

# Preparing to Study Abroad: Learner Response to an Academic Discussion Course

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## Abstract

This paper presents student feedback regarding the first semester of a yearlong course designed to improve students' academic discussion skills. The course is part of the core curriculum for first-year students at the College of Intercultural Communication at Rikkyo University. It features a six-student maximum and aims to prepare students, all of whom will study abroad in their second year, to succeed in an academic environment in which English is used. Students develop a range of skills, including turn-taking, clarifying, supporting opinions, and expressing objections in discussing themes such as education, public manners and gender issues. Student feedback takes three forms: survey responses, excerpts from writing assignments, and portions of email exchanges between teachers and students. Areas in which student feedback is presented include achievement of course goals, acquisition of target skills, preparedness for studying abroad, feelings about class size, and opinions about course materials.

# 1. Academic Discussion Course (CS1AA & CS2CA)

## 1. 1 Teaching Context

There were five or six students in each class. Students had been streamed using a placement test, and ability levels were generally compatible within each class. All of the students who participated in the study were first-year students.

## 1. 2 Course Goal

The goal of the course was presented to students in the course syllabus: "The purpose of this course is to give students the opportunity to develop *academic discussion skills* so they can express their opinions and participate more effectively in classroom discussions."

Jordan (1997) identified five situations in which academic speaking skills are required: "asking questions in lectures; participating in *seminars/discussions*; making *oral presentations*; answering ensuing questions/points; *verbalizing data* and giving oral instructions in seminars/workshops/laboratories" (p. 193, italics original).

The academic discussion classes focused primarily on the second of these, participating in seminars or discussions. However, other skills came into play as well, including making oral presentations and verbalizing data, though these were not emphasized as much as discussion skills. College of Intercultural Communication students will certainly need academic speaking skills for group discussions at Rikkyo University. In addition, many students will also use the skills at their chosen study-abroad institutions and at their future workplaces. While the latter may not require academic discussion skills *per se*, the ability to quickly formulate ideas into clear, well-organized statements will likely be valued by employers and colleagues.

## 1. 3 Skills Focus

The course textbook, *Discussion Matters*, (Suthons, 2006) provided the discrete skills covered in the class (Table 1):

Table 1 *Skills covered in class*

Spring	Fall
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Giving an opinion with reasons &amp; examples</li> <li>• Explaining ideas</li> <li>• Evaluating opinions</li> <li>• Identifying issues and finding topics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Defending one side of an issue</li> <li>• Making generalizations and theorizing</li> <li>• Disagreeing</li> </ul>

In addition to the skills presented in the course textbook, students were provided with a list of expressions commonly used in academic contexts. Examples include: "Would you mind repeating that?" "I think we've gotten off the topic." "I'm not sure I understand you." "That's a good question." and "Could you give us an example?" Furthermore, teachers supplemented this basic list throughout the semester with expressions they felt would be useful during a particular lesson. All in all, students were presented with language that covered most of the skills identified by Kehe and Kehe (1998) as cited by Strain (2006):

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| 1. using rejoinders                        | 8. recounting something they have said           |
| 2. asking follow-up questions              | 9. volunteering an answer                        |
| 3. seeking and giving clarification        | 10. helping the leader of a discussion           |
| 4. using comprehension checks              | 11. expressing an opinion                        |
| 5. answering with details                  | 12. referring to a source when giving an opinion |
| 6. soliciting more details from others     | 13. leading a discussion themselves              |
| 7. interrupting others during a discussion |  |

## 1. 4 Content Focus

Students employed these skills in discussions of content areas (Table 2) selected by instructors. Content took the form of news articles, discussion questions, and short student presentations.

**Table 2** *Topics covered in reading materials*

Spring Topics	Fall Topics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Education</li> <li>• Family</li> <li>• Public manners</li> <li>• Gender issues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Environment</li> <li>• Jobs</li> <li>• Media</li> <li>• Mental health</li> </ul>

The seven academic discussion instructors all adhered to the course syllabus, but within this general framework, they were free to conduct classes as they wished, based on students' levels, needs and interests.

Each semester comprised a series of two-week lesson cycles. During the first week of this cycle, students focused on a skill, such as giving an opinion with reasons and examples. Instructors guided students through a number of exercises designed to facilitate understanding of the skill and to provide opportunities for practice. In the second week, students applied the skill, as well as others from their growing repertoires, in a discussion of one of the content areas. Thus, the objective for students was to put

*skills in the service of content exploration.*

## 1. 5 Assessment

Students took midterm and final exams each semester (for assessment criteria see Table 3). Each exam had two components: an in-class speaking task and a take-home writing assignment. The speaking portion required students to synthesize many of the skills they had learned and practiced in previous weeks.

For the writing component, students produced short papers in which they reflected on what they had done well and what they had admired in their peers' performances. They identified ideas or comments they had wanted to express but could not. They also pinpointed areas in which they planned to improve.

The rationale for creating this two-part exam was to combine one component that required students to think on their feet, to engage in discussions without the use of dictionaries or prepared scripts, with a component that encouraged meta-cognitive reflection on their performances. As will be discussed, this latter component provided both students and teachers with valuable information about each student's experience of the course.

**Table 3** *Academic discussion speaking test assessment criterion*

<b>Group Discussion</b> 60 points	Made relevant comments with clear reasons and examples	15 pts
	Responded to others by either agreeing or disagreeing	15 pts
	Showed good turn-taking strategies and encouraging others to participate in discussion	15 pts
	Spoke clearly and confidently without hesitation	15 pts
<b>Reaction Paper</b> 40 points	Paragraph 1	8 pts
	Paragraph 2	8 pts
	Paragraph 3	8 pts
	Paragraph 4	8 pts
	Paragraph 5	8 pts

## 2. Findings of the Study

On the final day of class, a course evaluation questionnaire consisting of 15 items was administered in English with Japanese translation. Students were given instructions for the questionnaire and were asked to fill in its two pages. They were asked to mark their choice on each Likert scale question. All 44 students from eight classes responded to the survey which took about 15 minutes to complete.

In addition to the questionnaire, students were asked to write a reaction paper and to submit it via email. In the reaction paper, they were asked to write about the areas in which they thought they had improved during the semester and about the skills they would like to develop in the next semester. They were given two weeks after the final day of class to submit. Thirty-nine out of 44 students submitted papers. In this section, statistical results from the course evaluation questionnaire and selected comments from the reaction papers are presented.

## 2. 1 Overall Evaluation

Table 4 illustrates students' overall evaluation of the course and teaching materials (Items 1 and 2). The results show that the majority of students felt that their overall speaking ability had improved ( $M = 4.28$ ,  $SD = 0.58$ ) and they felt more confident when having discussions in English ( $M = 4.08$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ).

**Table 4** *Result of course evaluation questionnaire (Items 1 and 2)*

Questionnaire Items	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1 My overall speaking ability has improved.	44	4.28	0.58
2 I am more confident when having discussions in English.	44	4.08	0.75

**Note.** Ratings are measured on a scale of 1-5. 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree; 0 = I don't know

In the reaction paper, students commented as follows:

- a. *I worried that whether we could talk 30 minutes with only one topic. However after starting conversation, time passed in a flash. Our topic was close to life, so I could enjoy this conversation, and I could say a lot of my opinion.* (Student Comment 1)
- b. *In our first class, I couldn't say any opinion to other people even not to my teacher. ...But in the discussion tests I think I could say more opinion and enjoyed speaking with other people in English than before. I think it's a really big improvement.* (Student Comment 2)

However, even though students felt their speaking ability had improved, in contrast to our expectations, not many students felt their speaking fluency had improved (Item 3;  $M = 3.14$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ) (Table 5). This is also related to the responses for Item 4, in which students answered that they are still not prepared enough to study abroad during their second year ( $M = 3.35$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ). Relative to the mean scores in Table 4, the mean scores were low.

**Table 5** *Result of course evaluation questionnaire (Items 3 and 4)*

Questionnaire Items	N	M	SD
3 My speaking fluency has improved.	44	3.14	0.93
4 I am more prepared to study abroad.	43	3.35	0.92

Since preparing students to study abroad is one of the main objectives of the course, to obtain a more qualitative understanding, several students were chosen randomly, contacted informally via email and asked why they did not feel more prepared to study abroad. Out of the eight students we contacted, seven responded. Selected responses:

- a. *I think studying abroad includes not only classes at a university . . . but also daily life (for example, communication with a host family).* (Student Comment 3)
- b. *I'm sure many students had opportunity to speak English in this small class, but in other English classes we don't get many opportunities to speak out.* (Student Comment 4)
- c. *. . . Many of us want much more experience of speaking English and also writing and reading it. I had so much opportunity of speaking English [in this class]. But what I thought was that it isn't enough yet.* (Student Comment 5)

## 2. 2 Discussion Skills

As regards students' reactions to the goals and objectives of the course, the result from Item 12 in Table 6 shows that they were clear ( $M = 4.57$ ,  $SD = 0.59$ ).

**Table 6** *Result of course evaluation questionnaire (Item 12)*

Questionnaire Items	N	M	SD
12 The goal and objectives were clear.	44	4.57	0.59

This is also reflected in students' response for Items 5.1–5.6 (Table 7). The mean scores were very high in all items ( $M = 4.02$ – $4.75$ ,  $SD = 0.46$ – $0.94$ ), indicating that students believe they have mastered the discussion skills covered in the course. This includes giving an opinion with reasons and examples, agreeing and/or disagreeing, turn-taking, asking for clarification, and inviting others to speak.

Students also reported that they had acquired discussion skills not listed on the course syllabus (Table 8). For instance, students noted that they had learned to encourage others to speak, to gesture, to use rejoinders, and to express themselves with greater clarity. Several students commented in the papers as follows:

- a. *After I took this discussion class, I finally realized that without reasons and examples, my words would not be able to convince somebody.* (Student 6)

- b. *[I learned] how to help everyone to join the discussion by asking his or her feelings or questions. (Student Comment 7)*
- c. *When I was junior high and high school student, I didn't have a chance to speak English, so I didn't know how to react when we discuss in English. However, I learned useful expressions and I used these expressions in this class, so now, I know how to react in English conversation. (Student Comment 8)*

**Table 7** *Result of course evaluation questionnaire (Items 5.1-5.6)*

Questionnaire Items	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
5 I have acquired the following skills.	44	3.14	0.93
5.1 Giving an opinion with reasons and examples.	40	4.28	0.60
5.2 Agreeing and/or disagreeing	44	4.41	0.69
5.3 Turn taking	44	4.16	0.94
5.4 Asking for clarification	43	4.02	0.83
5.5 Inviting others to speak	44	4.30	0.74
5.6 Others	8	4.75	0.46

**Table 8** *Follow up comments for Item 5.6 (N = 9)*

Responses	Frequency
Encouraging others to speak	1
Gestures	1
Responding to others	3
I became to like speaking English.	1
Asking questions to others	1
Having no silent time in conversation	1
Saying my opinion clearly	1

## 2. 3 Small Class Size

As regards small-size classes (with a maximum of six students per class), the majority of students had a very positive view of the learning environment (Table 9). They believed small-size classes are good for building speaking skills (Item 6;  $M = 4.89$ ,  $SD = 0.32$ ). Furthermore, they simply enjoyed the small-size classes (Item 7;  $M = 4.86$ ,  $SD = 0.35$ ).

**Table 9** *Result of course evaluation questionnaire (Items 6 and 7)*

Questionnaire Items	N	M	SD
6 Small-size classes are good for building my speaking skills.	44	4.89	0.32
7 I enjoy small-size classes.	44	4.86	0.35

The reason for liking the small-size classes could be explained by looking at the response from the students' reaction papers. This indicates that small-size classes may have created a different dynamic compared with classes of more than 20 students. A student commented:

*Because this ... class consists of 5 students, so I can have many opportunities to speak English and feel very comfortable. I think this class has the most chances to speak English.* (Student Comment 9)

While they benefited from small-size classes, students felt their amount of speaking time in class was not enough (Table 10;  $M = 3.64$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ).

**Table 10** *Result of course evaluation questionnaire (Item 8)*

Questionnaire Items	N	M	SD
8 I'm satisfied with my amount of speaking time in class.	44	3.64	1.18

This sentiment is also apparent in students' reaction papers when they wrote about areas in which they want to improve next semester. One student reported:

*I have wondered what we can do until the studying abroad. I would like to discuss . . . more and more [after the class ends].* (Student Comment 10)

## 2. 4 Course Materials

Students' comments indicated that the course textbook was too challenging for students in the lower levels (Item 9;  $M = 3.84$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ). The result also suggested that the course textbook was not interesting for some students (Item 10;  $M = 3.33$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ). Furthermore, they believed that the course textbook did not help improve their speaking ability (Item 11;  $M = 3.16$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ). Compared with the course textbook, students enjoyed the themes covered in their supplementary readings (Item 13;  $M = 4.36$   $SD = 0.75$ ) and materials provided by individual teachers including worksheets for pair or group activities, gap-filling exercises, and lists of useful expressions more. A student commented:

*The handouts that I got from my instructor were more interesting than the textbook.* (Student Comment 11)

Also, they felt that they were more appropriate for their levels (Item 14;  $M = 4.14$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ) (Table 11).

**Table 11** *Result of course evaluation questionnaire (Items 9-11, 13 and 14)*

	Questionnaire Items	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
9	The course textbook was appropriate for my level.	44	3.84	0.87
10	The course textbook was interesting.	43	3.33	0.78
11	The course textbook helped me improve my speaking.	43	3.16	0.95
13	The themes covered in the readings were interesting.	44	4.36	0.75
14	The levels of the readings were appropriate for my level.	44	4.14	0.85

## 2. 5 Desire to Improve

Table 12 shows students' perception of areas in which they wish to improve in the future. Significantly, 24 out of 59 students (about 40%) who responded indicated they want to learn more vocabulary ( $n = 16$ ) or to acquire more useful expressions ( $n = 8$ ).

**Table 12** *Students' perception on things to improve (N = 59)*

Comments	Frequency
1. Learn more vocabulary	16
2. Use more useful expressions	8
3. Improve grammar.	6
4. Speak more fluently	5
5. Improve listening skills	3
6. Speak logically using data for support	2
7. Be able to convince / persuade others	2
8. Express opinions much more clearly.	2
9. Improve pronunciation	2
10. Express things in simple English.	2
11. Would like to lead discussions next semester	1
12. Practice during lunchtime	1
13. Prepare for discussions in advance	1
14. Use a longer sentence	1
15. Speak more actively	1
16. Not give up saying something, even if it is difficult to express.	1
17. Use more gestures and make eye contacts	1
18. Respond to others naturally	1
19. Speak more about social issues	1
20. Use more examples	1
21. Think things in English.	1

**Note.** Students were able to write more than one response.

This is further stated in students' reaction paper as follows:

- a. *What I want to improve now is my quantity of vocabulary. I think the most important thing in language is not to stop learning words.* (Student Comment 12)
- b. *If I have a vocabulary which I don't know, I stop speaking and became silent. I think it is really not good behavior when I work . . . somewhere in the future.* (Student Comment 13)
- c. *I would like to react more to what others said by using the handout you gave us in the first class. That can help us to have a discussion more real and to continue the discussion by making deeper point.* (Student Comment 14)

## 2. 6 Summary of the results

Students generally responded favorably to the curriculum as a whole, feeling that the course goal and objectives were clear ( $M = 4.57$ ,  $SD = 0.59$ ). The majority of students thought their overall speaking ability had improved ( $M = 4.28$ ,  $SD = 0.58$ ) and felt more confident having discussions in English ( $M = 4.08$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ). They also reported that they had mastered the discussion skills covered in class ( $M = 4.02$ – $4.75$ ,  $SD = 0.46$ – $0.94$ ). In addition, students had a very positive view of learning in small-size classes (Item 7;  $M = 4.86$ ,  $SD = 0.35$ ) and believed that the class dynamics had facilitated their speaking skills (Item 6;  $M = 4.89$ ,  $SD = 0.32$ ).

Yet, several problems were indicated. First, questionnaire items related to the teaching materials had lower mean scores compared with other items. Students evaluated the course textbook as being inappropriate for certain levels (Item 9;  $M = 3.84$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ), and not interesting (Item 10;  $M = 3.33$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ). Most striking was the evidence that suggested students did not feel the textbook facilitated their speaking ability (Item 11;  $M = 3.16$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ). Other instructors who were teaching lower-level classes reported similar concerns. This was due in part to the fact that only one textbook was provided for all levels.

Second, not many students felt their speaking fluency had improved (Item 3;  $M = 3.14$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ). They also felt that they are not yet ready to study abroad in their second year ( $M = 3.35$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ).

Third, about 40% of students indicated that they need to acquire more vocabulary words and expressions for academic discussions. Regarding vocabulary skills, little emphasis was put on explicitly teaching new vocabulary words during class hours, and the course textbook did not include vocabulary sections.

### 3. Discussion

In general terms, the course appears to have served its stated purpose. Most students reported that they appreciated and benefited from the small classes and that their speaking skills had improved. Furthermore, the data indicates that students feel they acquired the target skills as presented in the course syllabus. In addition to results suggesting a positive impact on students, there are also data that highlight areas requiring further consideration and adjustment. While it is encouraging to receive positive feedback, it is the criticism that provides the greatest opportunity to make improvements to ensure that what happens in the classroom does in fact correspond to the goals of the course and to student needs.

It is clear that the level of the students and the difficulty of the materials should be reconciled. One possible drawback to assigning overly challenging reading to students is the need to spend an inordinate amount of class time explaining the material. Indeed, this occurred several times in the academic discussion course. One ninety-minute class per week is not a great deal of time, so in order to maintain focus on academic discussion skills, using primary and supplementary materials that are of an appropriate level is crucial. As Kitao and S. K. Kitao (1997) state “materials are the center of instruction and one of the most important influences on what goes on in the classroom.” In other words, the right materials allow students to channel their energy into achieving the course goals.

Since the course was designed to help students develop academic discussion skills prior to their semester abroad, the relatively low mean score (3.35) for the statement “I am more prepared to study abroad” was salient. In fact, this prompted further communication, an email sent to randomly selected students, when none had been planned. This yielded useful and somewhat surprising information. First, student responses indicated clearly that, because the course was only half complete, they did not feel prepared to go abroad; they felt they needed more time in order to fully develop and practice the target skills. Other comments suggested that academic discussion skills were not the only factor determining preparedness to study abroad.

Students also identified other areas of the study-abroad experience in which language skills will be necessary – specifically, communicating with their host families. Fukazawa (2008) has demonstrated that Japanese students encountered more linguistic challenges in dealing with their host families when studying abroad than they did in academic contexts. In its current form, the academic discussion course does not address communication skills suited for communicating with host families; however, in assessing students’ overall preparedness to study abroad, it may be important to take this aspect into consideration.

Though grammar and vocabulary were addressed in an *ad hoc* manner, they were not built into the academic discussion curriculum. Students' comments indicate they feel the need to develop in these two areas. It may be that students in the academic discussion classes would benefit from some basic grammar and/or vocabulary work that complements the course focus of academic discussion. Or perhaps simply providing guidance on pursuing vocabulary and grammar development autonomously would be sufficient. Alternatively, a careful look at the overall first-year program might reveal other opportunities for students to focus on grammar and vocabulary. At a minimum, though, some further thought needs to be given to this matter.

## 4. Conclusion

The most encouraging result of the first semester of the academic discussion class may very well be the dialogue that was initiated between students and instructors. Student questionnaire responses, reflective writing assignments and email correspondence provided a great deal of useful information. Of course, this type of communication is part and parcel of teaching, and yet when it proves a viable means of seeing through students' eyes, knowing how they are experiencing a class, and understanding how they feel about their own performance, steps can be taken to make improvements to a course that are in line both with students' needs and with the goals of the course.

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