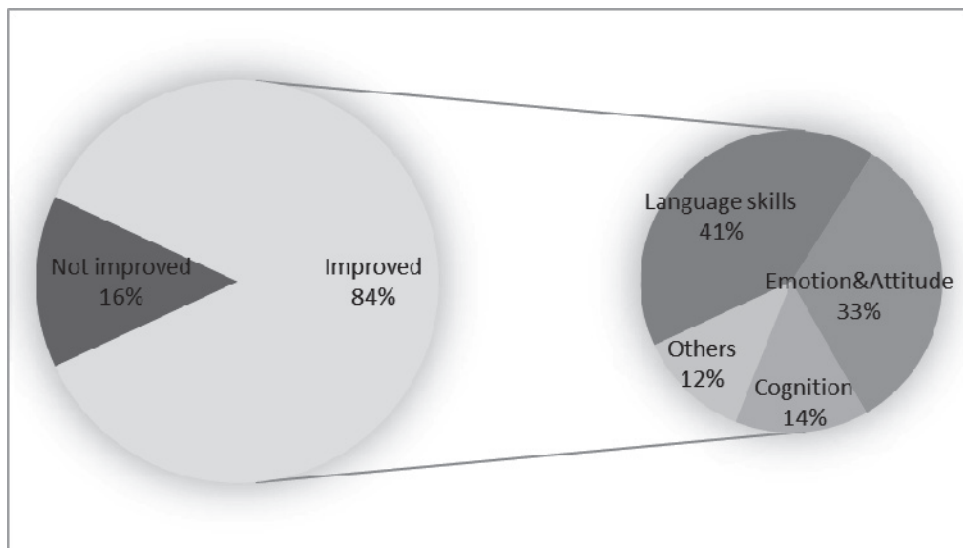
Second, the students were asked about the importance of preparation (Figure 6).



**Figure 6. Importance of preparation for discussion circles 2.**

Ninety-six percent of students answered that preparation is important to conduct discussion. This is significant difference from the previous research in which only 58% of students said that preparation makes difference. Some reasons for this were suggested. 42% of students mentioned that, without preparation, they would trouble other students by not being able to participate and cooperate. 31% of students mentioned cognition, with preparation helping deepen their understanding of the article and having a deeper conversation. 15% of students mentioned the impact of preparation on output, or the ability to express their opinions. Finally, 10% of students stated that preparation makes discussion smooth.

Next, students were asked whether they felt an improvement in their discussion skills from Discussion Circles 1 and Figure 7 shows that 84% of students felt that their skills had improved.



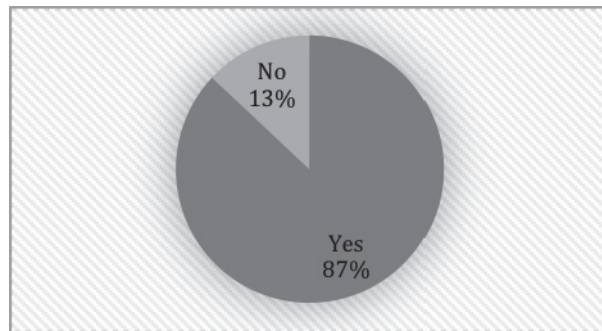
**Figure 7. Improvements of discussion skills in discussion circles 2.**

A 41% of students stated that they felt that their speaking and listening skills or vocabulary size had been improved, which was 30% higher than in the previous research. 33% of students noted a change in their feelings and attitude toward discussions, such as becoming more proactive, feeling easy and enjoying speaking English, more willingness to share their opinions and listening to others' opinion, and



embarrassment and negative feeling decreasing. Regarding cognition, 14% of students felt that they could now more deeply understand the content, thereby improving the content of their questions and opinions, and their ability to connect the topics with other relevant information. Finally, some other students stated that they understood better how to talk or how to ask questions during discussions, and could conduct discussions in a more natural and smooth manner.

Finally, in terms of the confidence in English discussion, 87% of students felt that they had gained more confidence than before, which may indicate that the students' anxiety had decreased through practice (Figure 8).



**Figure 8. Confidence gain through discussion circles 2.**

The results suggested that, in comparison to the previous research where students seemed to focus more on personal skills and emotion, students became more motivated to join the discussion as a member of their group and carry out their responsibilities. This in turn seemed to have been helped by greater understanding and appreciation of preparation and its procedures, leading to participation and cooperation, something that was not mentioned much by students in the previous course. Moreover, greater appreciation of preparation and the feeling of responsibility led to more students spending more time on preparation, leading to deeper understanding of the topic.

The limitation and difficulty cited in the previous activity was the difficulty of interrupting or jumping into the discussion with natural order and timing. Since the

students prepared and thought through the topics more carefully than before, the students were gradually able to think not only about themselves but also as a group and were more active and could share their own opinions and information in a more natural manner. Remarkably, students now seemed to feel more responsible about their own roles, but at the same times they no longer seemed to be restricted by it. Discussion Circles 2 was thus applied more effectively, but some further adjustments may be needed in association with students' developments.

## 6. Discussion Circles 3

Discussion Circles 3 was conducted as a second round of Discussion Circles 2. In this section, some adjustments for Discussion 3 will be introduced.

### 6.1 Materials and procedures of discussion circles 3

Since students had been practicing discussions over two semesters, students had gradually come to understand and also able to evaluate what kind of articles were appropriate for discussions. This time, each student found two articles for discussion, reserved for the time when they take on the role of the leader. Students were required to show two articles with two possible discussion questions to their teacher one month before they started Discussion Circles 3 and at least one article had to be approved by their teacher. Next, the requirements for each roles' preparations were reviewed and advice given by the instructor. Leaders were directed to write more than 50 words as answers to each discussion questions, since less than 50 words might not lead students to think through the article and its topic deeply enough. In addition, leaders were provided a handout of discussion procedures without example sentences.

Summarizers were asked to write not only the purpose of the article and the author's attitude toward the article, but also to identify where students found evidence to support their answer. (e.g. "The author's attitude toward this article is objective since the author said...") This is because there might be a possibility that each student understands the article differently and this could lead to another discussion.

Reflectors were asked to write not only the facts, but also their own reactions or thoughts regarding the information. This was because some students ended up simply sharing information and could not expand or deepen the discussions in the last rounds.

Questioners were now required to prepare three discussion questions with answers of more than 50 words for each question. Finally, for Vocabulary checkers, assigned students were required to use Learner's dictionaries such as Oxford Learner's Dictionary and Cambridge Learner's Dictionary.

In terms of the grading, IC recorders were provided for each group and the discussions were recorded each time. At the end of the 5 discussions in Discussion Circles 3, each student chose their best discussion. The students' performance would then be graded carefully by the instructor who would listen to the selected session's recordings.

## 7. Analysis

In this section, the effects of material and procedural changes, as well as the students' reactions toward Discussion Circles will be analyzed and suggestions for discussion activities will be proposed.

Discussion is difficult because it does not have clear procedures (Kaneko & Kimizuka, 2008). Therefore, students need clear instructions and structured formats of discussions at the beginning. In terms of the topics and articles for the discussions, the students in this research who chose their own articles for Student-led Discussion had difficulties in finding appropriate articles, but the students who found materials for Discussion Circles 3 could find appropriate articles that were relatively easy for everyone to understand, while being debatable and interesting. Thus, students may need to be presented many examples of articles and use them to understand what kind of articles – format, content, and style – could lead to active discussions.

As for the preparations, students indicated that they felt more comfortable and could be more active in discussion with appropriate procedures and quality of preparations. Through preparation, students could think through the topic carefully, prepare what and how to share their opinions in English, and in turn reduce their anxiety while increasing motivation to participate and cooperate. As Murakami (2012) mentioned, the feedback seemed to reaffirm that discussion can foster the students' time management skills and sense of responsibility, with appropriate preparations re-enforcing these skills.

In terms of assessing the students' critical thinking, preparation and reflection sheets were useful for teachers to understand each student's thought and thought process, as well as any areas that may need further support. Cazden (2001) pointed out that students understand more than what they can produce, thus silence does not necessarily reflect a lack of knowledge. If there are students who can critically think about the topic, but find it difficult to voice their opinions, those students may need more language support or inductive, enabling, and relaxing atmosphere to draw out their opinions. On the other hand, if there are students who cannot complete preparation or reflection sheets, those students may need some help to see the issues from different points of views and may need some examples, or guidance on time management.

In terms of the output in discussions, turn taking was difficult for the students and also difficult for teachers to teach explicitly. However, with some language support, such as teaching some phrases that can be used in discussions and encouraging students to use them, gradually led to students knowing what to say to intervene, make statements, and argue certain points at strategic timings. Careful preparation further seemed to lead to more active discussion and natural ways of turn-taking, since students' willingness to exchange their opinions seemed to have overcome their anxiety of not having confidence in how to make points in English. This seems to be a very positive effect that successfully encouraged students to engage in English output. In this way, discussion activities may be able to motivate students to speak English more.

Finally, the aim of the discussion activities in this research was for students to be able to exchange their ideas, opinions, and information to lead deeper comprehension through critical thinking. As a next step in mastering these skills, students might be tasked to discuss for specific purposes, such as organizing group opinions and proposing a solution as a group for consensus building or social dialogue. This would require leveling up of both personal and cooperative skills that would require the further strengthening of the students' confidence, motivation, and group working skills, all of which can contribute to reduced anxiety and natural speaking skills in English.

## 8. Conclusion

In conclusion, Japanese students tend to have limited discussion experience, especially in English and lack confidence and familiarity with discussion and preparation. In this research, four discussion activities were introduced along with positive and negative effect of each, and the students' reaction toward the activities were analyzed. The results indicate that the students who do not have experience with discussion may need clear instructions and structured formats of discussion, so teachers should lead first, but students can gradually take initiative as they learn and understand the discussion formats. Since students did not have enough experience of having discussions, it seems to be significantly important to teach how to conduct discussions by showing clearly structured discussions at the beginning. Thus, to assigning roles to each student may be effective.

As a fundamental ingredient for active discussions, it is important to choose appropriate articles, therefore, teachers should choose articles, beginning with materials and topics that have been seen and used previously by students, then moving on to articles that are new for students. Once students are comfortable enough, they can choose articles by themselves. Another critical component were preparations for discussions, which with the appropriate procedures and quality could help reduce the students' anxiety and can lead to more active participations.

Although discussions may take time to learn and require much practice, materials and procedures are adjustable with the students' initial level of English proficiency and with the correct structure, it could motivate students to speak English and lead to positive effects on their discussion skills and proficiency. Moreover, through discussions, students may be able to learn how to identify issues, search and select appropriate information, apply their knowledge, report the information, analyze, organize and convey opinions, make decisions, etc., all practical and fundamental social skills that are necessary in both local and global settings. Therefore, discussion may be well worth conducting in English class for holistic student development.

For further research, closer examination of each student's reaction toward discussion activities and how each student's attitude toward discussions changed could be analyzed, and a more effective grading system could be examined and proposed.

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