Discussions and More

A revised and updated edition
of *Discussions that Work*

Penny Ur

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Thanks

This book is dedicated, with my love and gratitude, to its editor, Michael Swan.

Michael supported my earliest attempts at writing that resulted in the first edition of *Discussions that Work* more than thirty years ago, as well as later books for the Cambridge Handbooks for Language Teachers series. He is a merciless but continually supportive and generous editor, to whom I chiefly owe whatever expertise in writing I have managed to accumulate over the years. Finally, he has edited the present volume with his characteristic zero tolerance for slovenly writing and insistence on accuracy, clarity and practicality for the classroom.

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Penny Ur

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INTRODUCTION

One of the major problems I have encountered as a teacher of English is getting students to talk in English amongst themselves in class. Full-class discussions afford relatively little time for individuals to express themselves; pair and group work obviously provide much more, but then there is the problem of devising effective and motivating activities that will keep students talking in the target language without direct teacher involvement. The aim of this book is to provide a set of oral-fluency activities for students at varying levels of proficiency, including activities suitable for both full-class and small-group work.

Background

Since the first edition of this book (*Discussions that Work*) was published in 1981, a number of changes have taken place that have made it look rather dated: changes in the status and function of the English language worldwide, in the theory and practice of English language teaching and in my own thinking.

English as an international means of communication
Over the last three decades, the use of English as an international means of communication has expanded enormously. Today it is widely used in business, politics and diplomacy, academic and professional study, research, information technology, tourism and travel, social interaction and more, where the participants in a communicative event may have different mother tongues and are using English as a lingua franca.

It is therefore more important than ever for people to have a functional knowledge of communicative English.

Much of this international use of English, it has to be said, is in the written, rather than spoken, mode. This may be formal (such as the provision of information through the Internet, negotiations of agreements through email, publication of literature or opinion, whether on paper or electronically), or informal (such as email, SMS texting, 'chatting', social networking). Nevertheless, the ability to speak fluently is still essential for most users of English: for functioning either in face-to-face events such as conversations, lectures and presentations, lessons or interviews, or in distance communication such as telephone or computer-mediated conversations, webinars or conferencing.

A communicative methodology: fluency and accuracy
The original edition of this book was published at a time when the communicative approach was only just beginning to be used. Communicative language teaching became increasingly popular, to the extent that by the 1990s some methodologists were advocating a methodology that was almost totally confined to communicative procedures: task-based instruction (Skehan, 1997) and the task-based syllabus (Long & Crookes, 1992). However, some opposition to a strongly task-based method (Swan, 2005), as well as problems with its implementation in practice in some teaching

contexts (Hu, 2002), has led to attempts to find a way to combine fluency-based communicative procedures, such as discussion or writing tasks, with accuracy-oriented explanations and practice, such as focused work on grammar or pronunciation.

Today, most practitioners are probably using a combination of fluency- and accuracy-focused teaching procedures, based on their own sense of what produces the best results in terms of learner achievement but influenced also by local constraints and preferences (for example, official guidelines, national syllabuses, upcoming exams). In general, oral-fluency procedures are seen as an important component of a balanced and optimally productive methodology. These are sometimes implemented in sessions specifically defined as 'conversation classes', but more often within ordinary lessons.

Task-based discussions – and more

At the beginning of my teaching career in the 1970s, I had been puzzling over how to get my students to talk to each other in English and stumbled on the discovery that it was the provision of a *task* that made the difference between a discussion that worked and one that did not (see the anecdote on pp. 6–7). If I just told the class to discuss a topic – however controversial – the interaction usually petered out after a few exchanges. If, on the other hand, I told them they had to do some kind of task associated with it, they continued talking until they had completed it to everyone's satisfaction. The *task* is defined here as a process aiming to achieve a clearly expressed *outcome*: so the participants might be asked, for example, to come to a group decision, solve a problem, find as many solutions as possible, agree on some kind of order of priority. A set of practical teaching ideas based on this rationale was eventually published as the book *Discussions that Work*.

The principle of the task as the basis for oral-fluency activities remains an important one; however, since writing *Discussions that Work* I have come across, and used, a number of techniques that seem to produce motivated and meaningful talk by students without being task-based, in the sense that they do not aim primarily at the achievement of a clear outcome. For less advanced students, for example, there are procedures based on text learnt by heart; there are an enormous number of game-like activities whose effectiveness derives mainly from enjoyment of the on-going interaction; and then there are topic-based debates and student oral presentations (particularly appropriate for classes of more advanced students focusing on learning English for purposes of academic study or professional practice).

The scope of the present book is therefore wider than the previous one and includes a number of oral-fluency activities that are not task-based and are not really 'discussions': hence, the new title *Discussions and More*.

Using this book

Organization

The first two sections of this book are *General principles* and *Practical guidelines*. The first of these provides some ideas about what constitutes a successful oral-fluency activity, the main types of speaking tasks and some principles of effective activity design. The second gives some practical advice on running these activities: tips on how to organize group work, for example, or whether/when to correct mistakes.

The actual classroom activities follow and are arranged in three chapters roughly according to level of challenge and length: 1 *Simpler, shorter activities*, 2 *Activities of medium length and complexity* and 3 *Longer, more challenging activities*. The language level tends to target elementary learners in Chapter 1 and more advanced ones later; the majority of the activities, however, can be adapted for use with classes of very varied levels of proficiency. Note that the activities can be used exactly as described, but don't have to be. Feedback on the previous edition indicates that many teachers freely adapt them to suit their own needs, or use them merely as the source of ideas for developing their own procedures.

Throughout the three activity chapters, the activities themselves are interspersed with brief practical tips on how to solve common problems or improve the flow of an activity.

Headings

The titles of individual activities are usually fairly transparent and are followed immediately by a gloss ('Outline') that explains briefly what students are expected to do. The following rubrics give information on appropriate age and proficiency levels, the amount of time that the activity is estimated to take, details of preparation and materials (where these are needed) and a note, where appropriate, of any specific language focus.

The *Procedure* itself is then described, divided into brief numbered steps. Optional subsequent headings are *Follow-up* (sections providing further extensions to the activity, including reading and writing), *Variation(s)* and *Note(s)* (sections offering solutions to any possible problems and other information that may be of interest to the reader as well as additional ideas for adapting activities).

Getting started

It is useful to skim through the book before you start using it, noting or highlighting activities that you think you might use with your classes. If you are interested in particular aspects, such as using pictures, or brainstorming or guessing games, you can use the index at the back of the book to find the activities that use them. Similarly, if you want activities that are likely to provide practice in specific language features – grammar, for example – these also can be found in the index.

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GENERAL PRINCIPLES

Successful speaking activities

A successful speaking activity is simply one in which as many students as possible speak as much as possible in the target language. So a discussion in a large group where only one student speaks at a time is unlikely to achieve this aim. Similarly, an activity where much of the time is taken up with such things as drawing, writing, moving or miming may be very motivating and produce an active and busy classroom process, but it will not achieve the principal aim of providing lots of speaking practice.

A further characteristic of a successful activity is the motivation of the participants to participate. Students should obviously be interested in listening or speaking to the speakers and responding readily to the humour, interest or challenge of the ideas being expressed.

Group work

There is a place for full-class interactions for oral fluency, as long as the class is not too big and the interaction is relatively intense and rapid (see, for example, Activity 1.16: *Guess the list*). However, in general, it is much better to use pair or group work because this affords more opportunities for individuals to practise speaking. For example, a class divided into five groups ensures five times as much total talking as would have taken place in a full-class discussion, and even if students spend up to half the time using their mother tongue, they will still get more than twice as much speaking practice as they would have done in the full class.

Groups may consist of any number of students from two (pair work) to six or so. Pair work leads to more individual participation, but is less appropriate for activities that require the production of a lot of different ideas. So larger groups – five or six participants – will be best for brainstorming or decision-making activities. Larger groups are also easier on weaker or shyer students in that they lessen the pressure on them to participate but are supportive enough to enable them to contribute when they can.

Group work is likely not only to increase the sheer amount of oral practice but also to improve motivation to speak. Students who are usually shy about saying something in front of the whole class, or to the teacher, find it much easier to express themselves in front of a small group of their classmates. Moreover, the physical focus of the discussion is close and directed towards the individual student; that is to say, whoever is speaking is only a small distance away, clearly audible, facing the others and addressing them personally. Any visual or other materials are likewise close by: the whole situation is more intimate and more likely to encourage individual participation.

Another advantage of group work is that it frees the teacher from the usual role of instructor, corrector or controller and allows him or her to wander freely round the class, giving help where needed, monitoring the performance of individual students, noting language mistakes for future

remedial work or devoting a little more time to students who need extra attention. The teacher also has an important role to play in supporting and encouraging discussions (see p. 14).

Finally, there is scope here for peer-teaching. In the course of group interactions, students will learn from each other, whether consciously or unconsciously. They may correct each other's mistakes, help out with a needed word and provide each other with exposure to new items or opportunities to review previously learnt ones.

Modes of activation

There are various ways to get students to talk: providing them with an interesting *topic* or a challenging *task*; using playful, *game-like procedures*; getting them to *perform pre-set texts*; asking them to *role play* situations; or inviting them to make formal *presentations* to the class. Each of these is discussed separately below, but of course in practice they are often used in combination: a task can be used as the basis for a game-like activity, a text learnt by heart can be used in role play and so on.

Topic

If you ask teachers how to get students to talk, they often say 'choose an interesting topic'. This is true only up to a point. If you invite students to talk about a subject which interests them (and note that 'them' usually means most of the class, not everyone!), this will certainly motivate them at the beginning to participate. Whether this motivation is maintained, however, is another question. Some classes that really enjoy the activity of debating controversial topics can keep up a topic-based discussion for an entire lesson. However, in my experience these are the exception. If you just introduce a topic with 'let's talk about your favourite football team' or 'let's talk about the latest local scandal', there may be an immediate response from some of the more active students, but then the participation tends to slow down, periods of silence increase and students start saying things like 'I can't think of anything else to say'. Underlying this claim is the feeling that they have no *reason* to say anything. In a conversation, in general, the main point is not the *what* but the *why*: participants need to have not only subject matter but also a reason to talk about it. This is why the *task* is so important: the most boring topic can furnish the basis for a good activity if it is accompanied by an interesting task (see, for example, Activity 3.6: *Dinner party*); however, a boring, or non-existent, task can kill the most enthralling topic.

Task

By *task* in this context, I mean work that results in some kind of clear outcome, such as a list, a picture, a story, a solution or a decision. Usually this outcome is produced by the participants at the end of the process. A topic-based discussion, in contrast, has no such result: ideas or opinions are exchanged with no definable outcome. The contribution of the task to speaking activities is, as mentioned above, that it provides a purpose: students are motivated to participate not just because they have something interesting to say about a topic but also because their participation contributes to the achievement of the aim of the task.

I learned about the value of tasks early in my career during a series of lessons I once gave as part of a course called 'Oral Proficiency' for fairly advanced speakers of English who were themselves