

“SORRY TO INTERRUPT YOU THERE, BUT COULD YOU ENGAGE IN MORE
AUTHENTIC SPONTANEOUS REAL-TIME DISCUSSIONS IN EAP?” 1

“Sorry to interrupt you there, but could you engage in more authentic
spontaneous real-time discussions in EAP?”

Richard Nickalls

Centre for English and Additional Languages, Lingnan University

Author Note

I have no conflict of interest to disclose.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to richardnickalls@ln.edu.hk

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Background

Students often arrive in EAP classes with poor communication skills and ineffective habits such as the overuse of notes and smartphones, a refusal to engage interlocutors with eye contact or other non-verbal communication, and a tendency to see discussions as performative. Instead of seeing the need to listen to others and respond to what they have said, they see the discussion as something to be scripted, memorised and performed no matter what others contribute to the discussion. The literature suggests that my own Hong Kong students' poor habits in university class discussions and debates were quite strongly ingrained as a result of the local culture and their public examination system which allows students to recite and recall memorised monologues (Bankowski, 2010; Hamp-Lyons, 1998). In fact, there are varied expectations at both high school and university levels in Hong Kong, but it appears anecdotally that undergraduate students are still permitted to script and prepare monologues (sometimes reading from notes) for some oral assessments and find it a great shock when some tutors ask them to put their scripts away and engage in real-time discussions. Furthermore, their poor habits may also be linked to recent disruptions in the students' school education. Indeed, many high schools in Hong Kong stopped examining oral English during the pandemic. It was therefore clear that our EAP students needed some scaffolding in group discussions beyond “please put your notes away”.

Unfortunately, it is very difficult to make some English for Academic Purposes students believe in their own speaking and listening skills to the extent that they feel confident enough to engage in real-time spontaneous seminar discussions. In fact, some students will refuse to change their worst habits until they fully understand the consequences of some misguided strategies that they use to cope with oral English situations. These include looking at their phones or referring to traditional notes throughout a discussion, scripting dialogues (and even other group members' turn-taking), dominating discussions, token and minimal engagement. I produced these videos with the help of our Visiting English Tutors to parody the worst effects of such strategies and model the aspirational goals of more interactive discussions that display better non-verbal communication and more genuine spontaneous engagement with other students. Care was taken to parody with comedic effect the noted tendency of students to over-script debates, even the interruptions.

Preliminary evaluation

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After using these videos on a course with 600 EAP students for two semesters we carried out a preliminary student evaluation last month. The early results are very positive. These videos were among the most popular videos added to our blended learning environment among both students and tutors. Both tutors and students liked the short format of the videos. As the videos are well aligned to our own EAP oral assessment, students saw their relevance and some of the most positive qualitative feedback comments came from mainland students at our university who, having come from a less communicative language learning environment without group oral assessment, felt that it supported them to adapt to an approach that was new to them. Although all students were aware that they weren't real students, they also liked seeing people of comparable age in the example videos.

Recommended Lesson Plan

Main Objectives of lesson

The three main objectives of the contributed videos and linked suggested lesson plan are to:

- Encourage students to swap their ineffective strategies for preparing for oral assessments (e.g. rote memorization) with effective strategies (e.g. thorough preparation to interact spontaneously in real time).
- Improve students' seminar skills in terms of non-verbal communication, turn-taking and polite phraseology around argumentation.
- Help students reflect on their own bad habits in preparing for and participating in oral discussions.

Please find an example handout in Appendix 1 and refer to the navigation notes published on the STiLE website.

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References

- Bankowski, E. (2010). Developing skills for effective academic presentations in EAP. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 22(2), 187-196.
- Hamp-Lyons, L. (1998). Implications of the examination culture for language education in Hong Kong. A keynote address presented. International language in education conference. Hong Kong: HKIED.

Appendix 1

Example Handout

TASK ONE

Discuss these five questions together in pairs or small groups:

- 1) How do you prepare for a class debate? Do you script and memorize what you are planning to say?
- 2) Do you listen to other people’s ideas when you argue with them? How would other people know you were listening to them?
- 3) In group work, are you someone who dominates discussions, or do you make sure everyone has a chance to speak?
- 4) What should you do if someone tries to speak for too long in a class discussion?
- 5) How can we help shy students contribute more to group discussions?

TASK TWO

A tutor has asked students to discuss the motion below:

The private ownership of guns (the ‘right to bear arms’) should be permitted to let people protect themselves.

The tutor asked students to speak in a natural spontaneous way with genuine interaction rather than scripting and reciting long memorised speeches (in preparation for an oral assessment that requires spontaneous discussion).

- In which video have the students listened to the tutor and engaged in more natural discussion?
- Which group discussion would you personally prefer to participate in?

TASK THREE

Watch video 1 again.

- a) How well do you think each student prepared for the discussion?
- b) What effect did the students’ preparation strategies have on the quality of the discussion?
- c) Do the students demonstrate any other ‘bad habits’ that reduce the effectiveness of the discussion?

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TASK FOUR

Watch video 2 again and make notes about the effectiveness of each student’s part in the discussion.

	Less effective strategies/bad habits	More effective strategies / good habits
Sophia (1 st on left)		
Rehab (2 nd on left)		
Laura (2 nd on right)		
John (1 st on right)		

TASK FIVE

Reflect on your own seminar skills

Good seminar habits

Points: ‘always’ (3 points); ‘sometimes’ (2 points); occasionally (1 point) or ‘never’ (0 points)

How often do you....	Me	Classmate
...prepare a short opening statement that briefly explains your stance to classmates?		
... ask questions and challenge your classmates in oral discussions?		
... politely show that you disagree with other students on a topic?		
...ask shy people in your group to speak and contribute to the discussion when they are quiet?		
...look at your classmates when they are speaking?		
... show your classmates you are listening to them with verbal and non-verbal communication (e.g. nodding head, smiling)?		
... engage with your classmate’s ideas (and not just your own prepared notes)?		
...politely interrupt classmates if they speak for too long?		

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Bad seminar habits

Points: ‘always’ (0 points); ‘sometimes’ (1 point); occasionally (2 points) or ‘never’ (3 points)

How often do you....	Me	Classmate
... script and memorize absolutely everything I plan to say in a group discussion and stick to my script (ignoring other classmates’ contributions)?		
...spend so much time thinking about your English accuracy and getting the sentence perfect in your head before speaking (the group discussion has moved on before you have the chance to speak)?		
...spend more time making notes and referring to your notes than listening to other people when they’re talking?		
...stare at your phone or computer screen while other people are talking?		
... feel frustrated because you cannot express your thoughts exactly?		
... dominate group discussions and speak so much that other people don’t get to speak?		
.....stay silent and not contribute to group discussions?		
...look bored and unengaged when other people speak?		

Appendix 2

Suggested solutions

TASK ONE

Discuss these questions together in pairs or small groups:

- 6) How do you prepare for a class debate? Do you script and memorize what you are planning to say?

Point out that scripting and memorising can be a good strategy (as long as they rehearse enough to sound natural) in some situations but will not be appropriate if spontaneous real-time discussion (and reaction to others) is required. For example, it's a good idea to memorise opening arguments, but later interactions in a discussion or debate must be more natural and spontaneous.

- 7) Do you listen to other people's ideas when you argue with them? How would other people know you were listening to them?

People know you're listening from verbal cues (what you say) and non-verbal cues (eye contact, nodding of head, body language).

- 8) In group work, are you someone who dominates discussions, or do you make sure everyone has a chance to speak?

Point out that effective discussions involve all members of the group. Most interactions in genuine discussions are short turns, not long monologues.

- 9) What should you do if someone tries to speak for too long in a class discussion?
- Interrupt with a polite phrase (e.g. "Sorry to interrupt you there, but...").*

- 10) How can we help shy students contribute more to group discussions?

Students should ask them what they think and show patience/give them time to overcome their shyness (e.g. "Sarah, I notice you haven't said anything. What do you think?").

TASK TWO

A tutor has asked students to discuss the motion below:

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The tutor asked students to speak in a natural spontaneous way with genuine interaction rather than scripting and reciting long memorised speeches (in preparation for an oral assessment that requires spontaneous discussion). I

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- In which video have the students listened to the tutor and engaged in more natural discussion? *Video 2*
- Which group discussion would you personally prefer to participate in?
Most students will hopefully prefer to be in the interactive group, i.e. Video 2.

TASK THREE

Watch video 1 again.

- a) How well do you think each student prepared for the discussion?
- Sophie (first on left). Seems fairly well prepared and ready to speak (frustrated she can't manage to interrupt Laura but should be more assertive and interrupt her).*
- Rehab (2nd on left). Did not speak. Looks like she did not prepare and does not want to be there.*
- Laura (the first speaker second from right) seems to have prepared a long script, memorised an answer quite effectively (but is dominating the discussion). She remains quite hesitant. Her excessive use of filler and many false starts show that she may be scripting/reciting her answer in an effort to overcome her lack of confidence.*
- John (first student on right). Seems to have scripted and memorised his contribution, but quite badly. When he talks it is clearly memorised/hesitant (not natural).*
- b) What effect did the students' preparation strategies have on the quality of the discussion?
- Students are not listening to each other – they are just trying to remember their rehearsed memorised monologues. The discussion is not very meaningful -it seems more like a “performance” (a bad one).*
- c) Do the students demonstrate any other 'bad habits' that reduce the effectiveness of the discussion? *Looking at phones, lack of eye contact, poor body language, looking bored, overlength turns, refusing to let others interrupt and talk.*

TASK FOUR

Watch video 2 again and make notes about the effectiveness of each student's part in the discussion.

	Less effective strategies/bad habits	More effective strategies / good habits
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<p>Sophia (1st on left)</p>	<p><i>Should have invited quiet student to speak.</i></p>	<p><i>States stance clearly and explains/supports her ideas well.</i></p> <p><i>Shows that she understands Laura (challenges Laura’s argument).</i></p> <p><i>After John’s interruption, she moves the argument on to another strong argument.</i></p> <p><i>Good eye contact with others.</i></p>
<p>Rehab (2nd on left)</p>	<p><i>Does not speak.</i></p>	<p><i>Better eye contact and body language in this video.</i></p>
<p>Laura (2nd on right)</p>	<p><i>Should have invited quiet student to speak.</i></p>	<p><i>Good eye contact. She allows others to speak more in this video.</i></p> <p><i>She shows she is listening to Sophia (verbally and non-verbally). Evaluates Sophia’s arguments to show disagreement.</i></p>
<p>John (1st on right)</p>	<p><i>Could have invited quiet student to speak.</i></p>	<p><i>Much better body language and eye contact.</i></p> <p><i>Interrupts politely and makes a good point respectfully.</i></p>

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