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THE GROUP DISCUSSION AND PREP
AS PEDAGOGICAL APPARATUS

ABSTRACT: This paper suggests an innovation in the socio-linguistic conditions under which languages operate in the Indian classroom. Using group discussions as a pedagogical tool allows for both thought and language to occur outside the usual linearity or hierarchy between the teacher and student. The group discussion creates a space for a rational analytical response and communicative interaction between students. It also achieves the ‘muting’ of the teacher, who becomes a better facilitator of language. Keeping in mind the distinction between the debate or argument and the group discussion, and the brevity that the last of these typically requires, the PREP (Point Reason Example Point) formula is suggested for use within the ambit of the group discussion. This formula requires students to frame their contribution to the group in just four sentences: to come to the point, to justify and illustrate it, and reiterate it. It helps students become more thoughtful as well as articulate in the English classroom.

KEYWORDS: communication skills, model for speech, model for thought, thought-generating modules, muting the teacher

0. INTRODUCTION

Group discussions are widely used for the evaluation of entrants to management schools in India. I will argue for the group discussion as a pedagogic apparatus: as a method of teaching and learning instead of evaluation alone, for students of the faculties of Arts and Humanities. I will also try to argue that the use of the group discussion could be a means of moving towards a dialogic system of learning/teaching, for a more performative and self-actualized English classroom in India. The model of pedagogy I propose is encapsulated in the Point Reason Example Point (PREP) formula, in which a student must quickly articulate his or her point in just four sentences initially and more elaborately later. This task makes them think quicker, and think analytically.

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1. THE GROUP DISCUSSION

1.1 The Group Discussion for management school entrants

The Group Discussion (GD) is a tool used for management entrance examinations, to identify potential candidates for management institutes which pick and groom potential leaders to fit into the roles of managers. The GD, as practiced in a popular training programme for students aspiring for admission to management schools, focuses on three basic qualities thought to be inherent in leaders: (1) competence, (2) empathy and (3) resilience. Aspirants are drilled in these three areas, feedback is given and models of behaviour are taught. However the evaluation in a GD is based on speaking, listening and situation handling, which are considered communication skills that correspond respectively to the three basic qualities of a leader enumerated above. These communication skills are evaluated largely on the basis of verbal performance.

The goal of a trainer in a management training institute is limited to getting the student into a management school, an institute or a company. The apparent success of the training is in some measure due to the filtering function of the qualifying entrance test, usually a test in the written mode. As a teacher of English, however, I am interested in the group discussion as a tool for use with students who neither aspire to management training institutes or management schools, nor have been through any filtration process other than the state and central examination boards; but who nevertheless need to articulate their ideas well: to make themselves understood, and feel competent in their fields, wherever they are.

1.2 The Group Discussion for Arts and Humanities students

I think my students are capable of finding and excelling in fields which do not have a mass appeal; special fields suited to their skills, in which they can find their own niche. I have had students of English Literature who are working in public finance; machine translation; most of my performing arts students will be professional artists one day; and I am sure that many of the arts students will find jobs that are tailor-made for them, instead of them being tailor-made for the job. It is for such students that I would like to turn the GD to good advantage. There is a potential
for grooming students in clear expressive skills, which serve them well anywhere, in whatever vocation they choose.

2. SKILLS FOR THE GD

To understand the possible theoretical justification for the three skills that the GD focuses on: speaking, listening and situation handling, I would like to refer to the Althusserian notion of ‘Ideological State Apparatuses’ (Althusser 1970 [2001, 2006]). A number of students come from economic and cultural backgrounds wherein these skills are already available to them, as schools have groomed them to fit into the world and cooperate with the system. They do not need the training that management training institutes give them, save to polish their communicative skills and become more aware of them. A person who can ‘speak well’ is considered a well-organized person. Skill in listening shows empathy and processing of problems which leaders have to handle. Situation handling, be it talking to a noisy group, a silent group, or a static group in which there are no ideas, is linked to the ideological notion of ‘speaking well.’ This model also matches, obliquely if not directly, the ‘three viewpoints’ for the study of a sentence proposed by Claude Hagège, elaborated on below.

A student can be made aware that there are models of speech and thought that one can use. A model of speech provides a way of putting forward what one wants to say in as uncomplicated and clear a manner as possible, so that what one intends to communicate is communicated without ambiguity and in the shortest possible time. It must be kept in mind that a GD which has about ten minutes allotted to it may have eleven speakers keen to speak, and speak more than once; so each speaker gets a chance to speak for a minute or less. Students thus are trained or taught to understand the difference between a debate, an argument and a group discussion. A debate is clearly an inappropriate model, as it presents an argument aimed at convincing people. I teach students that in the group discussion one does not try to convince anyone but gets across what one has in mind, and moves on. In a model which is argumentative and long winding, the point would be lost; the maxim ‘Human beings are
bad listeners’ holds. Thus the model of speech for the GD aims for communication in the shortest time possible within the given constraints of time and people.

The model of thought is necessary so that thoughts can be generated. In the absence of thought, there will be nothing to say or learn, or else ideas will be bandied about without any kind of interaction or group dynamics. The GD might fall silent or get stale if there are no ways to make the participants question ideas, and think about relevant but unexpressed ideas. Different kinds of GDs require different kinds of thought-generating modules. The model of thought for a Topical Propositional GD, which requires a yes or no answer to a proposition, could follow the situational approach: thoughts are generated around the locational setting, the social setting and people involved. An example for a topical proposition GD is ‘Contraception should be banned’. For a Topical Issue GD the model appropriate is a look at causes, effects and solutions. An example for the Topical Issue GD is ‘Contraception’. For Case Study GDs, the abstract of the case is plotted at the centre of a blank sheet; how different players in an organizational set up have become part of the problem, and how they can be part of the solution, is considered.

Though different kinds of GDs demand different thought models, one has always to speak in the PREP formula illustrated in section 4. Often the thought module is not present initially; students are to be made aware that they have not been thinking. Again, students often struggle initially to make their ideation fit into the model of speech. Learning to use these models of thought and speech is thus a great learning experience in itself.

3. THE PRAGMATICS AND SOCIOLINGUISTICS OF THE CLASSROOM

Though it might seem archaic or simplistic to teach forms of thought and forms of speech, as if ‘speech is the dress of thought,’ pedagogically this model is productive in the classroom. Moreover, in the context of
the proposal for ‘three viewpoints’ on a sentence by Claude Hagège (1992:161-2), it is by no means a simple model:

A sentence… may be studied from three complementary points of view. The first one considers it in relation with the entire system of the language. Hence we study for this perspective, the relationships between different terms as well as the expression of these relationships. This is the morphosyntactic point of view, or viewpoint 1. The second point of view connects the sentences to the external world they refer to. Thus instead of the forms, here we take into account the meaning conveyed by these forms. Hence we propose to designate as viewpoint 2, the semantico-referential viewpoint.

Lastly, from the third point of view, a sentence is studied in its relation with the speaker, who in turn is related to a hearer. The speaker selects a particular strategy, a particular manner: of presentation, building up a hierarchy between what is stated and that about which the statement is. Hence we propose to call this point of view the enunciative-hierarchical point of view.

The model gives the student a short term skill to master in the classroom, and a longer term goal to look forward to; i.e. making himself/herself articulate whenever s/he speaks. More importantly it makes for ‘noise in the classroom’ where the student and not the teacher makes meaningful noises, hears her own voice and actualizes herself. However, caution is necessary, for as Colin Peacock says (1990:39):

Many experienced teachers will quickly lose patience with the kind of lesson that has been described. In some classes, just as in traditional directive lessons, pupils are not prepared to accept the rules and conventions of this kind of formal discursive lesson. Opinions are shouted across the room with great gusto, sometimes in a simultaneous chorus. Few pupils seem prepared to listen to points of view that conflict with their own values and beliefs. Some are happy to escape
altogether and retreat into a personal dream world untouched by the lesson’s debate. At its worst such a lesson is a travesty of a discussion; it becomes an incoherent babble of opinions. Even at its best, when discussion is well organized and tolerant, with a large number of pupils participating, a sense of dissatisfaction remains.

What happens is what I would like to call a ‘muting of the teacher.’ This is a valuable technique for a sensitive teacher: the teacher moves away from the group and seems as if not to be there. This makes the students stand on their own feet and trip over, make mistakes, use jargon, colloquialisms, creolized language and so on, but nevertheless communicate and find confidence in communicating. The over-anxious teacher, like the over-anxious parent, rushes in to help, delaying the process of learning. Thus muting the teacher is an aid to learning and is a skill of unlearning rather than learning.

Floor giving and floor receiving are part of a pragmatic process of handling space. Floor giving implies letting another person use my space, and in return a sensitive audience or person will pick up from the body language or the verbal signals that s/he is invited to use the space which the speaker has willingly though temporarily abdicated for him or her. However, the anxiety-ridden teacher makes floor giving minimal as the teacher wants to prove his or her supremacy. The floor space of the teacher is much like the space of the actor who uses space on stage. The audience space is taken up by the students. Seldom does the teacher relinquish her space so that students can be actors in the class, except perhaps when the student is made to answer questions or read; a controlled floor giving by the teacher as a pragmatic consideration for some student participation. In a group discussion floor giving by a teacher who plays mute for the period of the group discussion becomes a confidence building exercise for the student.

It is this confidence building which is most often lacking when language and literature are taught. If students are not articulate in class, it is to some extent due to a de-skilling that takes place at school, and re-skilling becomes imperative.
4. THE PREP FORMULA AND ANALYTIC COMMUNICATION

It helps students in disciplines like political science, sociology, or English literature to start finding ways of thinking and articulating (a) what they want to say, (b) what they thought they said, (c) what they actually say, and (d) what the other person ‘receives.’ These are the four basic elements that could define the communicative situation in a group discussion concretely.

In most undergraduate and perhaps postgraduate courses as well, students are not able to articulate their thoughts, as rote learning and reproduction of content form a major chunk of their training. The Point Reason Example Point (PREP) formula for a GD teaches them to quickly articulate their ideas in just four sentences initially. PREP makes them think quicker and think analytically. When one initially tries to make a point, the point may not be clear in itself, as it may be just an unsupported statement. The reason for the statement may lie somewhere outside the immediate context. Giving a reason for the point makes the analysis possible. For example, the statement ‘Railways should be privatized in India’ makes a Point which might or might not have takers, and might lead to argument unless the Reason is given. When one adds the Reason ‘…because they are badly managed,’ there is more clarity about the direction of thought, which permits analysis. Most importantly it validates the Point that has been articulated. When one adds the Example ‘…in some sections of India people travel ticketless,’ it consolidates the point and the reason by concretization. The search for a good or appropriate example for the point makes the mind sift through possible examples, which consolidates the point. The final repetition of the Point in the same or other words hammers the content home. The repetition of the point may seem ridiculous to students, until they are made aware that human beings are bad listeners, which is why the point needs to be repeated.

The PREP formula possibly makes students aware that one should validate what one says for it to be acceptable. For most listeners, it is the reason given for the point that validates it. Compare the statements ‘Globalization is beneficial to local creativity,’ where the point is not
validated with a reason; ‘Globalization is beneficial to local creativity as local tastes, temperaments and even climates differ,’ where the statement is validated with a reason; and ‘Globalization is beneficial to local creativity as local tastes, temperaments and even climates differ. Consider the production of jeans in this country, where you no longer have blue jeans alone, but a number of varieties and designs,’ where the point and the reason are consolidated with an example.

In a group discussion, one has to make a useful contribution in perhaps a fraction of a minute. In some GDs it is important to speak even if one’s English is unacceptable. A well worked-out group discussion is one in which a person is heard every time, and her presence is noted, even if by a counter PREP, or (dis)agreement with what is being said. The PREP makes the student conscious of how to get the point across in the least possible time. Many students fail to make a point at all, or hedge around the point and never come to it. Most often it is the reasons, and sometimes the examples, which make them think about what the point actually is, and how to put it across.

It is here that the teacher might be of some assistance as s/he may be able to express what is being said in a more cogent way. The teacher may find that a number of points are clustered together, making the articulation difficult and complex. Clarity in what is being said is required not only in writing but also in speech. Notwithstanding Spivak’s caution ‘We know plain prose cheats’ (Morton 2003: pp. 5-6),¹ until one achieves the status of a Spivak after years of complicated reading and thinking, one has to be clear in what one says. It is one’s understanding of complex ideas that is tested in examinations and interviews.

5. CONCLUSION

It is my experience that a learner acquires some competence in the speech model in about four sessions, though it may take a while before the value of the different thought models is seen and learnt. However, the thought model is an effective pedagogical tool inasmuch as students are taught not to be dogmatic, but to give a reason for their stand. In the
situational approach, different situations have to be thought of and thus vocabulary, expression, the complexity of the situation and its analysis are all achieved together.

To sum up, a group discussion becomes a pragmatic tool of learning and teaching, it mutes the teacher and helps the teacher learn what the students’ needs are. It makes the students participants in their own role as learners and makes them actors and not mere observers. Thus it is an innovative approach to the classroom which makes learning and teaching enjoyable, even though initially the question of control of the class would be a problem for the teacher.

NOTES


   Like many other thinkers of the 20th century, including the German philosopher Theodor Adorno (1903-69) in particular, Spivak crucially challenges the common-sense assumption that clear, transparent language is the best way to represent the oppressed. In fact, Spivak suggests the opposite in actually true. For the translated system of representation through which things are known and understood are also the systems which control and dominate people. For this reason, Spivak’s thought emphasizes the limitations of linguistic and philosophical representation, and the potential to mask real social and political inequalities in the contemporary world. As Spivak states in an interview:

   “[W]hen I’m pushed these days with the old criticism – ‘Oh! Spivak is too hard to understand’ – I laugh, and say okay. I will give you, just for your sake, a monosyllabic sentence and you’ll see that you can’t rest with it. My monosyllabic sentence is: *We know plain prose cheats.*”
REFERENCES


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