

# To the Teacher

## Teaching Discussion Classes

Without a doubt, one of the most challenging teaching situations is a discussion or speaking class. In theory, the teacher (or a student) can bring up a given topic and the students will discuss its merits or controversial aspects. In reality, however, this is rarely the case. In most classes, the most confident students tend to dominate the discussion, and the weaker students, those who really need the class, quickly withdraw. In order to keep the “discussion” going, the teacher ends up trying to draw the students out. In effect, this “discussion” often becomes a question and answer exchange between the teacher and a few students.

In classes of students with lower levels of English proficiency, the difficulties associated with teaching a speaking class can be compounded when students’ insufficient English language skills limit their ability to express their ideas in English. The teacher must then come up with activities that are interesting yet not beyond the linguistic capabilities of their students, a feat that is not at all easy. While many speaking books for lower-proficiency students have activities in which students talk about food preferences and favorite colors, these topics often lack the controversial or “discussable” aspect that a real discussion has. While students might indeed talk about their favorite colors, this is hardly a discussion. In a true discussion, speakers are pushed to ask the other participants why they hold a certain position. The activities in *First Discussion Starters* are an attempt to blend discussable topics for real discussions with L2 research on pair work (and group work) while taking into account the linguistic limitations and capabilities of lower-proficiency ESL/EFL learners.

With a wide variety of engaging topics and unique interactive exercises designed to keep the discussion flowing, *First Discussion Starters* aims to balance the speaking loads of all the students in the class and thus promote an environment in which everyone has not only a chance, but a real need, to speak out. In fact, many times the exercises have been designed so that the students cannot complete the speaking task unless everyone in the group participates and speaks up. Therefore, students actually need the input of other students to complete the discussion task. In addition to exercise design that encourages student interaction, we have taken care to choose topics that do not require

large amounts of specialized vocabulary or complicated language. To be sure, some specialized language is needed for almost any discussion topic, whether it be court terms for a serious discussion of a court case or cooking terms for a lighter discussion of favorite childhood recipes.

### **Using the Book**

The most important pedagogical point involved in using this book is that the teacher give the students the time and framework to think about their own ideas so they can form a coherent opinion. It is extremely important to realize that our students have a number of factors working against them: they may lack confidence in their English skills, they may not have any background information about the topic, they may not have participated much in group discussions, they may be not interested in the topic because they have not been engaged personally, and they may not have any opinion at all about the topic (though this last factor is definitely not limited to nonnative speakers). Because of the lower English level of most of the students using this book, it is therefore particularly important to allow the students extra time to prepare their ideas to identify key vocabulary or language structures needed to express a certain idea in a certain fashion.

These possible limitations of our students have been taken into account, and the exercises within each unit are set up in a special way in order to help the students develop and organize their ideas and thus foster confidence in their knowledge of the topic, which will facilitate speaking. Whenever a question for discussion is introduced, there is a prerequisite exercise that has the students write out their own ideas. This exercise sometimes consists of a series of short questions designed to guide the students through the critical thinking process. At other times, the exercise has two or three questions that are more general in nature but still aim to guide the students so that they can put down their ideas on paper.

This book is built on the premise that having to write out our thoughts on paper forces us to reexamine, rethink, and recycle our ideas until we have a much neater package. At workshops, when teachers are asked their opinion about a topic and then told, before everyone has had a chance to speak out, to write out their opinions in 25 to 50 words, it is usually the case that their written opinions have changed somewhat from their original opinions. Certainly the written opinions are more directed and more to the point. When teachers are then asked to continue talking about the topic in question, the discussion seems to flow much better. In addition, teachers who were reluctant to speak up before now do so. The printed word in front of them seems to be an anchor for those who were hesitant or reluctant to speak up before. The simple act of

writing one's thoughts on paper before having to speak does make a real difference in not only the *quality* but also the *quantity* (fluency) of the discussion.

For example, when a student is suddenly confronted with the statement "People shouldn't drink and drive," it might be difficult for many students to say something that makes much sense and truly expresses their opinion. Most students in this situation in a group will be so nervous about what they are going to say that they can't and don't listen to the other students until after they themselves have spoken. Thus, what ensues more resembles a series of monologues than a dialogue or discussion of sorts. For this class to be a real learning and developing situation with interaction, it is much better—and we would argue necessary—to have the students write out their ideas briefly beforehand.

### **Topics for Discussion**

A quick glance at the table of contents will reveal that the 24 units cover an extremely wide range of topics. Though most of the topics in the text are serious (censorship, cloning, and domestic violence), many others deal with lighter topics (proverbs, pets, and travel). The topics were chosen because they are of interest to our student base. In addition, topics that may become dated very quickly were not included.

Unlike other books on the market today, *First Discussion Starters* tries to avoid the use of imaginary situations for discussion (e.g., "Imagine that you were the president of the country. What would you do?"). When people have been challenged to come up with a potential solution to a task or problem, they rightfully expect to be able to hear what the "correct" answer is. For example, in the numerous court cases mentioned in this book, there is always a real court judgment given by a real judge or real jury or another official. After the students have discussed each other's verdicts and supporting reasons, they are then (and only then!) instructed to turn to the back of the book to discover the actual decision of the judge or the jury.

As often as possible, the activities, tasks, and topics chosen for this book are real situations from all over the world. When students are asked what they would do in a given situation, a real answer is provided.

### **Types of Interaction in the Exercises**

Most of the units in this book introduce a problem or controversial topic at the beginning of the unit. This is then followed by a series of exercises designed to prepare all of the students so that they can express their ideas at the next class meeting. A unit usually includes several kinds of oral fluency activities, but some of the major types of activities are listed here.

*Problem-solving tasks:* A unique feature of this text is that *every* unit in this text has several tasks in which students must cooperate to solve a problem while using English.

*Court cases:* Exercises in Units 1, 6, 7, 10, 19, 20, 22. Each of these exercises pertains to a real court case that involves the topic of the unit. Students are told to work out their own solution as if they were the judge or jury or another authority with the power to decide the case and then discuss their ideas later in class. Actual decisions are revealed in the communication activities at the back of the book.

*Finish the story:* Units 8, 11. A story that has a unique ending has been begun in the unit, but the ending has deliberately been left off. Instructions are given for having students discuss possible endings and reasons for their choices. As with most of the material in this text, an actual story has been used.

*Speaking puzzles:* Units 4, 16. Students work in threes to complete a crossword puzzle. Each student has access to a unique set of some of the clues. Students must cooperate by giving spoken clues to each other so that they can complete the entire puzzle. Two students may have a clue for the same answer in the puzzle, but the clues have been written differently so as to foster discussion as to the meaning of each clue.

*Role play:* Units 2, 14, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23. Though the unit does not revolve around the role-play exercise, these units do include an exercise that has the students do some sort of role-play regarding the topic of the unit. Possible roles are often suggested, but it is up to the teacher to choose which roles should be used. Whether or not role plays succeed in class depends a lot on the dynamics of the given group of students.

*Scales and questionnaires:* Units 1, 2, 6, 9, 10, 12, 14, 17, 21, 24. Scales and questionnaires actively engage the students at a personal level; later on, students compare their responses with responses of other students in their groups.

*Discussion and oral presentations:* Units 5, 13. Though these units contain other types of interaction, one of the main points of these units is that students bring in related material from outside class to present to the rest of the class.

*Put the story together:* Units 3, 15, 18. Students work in large groups to solve a strip story. Each student has one piece of the story, and all students must work together or a solution is impossible.

*Small group discussions:* Units 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24. One of the main features of these units is an exercise that fosters active interaction among the members of a small group (three to five students).

## Text Organization

*First Discussion Starters* consists of 24 self-contained units. There is ample background material in the text to start students on their way to a discussion. Teachers do not have to spend time searching for newspaper or magazine articles that most of the students in the class will be able to comprehend (which is in itself a major job for any teacher), and students do not have to do extensive outside reading in order to feel qualified to talk about the topics. Thus, students can spend their class time speaking about and discussing topics rather than reading them silently. (Naturally, teachers may assign additional readings to supplement the topics in *First Discussion Starters* if they wish.)

An important unique feature of this text is that there are efficient, that is, simple yet effective, homework exercises in which students must sort out their ideas and opinions before discussing or talking about the issues in the textbook. This allows all students to be prepared for the speaking activities in class and is of special importance to the weaker, less confident nonnative speakers. It also allows the teacher to feel confident that all the students in the class, regardless of their native country, education level, or age, now have a known common background about the topic. Some students will naturally know more about certain topics, but now the teacher at least has a common denominator from which to start discussion.

Each unit contains a number of exercises (usually around 8 to 10) that provide speaking preparation or speaking interaction about a central topic or idea. In most of these activities, students must work together in pairs or small groups to solve a problem, reach a consensus, discuss ideas, or complete some other kind of speaking task.

A particular strength of the design of this text is that there is no set pattern for introducing a topic. Units begin with a variety of presentations, including illustrations, questionnaires, court cases, and proverbs. This variety should keep a discussion course from becoming monotonous or too predictable after a few weeks.

## Sequencing of Topics (units)

There is no one best way of sequencing the units or topics in this book. All units are independent of each other. Thus, the class could begin with any of the units and then continue with any other unit.

As much as possible, the difficulty level in the units is consistent. What is different, however, is the topic of the units. Thus, one of the few factors that might influence the “best” sequencing of units for a given group of students is the topics themselves. In general, students at this level will find the lighter topics toward the beginning of the book and the more serious topics requiring specialized vocabulary toward the back of the book.

The topics in the units have been included because they lend themselves to discussion. This means of course that some of these topics are controversial. If the topics were not controversial or would not naturally elicit a variety of opinions, they would not be good discussion starters. One way to lessen the chance of “forcing” a controversial topic on a group of students is to have the students themselves choose which units they would like to cover in the course. It is recommended that the teacher choose one unit to begin the term and that one of the students’ first assignments be to form small groups of three to five students to discuss and then rank the topics (i.e., units) in the textbook in terms of which units they would like to do first. This has numerous benefits for the class. First, the teacher is no longer dictating the course. Second, the students have a stronger sense of community. Third, this task itself requires speaking and negotiating practice using spoken English. Finally, students are likely to have better discussions if they are interested in the topics that are being discussed.

## Communication Activities

At the back of this text, there are 59 communication activities. These are an essential part of almost every unit. In a given exercise in a unit, students are often told to work in pairs or small groups. Student A will be told to look at one communication activity, while student B will be told to look at another communication activity. In this way, the students hold different pieces of information that only they know and that they must share verbally with their partners. Since the two pieces of information are not on the same page or even near each other in the text, the students must talk to their partners to complete the given language task.

It is essential that students understand the whole activity before teachers have students do the communication activities. The teacher should give an overview of the exercise, explain how the communication task will work, divide

the class into pairs or groups as the exercise instructions indicate, and then walk around the room to help any student who might still have questions.

### **Fluency versus Accuracy in Language Learning**

All exercises that are done in any language class are done for accuracy, for fluency, or for a combination of the two. However, we teachers very often tend to do one to the exclusion of the other, and much of what we do, especially what we have traditionally done at the lower levels, is heavily oriented toward accuracy. In contrast, the lessons in *First Discussion Starters* offer a balance of accuracy exercises with fluency exercises.

For an exercise to be fluency oriented, the exercise should be slightly below the actual level of the students so that the students can practice extensively without becoming too distracted by difficult or unfamiliar vocabulary and grammatical points. In other words, the students should find the language level in the exercise easy. The purpose of a fluency exercise is to increase the volume of actual language practice that students can accomplish in the given time limitations. Having the students write out their opinions ahead of time, as many of the exercises require, will allow the students to concentrate their efforts on actual speaking rather than on reading, listening, or vocabulary. Students will learn to speak about a topic in English by doing just that—actually spending class time speaking.

### **Integrated Skills**

Having students write something on the topic before they discuss the topic is innovative and integrates writing and speaking. Although this book is designed primarily to encourage speaking, it calls for other skills such as reading, writing, listening, working in groups, and cooperative learning, yet this is accomplished without students having to do an extensive amount of outside reading or writing, which allows the students to focus on the primary goal of this text: speaking fluency and discussion skills.

### **Vocabulary Development**

Regardless of any ESL or EFL student's level, vocabulary development is one of the primary concerns of many students. To help students acquire and retain important new vocabulary that pertains to the topics presented in the units of *First Discussion Starters*, each unit concludes with a vocabulary check called Language Review. Though this vocabulary information is presented as a review exercise, it may be helpful (or necessary for some lower-proficiency groups) for

students to see this vocabulary before beginning the discussion. Whether vocabulary is done as a review, a preview, or both is left up to the individual teacher since no one knows the students and what they can handle better than the actual classroom teacher.

The format for this vocabulary exercise varies from unit to unit. Examples of the different formats follow.

### *Key word*

Read the key word (in bold) in the left column. Circle the letter of the choice that is related to the key word.

- |                  |               |                 |                |
|------------------|---------------|-----------------|----------------|
| 1. <b>split</b>  | a. help       | b. divide       | c. decorate    |
| 2. <b>annual</b> | a. once a day | b. once a month | c. once a year |

### *Sentence Completion*

Circle the best word to complete the sentences.

- The governor (pressed, passed, asked) a law that prohibits smoking in public places.
- I saw a very (gentle, stupid, vicious) dog, so I walked away from it.

### *Definition*

Match the words in the left column with their definitions in the right column.

<i>Vocabulary</i>	<i>Definition</i>
— 1. specialist	a. person who focuses on one particular area of study
— 2. complained	b. to put steady force on something
— 3. press	c. spoke unhappily

## **Web Sites for Further Study and Discussion**

At the end of each unit, we have included a Web address that will direct you to other sites that are related to the topic or topics covered in that unit. We realize that each group of students is different. Some students may need additional information on a given topic before they are ready to discuss the material. In addition, students who want extra English practice can work on their reading and vocabulary skills by perusing the Web sites. As with any Internet activity, we recommend that the teacher visit each Web site to check out the contents first-



hand to make sure the material is suitable for the students. Because Internet sites appear and disappear so quickly, if you have ideas for additional Web sites, please send them to [esladmin@umich.edu](mailto:esladmin@umich.edu).

### **Answer Key**

The answers for Language Review, the last exercise in each of the 24 units, and for crossword puzzles are provided at the back of the book. These answers are provided so that the students may check their own work. Logically, it is supposed that the students will use the key only after they have actually completed the exercise. It is further hoped that students will return to the exercise to detect the source of their error to complete the learning process.