

# Discussion and the English Language Lesson

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Many record books and teaching notes are pock-marked with the word 'Discussion', especially in the upper secondary classes. The word is followed by a blank space – which is often symbolic of the lesson that takes place.

I think all of us are aware of the important part oral discussions play in language teaching, especially at the upper secondary level. The properly planned discussion lessons gives the pupil practice in marshalling his thoughts together and communicating these ideas to others, relating them to the subject of the moment with confidence. Speech training exercises, prepared speeches or reading aloud help to develop clarity, intelligibility and general ease in speaking a foreign language but "conversation calls for immediate response, or at least fairly fluent responses, otherwise normal communication becomes very strained."<sup>1</sup>

For optimum results the discussion class has to be carefully planned and structured. I have made a few notes here which I hope will be of some help to other teachers. Discussions, of course, can be seen as part of the Oral English programme the teacher has planned for his class or it might be built into the other sections of the English Language syllabus. The latter is probably what most of us are doing now. For instance, we have class discussions (a) when pupils are preparing for an essay; (b) following a reading of a comprehension passage, (c) as part of the preparation for precis-writing exercises and (d) in relation to the study of literature texts.

A discussion may be broken down into the following three components: participants, topic and discussion leader.

## I Participants

These are the pupils in the class. It is essential that they have a clear idea of the topic and are prepared for it. Often, if not always, it is wise to allot to various groups the different points of view a topic might trigger off. Perhaps the topic decided upon may be related to the Shakespeare play the class is doing and goes like this: "Is *Julius Caesar* the title you would have given to the play?" If you have a class of forty you might divide the class into 4 groups of 10, giving them the following instructions:

- Group I* Prepare to defend the question asked i.e. that you agree that *Julius Caesar* is the best possible title for the play.
- Group II* You disagree with the question. You think Brutus is more central. Tell us why.
- Group III* You think Mark Antony is the most important person in the play and the rest of the characters revolve round him.
- Group IV* Listen carefully to the arguments presented and list those which you think are sound, awarding points as you go along. Tell us at the end of the discussion which group has presented the most cogent and well-substantiated arguments.

Make the rules clear to them – rules about time limits, choice and selection of speakers (appoint different pupils each time) and awarding of marks. Work these out with your class, paying heed to their suggestions.

## II Topic

This must be given some thought. Accept pupils' suggestions freely but consider the topic and its implications closely. Make sure that it has plenty of meat for discussion. When you are framing the question or sentence make sure that it offers ample scope for the airing of different points of view. The subject area to be covered should not be too broad or narrow for the time available so that some sort of conclusion can be reached by the end of the period. Above all, the pupils must be able to see the topic as having a personal relevance. This helps to get them involved in the discussion.

## III Discussion Leader

Normally the teacher should act as the discussion leader unless it is a Form V or Form VI class. Initially the teacher can lead the discussion. After a couple of sessions, the class might like to appoint its own discussion leader on a rotation basis, taking the interest of the pupil concerned into consideration. Encourage this and point out the functions of the leader in a discussion, such as the following:

2 <sup>1</sup>E.L. Tibbits: *Speaking Out in English: Aspects of Speech Training* (1); English Language Teaching, Vol. XIX, No. 2, January 1965, p. 52.

- a) The leader initiates the discussion, defining its scope, making a comment or asking a question that will trigger off a discussion.
- b) He pays careful attention to the proceedings, clarifying points when he perceives difficulties or misunderstandings.
- c) He keeps the session in order, timing the speakers and keeping their emotions in check.
- d) He should be ready to offer a stimulating thought should he notice the tempo of the discussion flagging and contributions petering off.
- e) He must be able to summarise the arguments at intervals as well as be able to wind up the discussion at the end. As a variation, the teacher might get one group to give the summaries (e.g. Group IV in the example given earlier).

While it is important to emphasize the structured aspect of a successful classroom discussion, it is equally necessary to realise the ease with which the teacher can adapt it to suit his class. He can, for example, change around the grouping system; start with topics of limited scope, moving on to more demanding ones as pupils gain in confidence; plan discussions for half a period or for a full period; help some pupils with content material, leaving more able ones to work on their own. The possibilities are legion.

The overall objective of the discussion lesson is not only to help pupils achieve fluency and confidence in speech but also to involve them in a directed listening activity. All too often, it is the teacher who is the only one involved in evaluating a discussion in class. By getting pupils involved in this task, you will be planning a meaningful, listening activity for your pupils.

The teacher will need to spend some time with his class, deciding on the specific outcomes they are hoping to achieve. They may decide to focus on accuracy of information in one lesson and examine the art of persuasive speech in another, depending on the topic selected. They can then work out a set of criteria for purposes of evaluation. This set of criteria may be in the form of simple questions as shown in the example below.

### Discussion Check List<sup>2</sup>

Speaker	Critical Thinking
<i>I Content</i>	<i>I. Does the Speaker:</i>
1. Do the speaker's	1. Arrange his facts as evidence

materials show a mastery of needed facts?	in support of his views?
2. Does he use evidence as the basis of his opinions?	2. Weigh evidence from two or more sources?
3. Does he break the question down into its underlying issues?	3. Illustrate his evidence with examples common to audience and experience?
4. Does he reason well from cause to effect?	4. Distinguish between opinion and fact?
5. Does he use facts well in his reasoning?	5. Base his judgements on facts.
6. Does his speech indicate sufficient preparation?	6. Make critical judgements?
7. Do his materials make his purpose clear?	7. Draw conclusions consistent with his purpose?

### II Techniques

1. Does the speaker speak with integrity, directness, and conviction?
2. Is his speech adapted to his audience?
3. Does he avoid nervous movements or speech mannerisms?
4. Does he pronounce difficult words with precision?

### II Do audience members challenge the speaker by:

1. Showing inconsistencies?
2. Seeking explanations of obscure meanings?
3. Asking that conclusions be justified?
4. Requiring adjustments in views to meet supplemental evidence?
5. Comparing views?
6. Seeking common agreement?
7. Demanding that a plan of action be stated?

### III Effect upon the audience

### III Supplement a speaker's statement with:

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| 1. Does the speaker convince the audience? | 1. New evidence?                        |
| 2. Does he provoke questions?              | 2. Illustrations drawn from experience? |

<sup>2</sup>Taken from the pamphlet "Youth Discussion, Patterns and techniques," as it appears in *Teaching English*: Lewis, John S. and Jean C. Sisk: American Book Company, N.Y. 1963, p. 484.

3. Does he satisfy questioners by his answers?
4. Are his listeners thinking about what he has to say?
3. Reasons for personal views?
4. Consequence deriving from particular conclusions?
5. Methods for taking action in the light of the evidence and conclusions?

*IV Make critical analyses of a speaker's materials by:*

1. Correcting errors in evidence cited?
2. Pointing out omissions?
3. Attacking hasty generalizations?
4. Insisting upon reasonable analogies?