Penny Ur, Discussions that work Cambridge 1981

## Organization

Now the task itself is of paramount importance; but very little less so is the manner of its administration. This may make all the difference between smooth, independent student performance and inefficient confusion.

### Presentation

The presentation of the task should usually be made before any move is made by students to start work. I have often fallen into the trap of getting students into their groups, giving out the materials, and only then starting to explain what they have to do; by this time their attention is naturally focused on each other or on the materials, not on me, with a corresponding drop in concentration and comprehension. It is essential that the students should be completely clear in their minds right from the start what the task is, and what limitations are imposed on how they do it; hence they should be told this by the teacher while their attention is fully hers.

There is a limit, of course, to students' patience and concentration span; so the clearer and more concise the instructions the better. With classes whose knowledge of English is not yet up to understanding such instructions without a great deal of clarification and repetition, it may be most sensible to give these in the native language; time saved by giving the preliminary explanation in the vernacular is time gained for the discussion itself.

The first time a class does an activity, it is often a good idea to do a 'trial run', either with the full class, or using a group of good students as demonstrators. In the more lengthy discussions that involve a lot of negotiation and argument this is impractical and unnecessary; but in the shorter game-like activities it may be the best way to make sure that the rules and procedure are clear to all.

### Process

If we want to ensure a smooth, efficient and enjoyable discussion we shall need to consider various aspects of its *process;* I use the



95



latter term to refer to *the way the discussion is held,* as distinct from the *content of what is said.* Some of these aspects are points of formal procedure, others are ad-hoc stratagems for dealing with particular problems; some need to be included in the teacher's preliminary instructions, others may only be put in during the course of the talking. Not all the points mentioned in this section are relevant to all discussions; but the teacher needs to be aware of them and their possible application.

Firstly, how will the group set about the task? They may just start talking, and often this is sufficient; but in some cases a few simple refinements may make that talking much more efficient and enjoyable. One is the *electing of functionaries* to do particular jobs as the discussion proceeds; a chairman, for example, or a secretary. Another is the organization of *strategy:* what things are to be done in what order. In many creative or interpretative exercises, for example, it is a good idea to start off with a 'brainstorming' session, with the secretary noting down all suggestions, preferably where they can be seen; and only then start sifting and evaluating, rather than discussing each proposal as it comes up. Or it may help for each participant to note down his own ideas on the subject before the general discussion begins; or for students to work in pairs first. Sometimes the introduction of *game-rules* or other limitations can add zest; students may not be allowed to see each other's materials, or may be limited in time or media.

Another aspect of process which the teacher will do well to consider before she starts is the *distribution of tasks.* In other words are all the groups going to do the same thing? Sometimes, if the teacher can cope with the preparation and organization, groups may do totally different exercises. But even where the groups are all doing the same general type of activity, it is often a good idea for the actual content of the tasks to be different; this stops groups plagiarizing, and lowers the possibility of distraction. The different tasks may be complementary (as in *Debates,* p. 105), or task completed by one group may be passed on to another (as in *Uses of an object,* p. 37).

There are certain general *discussion skills,* also, about which the teacher will need to remind her students. The need for reasonably balanced participation of all members of the group, respect for the chair, prohibition of interruptions, and even so simple a thing as keeping voices down so as not to disturb other groups or classes – all these may need to be consciously and systematically taught, especially in younger classes. They may even be made a part of the task, and the group's performance judged by satisfactory standards in these aspects as well as by results.

The teacher may need to function discreetly as discussion leader in coping with specific problems as they come up. For example, it sometimes happens that the discussion gets rather involved, and there is a danger that participants may lose the thread of what is going on: it is very helpful for the teacher to step in with a *clarification* (if, of course, the number of groups is sufficiently small for her to be able to follow the developments in each). This may take the form of a simpler paraphrase of what has recently been said, or a summary of conclusions the group has already reached, or a redefinition of the problem in the light of new information or of a different viewpoint. Secondly, there is the *prevention of digressions*. Sometimes, it is true, digressions may take the form of interesting and possibly productive sidelines that can be left to develop; but the pointless, non-productive digression needs to be cut short, and it is up to the teacher, usually, to diagnose the difference and act accordingly. Thirdly, it may happen that the discussion flags or goes off the rails because of lack of ideas or too facile a treatment of the subject. Here the teacher may find herself making a *contribution to content*. In general, a good discussion-leader should concern herself with process only, but this has its exceptions. Contribution to content may in some cases prove the most effective oiler of the wheels of process. A suggestion from the teacher as to an alternative approach, or another contribution to the brainstorm, for instance, may give the whole debate a boost onwards. Or where the students have contented themselves with shallow, facile conclusions, have ignored inconvenient facts, or are over-biased, the teacher may very productively 'throw a spanner in the works': call to mind those unwelcome facts, or produce 'subversive' opinions (not necessarily her own!). All this tends to make the discussion more controversial and the treatment of the subject more thorough.

Other aspects of process are concerned with language practice. Firstly there is the question of the *discouragement of native language use*. The temptation to fall back on their native tongue is always before our students, and there is no one easy way to stop them succumbing. Exhortations and consistent reminders by the teacher help, but may not always be adequate. Stratagems which may be useful: if there is a group contest, then groups may be told that every occurrence of native-language use will lower their eventual score: the teacher cannot always be present to check this, so I have often found it effective to appoint an observer from among the students whose job it is to note any such transgression. Or you may put a tape-recorder (on 'record') by an offending group, and make sure they know about it – this is surprisingly effective.



Another problem connected with language use is *participation encouragement:* what can we do to ensure that all the students do have a chance to practise using the language actively? This can be built in to the task by such stratagems as the 'combining arrangement' (an idea based on the article of that name by I.S.P. Nation – see the *Bibliography*). What this means, basically, is that instead of giving all the data needed to solve a problem to the group as a whole, you give only one item to each member. Thus they all have to 'combine' (and therefore speak) in order to work out the answer (see for example the activity described on p. 15, or *Combining versions*, p. 90). Or we can insist that every student has to put forward at least one suggestion in a 'brainstorm'; this can be helped if a little time is allotted at the beginning for each student to think about or jot down his ideas. We can lay down that decisions must be made, if possible, by unanimous agreement rather than just majority vote (this has the added advantage that it makes the debate far more thorough). Alternatively, in an open-ended creative assignment, we can make it a condition that the result must contain at least one contribution from each group member.

What about *correcting mistakes* of language? Some teachers think this should never be done in fluency exercises, on the grounds that it is discouraging, interferes with the flow of discourse, and stops students having to make do with what they know. Now nothing, in my opinion, should 'never' or 'always' be done in language teaching (even this proposition probably has its exceptions!); such pronouncements are at best over-simplifications, at worst simply wrong. In the present case, there are reasons why one would want to compromise. Firstly, even if the teacher does not correct glaring errors, other students will, probably more rudely and less efficiently. Secondly, a student often knows he may be saying something wrong, or may simply not know how to say it at all, and will learn more from being given the appropriate form or item at a moment when he needs it to express himself, than he will from being forced to paraphrase. Lastly, withholding such help often hampers the discussion and discourages students more than giving it. However, the teacher is not always on the spot, and on such occasions the student will have plenty of practice in making do with the limited language available to him. In short, although we do not do formal language teaching in these activities, and though we want students to develop independence and fluency, there is a case for unobtrusive helping-out with specific errors or gaps as they come up.

## Ending

How do we draw the discussions to a close? There are various problems here: one group may finish long before the others; all the groups may finish early, or be still fully absorbed far beyond the period previously estimated by the teacher.

Let us start with the first of these, as it comes up almost every time. The obvious answer is for the teacher to give the quickest group further work to do until all or most of the others finish. This further work may take the form of an elaboration of the task (You've made a list of possible items? Good, now put them in order of probability/priority/interest. You've made up your story? Now record it/prepare it for acting/write it out . . . and so on). The teacher may have self-access work-cards available for individual stop-gap occupation. Or she may simply say 'Get on with your homework' or 'Read your books'. In any case, these reserve occupations should be ready to hand; and their preparation is an essential part of the lesson plan as a whole.

At what point does one call a halt to the discussion? This is often difficult to gauge. Sometimes it may be best to wait until all the groups have completed the task, sometimes this takes too long, and it is better to stop the last ones before they finish; at other times it is even expedient to stop all groups while they are still absorbed and active, but have enough material ready to warrant a feeling of achievement and a fruitful feedback session. This last possibility has an added advantage: it leaves students with a taste for more, and thus with heightened enthusiasm, or at least willingness, for further such activities. A previously-given time-limit, of course, solves this problem at a stroke, but may not always be appropriate. Beyond these ideas, I can give no further reliable recommendations: it is up to the teacher to be flexible and rely on her common sense. However, one warning: if you think you may have to stop one or more groups before they finish, say so beforehand – this saves protests and delays when the time comes.

## Feedback

The ending of the group discussions and the finishing of the task do not constitute the end of the exercise as a whole. It is not fair to students to ask them to put a lot of effort into something, and then to disregard the result. It is true that we, as teachers, are mostly interested in the language practice that takes place during the discussion itself; but the students are at least equally, if





not more, interested in its apparent purpose, whose achievement is represented by the results of the task. What the groups have done must then be displayed and related to in some way by teacher and class: assessed, criticized, admired, argued with, or even simply listened to with interest. This I call the *feedback* session; it is an essential part of the activity as a whole and may provide a setting for some valuable learning.

Feedback can be organized in a multitude of different ways: by giving the 'correct' results, where there are any, and getting groups to assess their own success; by trying to collate the various proposals into a definitive class version; by comparing the conclusions of different groups; by simply asking groups to read aloud, display, or play back their results. It is particularly interesting for one group that has been working on a certain assignment to find out how the others have coped with it; I am always pleased to find how attentive students are when listening to descriptions of what other groups have made of the same material they have had.

In most cases a brief full class session is needed and some sort of rounding-off summary by the teacher. It is most important not to leave the problems set hanging in the air (unless it is planned to continue in a further session), to supply all the necessary solutions, to answer queries as far as possible, and to give students time and scope for exploring conflicts and differences that come out of comparing results. Sometimes the teacher may find it advisable to publish the results in some way: to pin them up on the board or type them out for distribution.

So much for the feedback on results, which may be done by teacher and class together; the feedback on process, however, is much more teacher-centred. The organization and performance of the debate sometimes need to be reacted to, assessed and criticized by the teacher, preferably immediately after the activity, if we are to take seriously the teaching of discussion skills. It is no good being indiscriminatingly warm and approving of students' work; they will appreciate being told exactly where and when their discussion could have been better, as well as where it was good. That this part of the lesson needs to be teacher-centred, incidentally, does not imply that it is teacher-monopolized; students' reactions and comments may also contribute to it.

Lastly, there is the feedback on the language use itself. Discussions provide the teacher with valuable information on what language is actively known and what is not, what is used rightly and what needs correction and practice. On the basis of this information she can then build further language lessons. These, of

course, do not have to be immediately after the discussion; as far as the students are concerned there does not have to be any connection between the two, though the teacher may find it useful to point it out.

## Conclusion

To summarize: discussions or discussion-games are the best vehicle for fluency practice in a foreign language: the question is how to make these maximally effective. *Interesting topics*, *group-work*, and *role-play* can facilitate student interaction. A *task* which cannot be done without verbal communication supplies learners with a reason to speak, and thus makes for a higher degree of naturalness and enthusiasm in their discourse. Finally, discussions can be made very much more efficient and enjoyable if attention is given to their *organization*.

It has been said that there is nothing so practical as a good theory; and I hope this may be true of the theoretical ideas of Part 1. Their application in practice forms the basis of Part 2, where a number of actual discussions that work are described in detail.