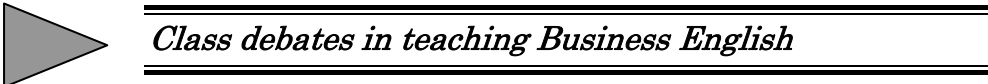




TEACHERS AS FACILITATORS IN CONDUCTING CLASS DEBATES


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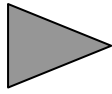
Class debates in teaching Business English

An area that has attracted increasing interest and awareness in the last decades, Business English must be seen in the larger context of ESP, as it shares needs analysis, syllabus and course design, materials selection and development with all other fields of ESP. However, Business English relies on a specific language corpus and a particular kind of communication in a specific context. Hence, any Business English teacher must not only be an expert in teaching the specific language of business, but also develop awareness of the needs and concerns of Business English students and become flexible enough to respond to those needs.

Business English places much emphasis on the need to develop the skills for using the language learned, and consequently many courses focus on such areas as meetings, presentations, and negotiations. Organising and conducting class debates belong to the same area and my concern here is what attitude we should adopt and what methods should prevail in this type of activity as opposed to others. Just like meetings and negotiations, class debates involve a lot of talking and my question is how deeply we should become involved in a debate and consider ourselves part of



it and to what extent we should just remain teachers. What is our position: a teacher, leader, facilitator¹, witness? Or should we embody all of them together?



Facilitation: art or science?

I will try to solve the above dilemma in what follows. A good start in doing this is the dictionary.

According to *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* (1998), the verb **to teach** has several meanings:

- show or explain (to someone) how to do something;
- give information about or instruction in (a subject or skill);
- give such instruction professionally;
- encourage someone to accept (something) as a fact or principle;
- cause (someone) to learn or understand something;
- induce (someone) by example or punishment to do or not to do something;
- (informal) make (someone) less inclined to do something.

Unlike **to teach**, **to facilitate** has a very short, but relevant explanation:

- make an (action or process) easy or relevant.

Although short, the definition of **facilitation** is a very complex one. How can we, as teachers, achieve this "ease"? Is there a recipe for this?

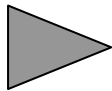
To understand the process better, let us consider what a facilitator's role consists in. A facilitator is a person whose task is to help debates flow more smoothly and be more productive. The facilitator is the one who organises the group, offers a variety of possible ways to approach problems, and waits until an agreement on a particular issue is reached. In other words, "the facilitator oils the tracks for groups to work effectively in meetings" (Doyle and Straus, 1993:37). So, despite its short and apparently simple definition, the process of facilitation is a very complex and intricate one.

¹ The idea arose during the workshop run by dr. Gabriela Matei, "To facilitate or to train: that is the question", as part of the 4th QUEST Romania National Seminar, an event dedicated to the European Day of Languages, Bucharest, 29-30 October 2004. Many thanks to dr. Gabriela Matei, an inspiring facilitator.



It is said that facilitation is more of an art than a science. The core meaning of **teaching** is to deliver already prepared information. **Facilitation** involves helping the participants discover information by themselves. A facilitator must be able to handle not only individuals, but also the interaction between individuals, and the subtleties of group dynamics. If the goal is to help a group become a team, the facilitator's job is to observe, give feedback, and ask questions that will lead to insight or knowledge. The facilitator notices what is NOT said as well as what is said and points it out to the group. The facilitator notices patterns in group interaction and brings them up to the group for exploration. **Teaching** generally involves the transmission/development of skills and knowledge. **Facilitation** often involves the softer side of human psychology, emotion and relationship.

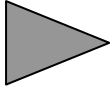
The goal of **facilitation** is to help a group to its best thinking. A good facilitator is helpful when a group is trying to deal with new or difficult issues. He/She helps students persevere as they are confronted with the inevitable confusion and frustration associated with trying to integrate different views and approaches with their own. In this situation the teacher, on a neutral position, is the one who fulfills the role of the leader. That is why we can say that **facilitation** is the art of leadership in group-communication.



Facilitating activities

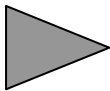
Facilitation activities are commonly classified (Berge, 1995) under four categories: pedagogical, social, managerial, and technical. I will focus only on the pedagogical ones, because this suits the aim of this article best. The pedagogical role concerns the teacher's contribution of specialized knowledge and insights to the discussion, using questions and inquiries to encourage students' responses, and to focus discussion on critical concepts. In addition, by modeling such behaviour, the teacher prepares the students to lead the pedagogical activities themselves. Facilitation involves identifying areas of agreement and disagreement, seeking consensus, acknowledging students' contribution, prompting discussion and assessing its usefulness. Among other activities included here are establishing etiquette, posing questions, diagnosing and dealing with misconceptions, and summarizing discussions.





Main aspects of facilitation

First of all, the facilitator's main concern is to create a non-threatening environment. Students must feel at ease in order to perform their tasks appropriately. Secondly, the teacher/facilitator has to make sure that all the students in the group have equal status and opportunities. This is very important because students need to be aware that they are neither situated on an inferior position, which would make them feel frustrated and uncomfortable, nor on a superior one, as they would tend to monopolize the discussion and impose rules and conclusions. Thus the facilitator's main task is to make all the students take active part in the debate, to actively explore the topic and share the information they have got. He/She has to encourage all participants to listen to what others are saying. In any group some individuals will be less inclined to speak up. That is why the teacher/facilitator has to watch out for signs that people are not involved (keeping their head down, doodling, showing lack of engagement) and try to engage and encourage these people by asking them for their opinions and comments. To keep the conversation on track, the facilitator must occasionally offer explicit "meta-comments" which hint at communication problems encountered by the group as a whole. A very important task that the facilitator has to perform is to awaken and maintain the students' curiosity and interest during the debate. Mentioning surprising facts or concepts excites interest and provokes comments. Recognition for contributing stimulates the desire to contribute again.



Role and functions of the facilitator in conducting class debates

As I have emphasized above, the facilitator is concerned more with the organisational part than with the content of the discussion. The facilitator manages the process of learning whereas the participants are responsible for the content of the discussion. The facilitator's main tasks are the following:

- to encourage and guide participants' discussion;
- to elicit/request information from the group;
- to make use of participants' thinking.



In the process of facilitation, teachers perform three types of communicative functions: contextualizing functions, monitoring functions and meta functions.

➤ **Contextualizing functions**

a. *Opening the discussion*

The facilitator/moderator must provide an opening comment that states the topic of the discussion and establishes a communication model. The moderator may periodically contribute "topic raisers" or "prompts" that open further discussions within the framework of the general topic.

b. *Setting the norms*

The facilitator suggests rules of procedure for the discussion and makes sure that all participants agree with them. Here are a few samples of possible rules to be adopted:

- All ideas are valid.
- Say what you have to say and listen to the others.
- All participants are equal.
- Don't break in brutally.

c. *Setting the agenda*

The teacher selects an order and flow of themes and topics of discussion or guides the students in setting the agenda themselves.

d. *Referring*

The facilitator can refer to other materials on the discussed topic available both online or offline: web sites or textbooks.

➤ **Monitoring functions**

a. *Recognition*

The facilitator refers explicitly to participants' comments and assures them that their contribution is valued and welcome, or corrects misinterpretations about the context of the discussion.



b. Prompting

The teacher can ask questions or address requests for comments to individuals or groups.

c. Assessing

Participants' accomplishments may be assessed by tests or review sessions in a following seminar.

➤ Meta functions**a. Meta-commenting**

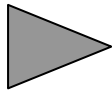
The facilitator may refer to context, norms or agenda or to solving problems such as lack of clarity, irrelevance, and information overload. Meta-comments play an important role in maintaining the conditions of successful communication.

b. Weaving/Interworking

The moderator summarizes the state of the discussion and finds threats to coherence in the participants' comments. He/She prompts the students to continue.

c. Delegating

Some moderating functions can be assigned to individual participants to perform for a shorter or longer period. For instance, if the students are organised in groups, a student can be assigned to each group to monitor its activity and make notes about it.



Skills and Qualities of a Facilitator

I have discussed so far about the roles and the responsibilities of a facilitator, but the truth is that there is no "right" way to facilitate. Much of the style of the facilitator depends on the personality of the individual, the situation and the nature of the group. Since the role of the facilitator is based on flexibility and accommodation to the needs of the group members, there is no real step by step procedure to follow. The facilitator has to employ a combination of techniques to address the needs of a particular group (Doyle and Straus, 1993:89)



Here is a list of suggestions regarding the characteristics of a facilitator, taken from the Electronic Discussion on Group Facilitation:

- "asking" rather than "telling"
- paying personal compliments
- willingness to spend time in building relationships rather than being always task-oriented
- initiating conversation rather than waiting for someone else to do it
- asking for others' opinions rather than always having to offer their own
- negotiating rather than dictating decision-making
- listening without interrupting
- emoting but able to be restrained when the situation requires it
- drawing energy from outside themselves rather than from within
- basing decisions upon intuitions rather than hard facts
- having sufficient self-confidence to look someone in the eye when talking to them
- being more persuasive than sequential
- being more enthusiastic than systemic
- being more outgoing than serious
- being more like a coach than a scientist
- being more like a counselor than a sergeant
- displaying a natural curiosity about people, things and life in general
- keeping the big picture in mind while working on the key points.

It is very difficult to decide what the most important characteristics of a facilitator are. They seem equally important from a theoretical point of view and each and every person may have his/her own classification. On the same web site a few opinions on the most important qualities of a facilitator can be found:

Opinion A

1. Good questioning skills
2. Knowing how to stay out of the way or to keep one's mouth shut
3. Keeping the discussion on track
4. Creating constructive conflict
5. Feedback skills



Opinion B

1. Organisation skills
2. Listening for understanding
3. Observing nonverbal messages
4. Questioning (as opposed to telling) skills
5. Conceptual and systemic thinking (to put it all together)

Opinion C

1. Knowledge of content that fits desired outcomes
2. Understanding of and skill with the audience's process of learning
3. Ability to maximize gaining of knowledge and skill in the time available
4. Observation and listening for opportunities of learning
5. Setting up learning environment via posing problems, questions, tools and other means to stir the mind and the body to learn

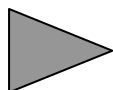
Opinion D

1. Objectivity/Neutrality
2. Understanding and experience in a wide variety of facilitation techniques (starting with brainstorming)
3. Charisma
4. Empathy

Opinion E

Listening, listening, listening

Given the opinions selected here it is obvious that there is no standard model of a facilitator. There are many variables that determine the good quality of a facilitator and this can be judged and valued only within a certain context.



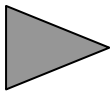
Tips for good facilitation

Having established that there is no model for the perfect facilitator, I provide below a number of tips to help us become better facilitators when organising debates with our students.

- Assume good intent.
- Role model the behaviour you wish the others to use.



- Practise and encourage active listening/reading.
- Be as explicit as possible in your communication.
- Do not automatically assume understanding.
- Build trust by doing what you say you will do. Encourage the others to do the same.
- Use irony and humour with care, as it does not always come across as you might have intended.
- Approach every contribution with curiosity, expecting surprise and wonder.
- Make rules, expectations or norms consistent, explicit and clear.
- Provide orientation material and paths for participants.
- Remember not everyone thinks or perceives things the way you do. Seek to understand participants' styles and needs.
- Consider cultural differences of participants (if the case).
- Use open-ended questions to encourage participation.
- Ask students for feedback. What is working for them? What is not? What is missing?
- Make purpose and task very clear and explicit.
- Monitor the participants' activity.
- Do not be intimidated by challenges.
- Provide stimulating content to foster interaction.
- Look for participation patterns and changes in conversations.
- Open new topics to support new threads as needed.
- Facilitation is the combination of knowledge and practice. So, practise, practise, practise.
- Read between lines.
- Seek to be fair.
- Have fun.
- Use common sense.
- When all else fails, ask and listen. Again and again.



Conclusion

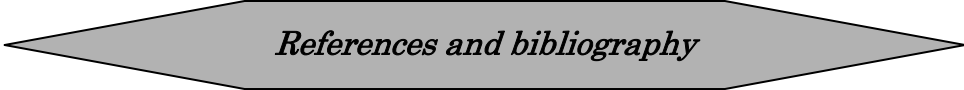
Facilitation is not an easy thing to do, but it is a very important part of our job as teachers of ESP in our attempt to stimulate, develop and improve students'



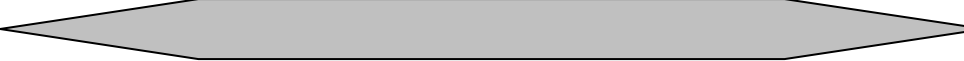
communicative abilities. It is an essential part of the teaching process, which involves, besides knowledge, emotional and behavioural components that are more difficult and delicate to deal with.

In this article I have tried to give an overview of this intricate process and suggest a few things that we have to bear in mind when organising class debates. Most of the information contained in this paper is due to many websites I have visited and books on facilitation I have turned to, as well as based on my own experience with my students. What is most important about activities of this kind is that students do not have time to get bored, especially if the topic is of great interest to them.

Facilitation is, however, paradoxical in itself: the teacher seems to be the least involved in this activity, but actually he/she is the key that leads to a successful outcome. The teacher has to organise the whole activity and supervise it very carefully. He/she may get involved only when the discussion is not on the right track or is dying away or when he/she feels that some students must be stimulated, encouraged or made aware of their essential contributions to the on-going debate.



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