



Briefing Note for Students

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

Turntaking, discussion, and critical dialogue

The difference between these three things may not be immediately evident to you. In your previous educational experiences (using both Chinese and the English language as the medium of communication) it is likely that, when speaking out, you did so through a process that in Australia we call **turntaking**. This means that each student has his or her say in a very formal and structured way, and usually after having some time to prepare what to say. In turntaking, there is no need for the 'speaker' to respond instantaneously to comments from peers or from lecturers or lecturers. What happens, and who is going to speak at what time, is predictable.

This type of oral interaction is not common practice in Australian university contexts. In Australia, there is much more focus on students speaking and interacting with one another in a spontaneous, rather than a rehearsed way, and sometimes this type of exchange can look as though people are being aggressive or angry towards one another (although this is not usually the case – it is just how academic arguments are enacted in the university context).

Because of this, seminars (or other instances where academic discussion and argument are expected) can be intimidating and alienating for Chinese students. These activities can seem very unfriendly and the rules with respect to how they operate, and the roles that different people play within them, are not obvious. The times for the lecturer or students to speak are not clearly delineated, and there is no clearly defined system for turntaking. It can all seem very messy. It also can be hard to understand the informal style of English that is often used. The Australian learning context can appear to be very different and very challenging.

In the Australian educational context, **discussion** and not **turntaking** is a feature of classroom interactions. Discussions are not rigidly structured and they encompass group interactions. Who speaks, and when, is not controlled as it tends to be in China, and it is OK to interrupt. How to do this, however, without appearing impolite, can be challenging and make classroom interactions seem impenetrable.

There are, however, some simple strategies that you can use.

Here are some English language phrases that can help you **interrupt politely** in discussions:

- 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?

But even using these phrases can sometimes seem difficult, particularly if you don't know the other people in your seminar or class group. It is much easier to interrupt if you feel that you have some sort of relationship with the people you are interacting with. Building relationships within a new and very different cultural context can be hard. To help in this regard, try arriving at your class a few minutes early so that you can initiate a short **conversation** with your classmates before you enter the classroom. This very simple strategy can help make that connection which can then be developed into the beginnings of a relationship.

Here are some simple phrases to help you do this:

- Hi, how are you?
- Isn't it a beautiful day?
- Do you live on campus?
- What is your name?

Remember, when you take the time to learn another person's name, you are expressing an interest in that individual and this is usually well received and can make further interactions easier.

The use of phrases such as those presented above can be described as 'warming up your voice'. This strategy can be extended by setting some goals for 'using your voice'. For example, determine that you will speak one sentence in the next seminar, two in the one after that, and so on.

Developing a discussion also requires you to **listen closely**. This has its own challenges, especially because the language used in discussions is often not the formal English that you would have studied and there will be lots of colloquial language used. So, how can you listen closely when you don't understand? Try these strategies to help you develop close listening (and appreciate that this may take some time):

- **Go for gist.** This means that, in the first instance, it is important to try and get the general meaning (gist) of what you are hearing. Don't be concerned about not getting all the details and don't focus on the grammatical features of the language that you are hearing.
- **Lock into listening.** Focus on listening to the discussion – lock everything else out. And don't concentrate on working out what you are going to say when you think it will be your turn to contribute to the discussion.
- **Forget face.** Now this will be hard to do but it is really important if you are to take an active part in academic discussions. Face is not as significant in Australia as it is in China. People are comfortable saying things without necessarily thinking them through carefully first. They also don't worry about how others may interpret what they say. A first step in reducing your concern about face is to be prepared (and comfortable) about asking when you don't understand. Try these phrases:
 - 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?
- **Query colloquialisms.** Now that you know how to politely interrupt, ask about the meaning of colloquial phrases that you begin to identify as you listen. It is important to build your knowledge of this type of language as it will give you greater access to both academic and social discourses and help you feel more comfortable.

Taking part in discussions and using the strategies described above involves **confirmation** and **clarification**. It also involves **agreeing** and **disagreeing**. But when does this stop being just discussion and become **critical dialogue**? This happens when the spontaneous interactions between lecturer and student (and among students) encourage or press another to consider the basis for their thinking and for the construction of their argument (Crookes, 2013, p.64).

It is important to understand that being 'critical' does not necessarily mean being negative. Being critical means engaging in analysis, appraisal, evaluation and judgement. It involves:

- Being able to recognise and develop an argument.
- Using evidence to support an argument.
- Being able to draw reasoned conclusions.
- Using information to identify and provide solutions to complex problems.
- Relating theory to practice.
- Reflecting on the justification of one's own beliefs and values.
- Being able to reflexively consider and evaluate one's own views against the work and views of others.

Sometimes Chinese students find this difficult to do, especially in classes where there is an expectation that oral interaction will be spontaneous. Again, knowing some key English phrases can be very useful. The phrases below can be used to support your **engagement in critical dialogue**.¹

Phrases to use when you are explaining your opinion:

- First of all...
- Secondly...
- The main reason is...
- Another reason is...
- The most important thing is...

Phrases to use when you are certain of your opinion:

- I am certain that...
- I am convinced that...
- I am positive...
- I am sure that...
- I strongly believe that...
- Without a doubt...

Phrases to use when you are conveying your opinion:

- From my point of view...
- I personally believe...
- I personally think...
- In my opinion...
- Not everyone will agree with me, but...

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

Phrases to use when you want to refer to a point in someone else's argument:

- Don't forget that...
- The point is...
- The problem is...
- The problem with...
- The trouble is...

Phrases to use when you want to say something you think is new information:

- Do you realise that...
- It may sound strange but...
- But...
- I think...
- We need to remember...

Phrases to use when you want to change the subject:

- Before I forget...
- By the way...
- Talking of...
- That reminds me...

So, in summary, moving from turntaking, to discussion, to engaging in critical dialogue involves you as a student in Australia moving from 'being there', to 'being able to interrupt politely' to 'being able to state a position' and 'to being able to express well reasoned disagreement or argument'. To do this you need to go through the processes of 'warming up your voice', 'using your voice', and then finding and '**using your own voice.**'

Reference list

Crookes, G. (2013). *Critical ELT in Action. Foundations, Promises, Praxis*. New York: Routledge.

Lam, W. and Wong, J. (2000). The effects of strategy training on developing discussion skills in an ESL classroom. *ELT Journal*, 54 (3), 245-255.



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