
International Forum
Vol. 13, No. 2
October 2010
pp. 21-30

FEATURE

**Classroom Discussion in Southeast Asia:
Concerns in Thai Classrooms**

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***Abstract:** This article defines the concept of classroom discussion as well as the benefits of discussion in the classroom. In addition, barriers to classroom discussion that are common to classrooms are discussed with a focus on problems unique to classroom discussion in Thailand. Suggestions for overcoming these problems are presented.*

Students need to participate in class in order for learning to take place. Yet the problem is that many students do not participate in class in any way that is beneficial to their learning (Gullette, 1992). One way in which students can participate is through classroom discussion. In Thailand, a country in Southeast Asia, discussion is rare in the classroom for cultural reasons. Despite this, educators in Southeast Asia must develop strategies to improve both the quantity and quality of discussion that is happening in their classrooms.

There are five ideas related to classroom discussion with which educators need to be familiar in order to implement discussion in their classroom. The first neglected, but necessary concept is a definition of classroom discussion. Second, educators need to develop an understanding of the benefits of discussion. Third, educators need to be aware of the common barriers to discussion. Fourth, in addition to common barriers, teachers in Thailand and the greater region of Southeast Asia need to know distinct cultural barriers to classroom discussion that are unique to the part of the world in which they are teaching. Lastly, it is necessary to have suggestions for approaching discussion so that educators have guidelines for discussion. These ideas will serve as the framework for this paper.

Defining Discussion

There are many definitions of what constitutes a discussion. Discussion is an exchange of knowledge between teacher and student yet it is primarily an exchange of knowledge between students. This type of communication is useful for focusing the learning on the students with the teacher serving in the role of

moderator who encourages the students to wrestle with ideas in the classroom (Gullette, 1992).

Classroom discussion has been defined as being concerned with the development of knowledge (Ezzedeen, 2008). This is different from daily conversation in which there may be no goal for the development of knowledge. Orlich et. al (2010) define discussion as an exchange of information that has a reason; this is not the same as recitation. Within the literature, there is a clear distinction between a discussion and a recitation. Wilen (2004) describes a recitation as the teacher asking a question and the student answering it. This method emphasizes lower level thinking, whereas discussion is intended to stimulate the higher-level thinking that students need.

Innes (2007) considers discussion to be not only the dialogue between teachers and students but also the dialogue among students within a classroom. This emphasis on student-to-student discussion moves the learning from teacher-centered to student-centered learning. Student-centered learning means the student taking some responsibility or role in their learning process (Hickman, 2007). One of the priorities of classroom discussion is to shift some of the responsibility of teaching from the teacher to the students. Through the interaction of opinions, student-centered learning can take place. Students need to play a part in their learning process, and a teacher can employ discussion in their classroom to achieve this. Discussion, therefore, is for incorporating student participation in the classroom with a goal of peer-to-peer as well as peer-to-teacher interaction.

Reasons for Discussion

There are many reasons why instructors should promote discussion in the classroom, especially in Thailand. The benefits can be divided into at least two distinct categories: thinking skills, and affective development. These categories are pertinent to Thailand because the Thai government expects all the course outlines of tertiary education to address these two domains (D. Sattayawaksakul, personal communication, October 29, 2009). When discussion happens in a classroom it can contribute to the development of several skills within each of the categories mentioned.

Thinking Skills

Thinking skills, as defined in Bloom's Taxonomy, include summarizing, applying, synthesizing, and evaluating (Woditsch & Schmittroth, 1991). Discussion directly challenges students to develop these skills as they engage in the process of sharing. When speaking in class, students need skills from all levels of Bloom's taxonomy to engage the teacher and/or other students. Classroom discussion, properly done, also contributes directly to students' development of metacognition, or awareness of their own thinking (Metcalfe &

Shimamura, 1996). When students articulate their thoughts in a discussion, it helps them to be aware of what they are thinking, and this is what helps to improve their metacognition.

Helping students to develop content mastery and problem solving skills is another benefit of using classroom discussion (Morgan, 1994; Wilen, 2004). As students engage their minds and use the content they possess, it helps them to develop a deeper understanding of this content. This deeper understanding can often translate into better academic performance. Through the development of thinking skills, students can perform better in school (Nelson, 2010). Such skills as these are what students in Southeast Asia need to develop in order to be successful.

Affective Development

Discussion plays a critical role in the development of skills related to the affective domain. The affective domain relates to changes in a person's interest, attitudes, and morals (Body of Knowledge Committee, 2008). When students are engaged in discussion it directly leads to a change in attitude (Henning et. al, 2008; Morgan, 1994). Attitude 'is an individual's mental evaluation of someone or something (Smith & Mackie, 2000). During discussion, students frequently make adjustments to their attitude based on new information. Sometimes their current attitude is strengthened by having to defend it. Hearing the opinion of peers is more powerful in discussion than hearing the opinion of a teacher, and it has a greater impact on changing attitudes (Quinn & You, 2010). In other words, discussion can help to change a student's attitude about a person or an idea, and this is a method that a teacher can employ when looking to influence a student in the affective domain.

A topic closely related to attitude is morality. For many of the same reasons that discussion can change attitude, it can also cause a change in an individual's sense of what is ethical or moral. Depending on the content of the topic, morality can be a tool used to persuade individuals to think differently about an idea or concept, which could not be accomplished through lecture or some other form of teaching.

Discussion can be useful for teachers who are looking for ways to develop their students' cognitive and affective skills. In addition, students' minds can be changed, and their thinking abilities can grow. The development of the cognitive and affective domain is a priority in the Thai education system since these skills have been seen as deficient in the students of this country (Government of Thailand, 1999). This is why it is important for teachers to cultivate the development of these domains using discussion both in Thailand and also in the rest of Southeast Asia.

Barriers to Classroom Discussion

The barriers to classroom discussion can be divided into two categories: general barriers that apply to any class and barriers that are uniquely applicable to Thailand because of the distinct culture and character of the people. Through understanding the barriers to discussion, educators can develop strategies for dealing with them and find ways to help students develop the discussion skills they need.

General Barriers to Classroom Discussion

General barriers to discussion include not understanding or failing to explain how a discussion should be conducted, time constraints, focus on lower level questions, using the textbook for the content of discussion, the experience and attitude of the teacher, prejudging silent students, and the size of the class. Teachers often do not understand exactly how to conduct a classroom discussion (Gullette, 1992), or, if they do understand it, they sometimes fail to explain it to their students. This may be in part due to the assumption that teachers make that everyone knows how to conduct himself or herself in a discussion during class. Initially, developing discussions takes a large amount of time (Morgan, 1994). This should not be surprising, since most activities involving higher-level thinking require greater time commitment. The time requirement and the complexity of developing discussions often prevent many teachers from attempting to use this method of learning in class (Henning et. al, 2008). Discussions commonly become bogged down with lower level questions that often have only one correct answer (Henning, 2005; Wilen, 2004), which was previously defined as recitation. The goal of discussion is to have questions in which there are several equally viable answers; if there is only one answer, there is not much to discuss. Many teachers mistakenly believe that single answer questions constitute discussion.

A second barrier is when discussion is based on the content of the textbook. Basing a discussion on textbooks often stifles discussion because students typically do not critically judge the content of textbooks, but often consider it infallible (Henning, 2008). Students make this mistaken assumption because they lack the declarative knowledge to assess the veracity of a textbook. Teachers often make a similar assumption when they assume that the student will critically analyze the text and come to class ready to share their opinion on the textbook. In addition, the content of the textbook is often outside the experience of the student and, therefore, is not yet relevant to the life of the student (Ezzedeem, 2008). The expert teacher can identify false arguments in the text and may want students to discover these and discuss them in class. However, the students consider the textbook to be a perfect expositor on the

facts of the subject and often will not question the veracity of statements made in the text.

Another related barrier to good classroom discussion is that the expertise of the teacher can often intimidate students, and limit the potential of a discussion (Ezzedeen, 2008). If an instructor comes across as all-knowing, this usually discourages discussion significantly. Students will often fear that their ideas or comments are not good enough in such a situation (Shafer, 2009; Wilen, 2004). Discussing information that is outside one's experience and doing so in front of an expert on the subject would be considered intimidating for many people, not just students. One can imagine the trepidation of a freshman undergrad when asked to share an opinion about a topic in which the teacher has a PhD. Moreover, teachers often prejudge students who are silent as not wanting to learn (Cady, 2007). The teacher with the expertise and a PhD has much to say about a subject and anticipates a lively interaction with the students. However, this never materializes, and often causes frustration for the teacher. This is a mistake because students are often silent to protect themselves from the humiliation of an incorrect response (Duff, 2002).

The size of the class can also influence discussion. If a class is too large or too small, it can limit the potential of discussion (Ezzedeen, 2008). It is much easier to have a discussion with 15 students than with 50. In larger classes, it may not be feasible to have classroom discussions unless the class is divided into smaller groups; however, whole-class discussion is a reasonable strategy for smaller classes. Of course, the size of the class is often outside of the control of the teacher. Despite this, teachers need to be aware of this when deciding if discussion is appropriate, and how to implement it in the teaching situation they are facing. If teachers want to include discussion in their classes, they must be aware of and develop methods for dealing with these barriers.

Classroom Barriers Unique to Thailand

In addition to the barriers that may present themselves in any classroom, there are several barriers uniquely challenging to Thailand for students in international schools. Among the problems, which are interrelated one with another, are language, groupthink, lack of critical thinking, and avoidance of disagreement.

Speaking in a way that is articulate in English, which is a second language, is difficult for many students, and particularly for students from Thailand. Limited language skills make classroom discussion difficult, as students lack the descriptive language for discussion (Hook, 2008). When asked to participate in a discussion a language learner is attempting to do several tasks simultaneously: listen to the discussion topic, translate the discussion into their native language, develop an answer in their native language, and translate their native language

answer into English for class discussion. This process is daunting for many Thai students, which may be a reason they choose not to participate in discussion.

There is a pervading groupthink collectivist culture in Thailand that limits the potential for discussion in a classroom. Groupthink is defined as a group emphasizing agreement on decision and minimizes critical thinking (Weiten, 2007). Groupthink manifests itself through three characteristics: overestimating the group, closed-mindedness, and pressure to conform (Tolman, 1996). The last two traits are particularly prevalent in Thailand. People who do not follow the decisions and consensus of the group are subject to social rejection, which is an effective way to coerce certain behavior from the people. Contrary thinking and nonconformity are culturally unacceptable since agreeing and avoiding arguments is socially important. Thailand has a collectivist culture which focuses on interdependence and maintaining the integrity of the community (Newman & Newman, 2009). Independent thinking could at times be considered troublesome. From the Thai Buddhist perspective of valuing harmony for the sake of a better future life, disagreeing could have spiritual ramifications in relation to reincarnation. Since rewards in the next life are often determined by the behavior in the previous life, someone who clashes with the groupthink mentality will not reap the reward he/she wants in the future life.

A consequence of this culture of collectivism and groupthink is the total avoidance of arguing and disagreeing. Social harmony is highly valued in Thailand (Insom, 2009). This is contrary to the tenet of discussion that argument is needed for the advancement of knowledge (Henning, 2005). Gullette (1992), states that one prerequisite for discussion is conflict. In discussion, conflicting ideas need expression in order for critical thinking to take place. When disagreeing goes against the culture, and sharing various opinions is frowned upon, this makes it difficult for true discussion to happen in a classroom.

The influences of the culture in Thailand prevent critical thinking from taking place. Students are expected to listen and outwardly conform to the expectations of peers and those in authority. It is unthinkable to question an authority figure since the student must show respect at all times. This limits discussion to what the teacher or a group of peers think on a subject. A basic concept of discussion is the idea of open debate and critical thinking; however, the pressure of conformity that is common in a collectivist society such as Thailand prevents this from happening.

A current priority in Thailand is the development of critical thinking skills. However, one of the root problems of this lack of critical thinking in Thailand is the cultural taboo of vigorous debate and defense of one's opinion. Critical thinking involves asking tough questions, openly disagreeing, defending opinions and, at times, arguing. Within a Western classroom, such occurrences take place. However, a culture such as Thailand that discourages disagreement

inadvertently discourages critical thinking in the process. Therefore, to encourage critical thinking educators in Thailand need to encourage true classroom discussion, which involves overcoming the cultural norm of avoiding disagreement.

These problems with the English language, groupthink, lack of critical thinking, and an avoidance of disagreeing make it difficult for true discussion to happen in college classrooms in Thailand. In dealing with these problems, educators need to find ways to circumvent the culture and demonstrate to students that it is permissible to disagree openly when discussion is taking place.

Suggestions for Discussion

With the problems mentioned about discussion there also many solutions to them. There are at least two categories into which solutions are classified: solution before discussion and solutions during discussion.

Before Discussion

Before the discussion begins, the teacher can take several steps to help the discussion to be productive. Prior reading is important in order to provide a context for the students when discussion is going to take place (Ezzedeen, 2008; Gullette, 1992). Through developing students' background knowledge, students will have a better idea of what to share during a discussion. Teachers often make the mistake of wanting to engage students in a discussion without providing the prior knowledge students need on a subject. The topics need to be arguable and challenging without one superior answer, and the students must be familiar with it (Wilén, 2004; Henning, 2008). It is difficult to comment on an idea on which one does not possess knowledge, and this often leads to silence in the classroom.

Students need to know that there are no wrong answers in an open-ended discussion (Reese, 2008). If the topic only has one acceptable answer this is not a topic for discussion. Discussion happens in the classroom through questions that cause reflection. In classroom discussion, one goal could be to have students share their opinion on a subject with the idea that all responses are acceptable. This helps students with dealing with fear over sharing their opinion. Many students in Thailand struggle with the idea of there being more than one "right answer." Their primary concern is to know the correct answer for the test. Through engaging Thai students with open-ended questions in discussion in the classroom teachers can help them to overcome this misperception of education and develop higher-level thinking skills in their students.

Establishing a classroom that is conducive to discussion is necessary for a teacher to encourage active classroom discussion. Before the students are in the room, the desks should be arranged in a U shape (Ezzedeen, 2008). This allows students to see one another when speaking and allows them to see each other's

body language, which is a significant part of communication. If the desks are in rows, it is difficult for true discussion to take place because of the lack of eye contact. The teacher must also monitor the climate of the classroom (Wilén, 2004). The climate relates to how the students feel emotionally in the classroom whether happy, sad, confident or fearful. Teachers can influence this through the demeanor they present to the students. If students feel uncomfortable, they will not talk. The teacher needs to be aware of this.

During Discussion

Students are often reticent to share their opinion. To overcome this, a teacher can employ transformational leadership skills during discussion in the classroom. This includes such skills as charisma, showing concern for students, and causing intellectual stimulation (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2009). These skills can often help students to develop a desire to participate in class. Through showing care and developing relationships with students, teachers can help them to feel comfortable to take part in discussions, which will benefit the students in the learning process. This approach is particularly applicable within Thailand because Buddhist students value relationships for the reason that harmony within the group is so important. Intellectual stimulation relates to critical thinking and is another trait that a teacher should possess when fostering classroom discussion.

During the discussion, the pace is important. Teachers need to slow down during a discussion, especially when it involves ESL students. Slowing down is needed so that students have time to process and respond to what is being said during the discussion (Wilén, 2004). However, keeping the pace at one speed is not best; rather, changing the pace of the discussion will help to keep students engaged in the discussion (Gullette, 1992). While students are thinking, it is useful to summarize, repeat, and/or ask follow-up questions (Henning, 2005). This helps to reinforce what has been shared during the course of the discussion.

Conclusion

Discussion is a process in which students share information in the pursuit of knowledge. The benefits of discussion include the development of thinking and affective skills. Problems with discussion are lack of knowledge of what a discussion is and lack of background information on the topic. Cultural specific problems of Thailand include the collectivist culture and a desire to avoid disagreement and argument.

There are problems in incorporating discussion into the classroom, but there are also solutions. A teacher must prepare for discussion in order for it to be productive. The classroom environment matters and the teacher needs to adjust the seating arrangement and be cognizant of the emotional climate of the

classroom. The topics presented for discussion must be debatable and the students need a body of knowledge from which they can form their opinion. Lastly, the teacher can take steps during a discussion by changing the pace and summarizing statements that students share. Through this, classroom discussion can mentally stimulate students in ways that are beneficial to the higher level thinking that is becoming the expectation in Thai classrooms.

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