



Briefing Note

DEVELOPING SKILLS IN TURNTAKING, DISCUSSION AND CRITICAL DIALOGUE: INFORMATION FOR LECTURERS

Turntaking, discussion, and critical dialogue

The difference between these three things may not be immediately evident to Chinese students. Their previous educational experiences (using both Chinese and the English language as the medium of communication) will have commonly featured what we, in Australia, would term **turntaking**. Each student would have their say in a very formal and structured way and there would be no need for the 'speaker' to respond instantaneously to comments from peers or from lecturers. Because of this, seminars (or other examples where academic discussion and argument are expected) can be intimidating and alienating for Chinese students as the rules of turntaking, as they know and have experienced them, do not apply. The Australian learning context will appear very different.

In addition, it is important to appreciate that all interactions and exchanges of information within a Chinese learning context are **hierarchical**. Interestingly, this may not even be evident to Chinese students themselves because hierarchy is culturally embedded and normalised. It is only in situations such as class discussions and seminars that the impact of hierarchy, and the way relationships relate to this and are enacted, can become apparent. For lecturers in Australia then, it is important to not only appreciate these differences, but also help Chinese students come to terms with them.

So, we know that in Mainland China turntaking is structured and it is not a discussion as we would describe it in Australia. **Discussion** in an Australian educational context is not rigidly structured and encompasses general dialogical and group interaction (Shin & Crookes, 2005). It is not controlled as it tends to be in China, and it is ok to interrupt. But Chinese students often don't know how to interrupt. They need permission to do this, and they need English language

phrases to facilitate their interruptions. It is helpful to provide students with phrases to use to enable them to **interrupt politely**.

The following phrases are useful:

- Can I add something?
- Excuse me for interrupting, but...
- I would like to say something, if I may ...?
- May I ask a question?
- May I interrupt for a moment?

Developing a discussion also requires those involved in the discussion to do the following:

- **Listen closely:** this may well be difficult for Chinese students, not only because of the flow of language between participants, but also because the language of discussion is not the formal English that they would have been taught. As lecturer in this context it would be useful to try to note down some common forms of informal language use such as '*hang on a minute*', '*that's rubbish*', '*I reckon*', and teach these explicitly to Chinese or other international students so that they can more easily deal with the ebb and flow of a discussion.
- **Build a discussion:** Chinese students have difficulty with this. Even if language is not an issue, the idea of linking their contribution specifically with something someone else has said can be challenging. The notion of actually building a discussion may not have been part of the experience of Chinese students. When it is their turn it is more likely that they will try to frame something that is grammatically correct rather than necessarily connecting to what has gone before in the discussion.
- **Feel safe:** the environment in which discussion takes place must be made safe. As the lecturer you need to establish norms of interaction. These need to encourage everyone to take care of each other, to listen to each other, acknowledge differing opinions respectfully, to be able to disagree respectfully, to be able to voice a genuine interpretation and not merely one that is perceived as being acceptable.

So where and when does agreeing and disagreeing in discussion become critical dialogue? Crookes (2013) provides the following definition stating that critical dialogue, refers to interactions, both between lecturer and student and among students, in which one person's language, whether statement or question, encourages or presses another to consider the basis for their thinking. (p.64).

This 'pressing' part and being 'critical' many Chinese students find difficult to do and uncomfortable to experience. It is not only unfamiliar, but is intimately tied with hierarchy and with the important concept of 'face' (see the Briefing Note on **Understanding the concept of face and how this impacts the interactions of Chinese students within the Australian university context**).

As their lecturer, there are some things you can do, however, to help your students in this area:

- Your students need to appreciate what 'critical' means. Being 'critical' in the Western sense of the word is hard, and it is particularly hard for newcomers who often interpret 'critical' as being negative. For Chinese students being critical is often particularly hard because being critical, as we understand it, is intimately tied to ideas associated with democracy and the exercise of power. Talking explicitly about this interpretation, right from the outset, may help.
- Pressing another to consider the basis of their thinking can also be difficult for Chinese students who often come from a context where information or viewpoints are considered to be either right or wrong. Ambiguity in interpretation, different viewpoints and perspectives and argument to justify these, are areas that can be highlighted but it may take time for students to adjust to these different ways of thinking and communicating.

Some simple actions may help:

- Let your students know that it is important and polite to share ideas with others.
- Praise students who directly acknowledge another's comment or respectfully disagree.
- Protect all interpretations but at the same time make sure that "any position can be interrogated even as it is protected" (Edelsky & Johnson, 2004, p.132).
- Provide some English phrases to help students engage in critical dialogue (see below).

Speech, speakers and social relationships are inseparable (Norton, 2000). Students need to move from 'being there' to 'being able to interrupt politely' to 'being able to state a position' and 'being able to express disagreement'. The following phrases¹ may help in two important areas:

¹ These have been drawn from Lam & Wong, 2000 and from http://www.nsknet.or.jp/~peterr-s/zemi/kiso_seminar_phrases.html
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<http://chinapostgraduates.murdoch.edu.au>

Relinquishing concern for face:

- Sorry, but I don't quite understand.
- Sorry, but I'm not with you.
- Sorry, could you say that again please?
- Sorry, would you mind saying that again please?
- Can you clarify your point? I don't get your point.

Voicing disagreement:

- So you don't agree?
 - No, I don't because...
 - I agree with you up to a point.
 - I don't agree with him / her because ...
 - I think ... because ...
 - I also disagree with X's idea. I think ...
- Some sample workshop activities that support the development of these concepts and the use of these phrases can be found in the Session: **Participating in group discussions**. Teach your students to voice disagreement and again, support this by providing appropriate English language phrases.

In summary

- Be aware that what you mean by 'discussion' is not what your students will mean. Let them know what discussion in your class 'looks like' and how it happens.
- Help your students interrupt. Provide English phrases to do this and help them 'decode' the informal English used by their peers. Also, help them understand that grammar mistakes in discussion are not a big deal.
- Make the learning environment 'safe' so that students will feel more comfortable interacting and contributing.
- Talk explicitly about what being 'critical' means and show them what 'critical dialogue' looks like.
- Help your students relinquish their concern for 'face' and provide them with some English phrases to help.
- Teach your students to voice disagreement and again, support this by providing appropriate English language phrases.

Reference list

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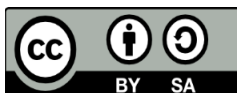
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Additional materials and resources are available from
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