Abstract
This paper describes a task based small-group discussion activity used in the elective C1/C2 English communication courses for second year students at Tohoku University and reports the results of a survey of 122 students who did this activity in the C1 communication course. The activity, designed to promote development of English, communication, and critical thinking skills, consists of three phases: 1) preparation - involving written or video input in English about an assigned topic and completion of assigned questions and creation of original questions about the topic; 2) in-class discussion - in which student groups of 3-4 engage in three, 15-20 minute discussions; and 3) post-discussion reaction - a 15 minutes period in which students produce a written, English summary of their thinking on the topic. In hopes of facilitating engagement and active discussion, most topics are drawn from student homework assignments, while some are selected based on relevance to students' major subjects.

Introduction
A task based small group discussion activity was designed to expand students' English vocabulary, develop their critical thinking skills, and improve their ability to communicate in English. The activity consists of three phases: 1) preparation, 2) in-class discussion, and 3) post-discussion reaction. These phases require the students to use all four English skill areas: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. In order to encourage active participation, topics are student generated and the majority of a class period involves students talking with each other. The role of the instructor is to plan, facilitate, and give feedback that supports student development.
Background

Discussion, either student-centered or teacher-centered, is an accepted teaching strategy at the secondary and post-secondary level in western education. In today’s Internet age there are academics who have attained celebrity status using the teacher-centered discussion method such as Professor Michael Sandel of Harvard University who has produced the video course “Justice.”1 In Discussion as a Way of Teaching Stephen D. Brookfield and Stephen Preskill offer a definition of discussion: “as an alternately serious and playful effort by a group of two or more to share views and engage in mutual and reciprocal critique. The purposes of discussion are fourfold: (1) to help participants reach a more critically informed understanding about the topic or topics under consideration, (2) to enhance participants’ self-awareness and their capacity for self-critique, (3) to foster an appreciation among participants for the diversity of opinion that invariably emerges when viewpoints are exchanged openly and honestly, and (4) to act as a catalyst to helping people take informed action in the world.” (p. 6)2

They further suggest fifteen benefits of discussion:

1. It helps students explore a diversity of perspectives.
2. It increases students’ awareness of and tolerance for ambiguity or complexity.
3. It helps students recognize and investigate their assumptions.
4. It encourages attentive, respectful listening.
5. It develops new appreciation for continuing differences.
6. It increases intellectual agility.
7. It helps students become connected to a topic.
8. It shows respect for students’ voices and experiences.
9. It helps students learn the processes and habits of democratic discourse.
10. It affirms students as co-creators of knowledge.
11. It develops the capacity for the clear communication of ideas and meaning.
12. It develops habits of collaborative learning.
13. It increases breadth and makes students more empathic.
14. It helps students develop skills of synthesis and integration.
15. It leads to transformation.” (pp. 21-22)3

Considering the cognitive level and previous education of Tohoku University students, discussion in English would seem an appropriate activity for helping them advance their language and critical thinking skills. However, the EFL context has to be carefully considered and addressed for discussion to be successful.

This discussion activity provides a framework in which students can experience success in discussion. It has been developed with Japanese students in mind but is equally usable for a class with a mix of international students and Japanese students. The following four questions have guided the development and ongoing revision of the activity:

1. What kinds of experience have students had with discussion in their junior/senior high school and university classes?
2. What factors, in particular cultural factors, might hinder or enable a discussion activity?
3. What is the extent of students’ knowledge and opinions about topics that might be discussed?
4. How sufficient is students’ English language ability for discussion in English?

As students change, the answers to these questions can change. The answers below reflect the current situation.
1. What kinds of experience have students had with discussion in their junior/senior high school and university classes?

In 18 years as a full-time teacher in a Japanese junior/senior high school, I observed many classes on various subjects. The only times I regularly saw students engaged in small group discussion were during the homeroom period or in club activities. A survey of second year Tohoku University students revealed that their experience with discussion in university classes is similarly lacking.* (*results reported in this report: C1 Communication Classに関するアンケート調査)

2. What factors, in particular cultural factors, might hinder or enable a discussion format?

Potential hindering factors:

a. The typical relationship between a teacher and students in a Japanese classroom:
   Teachers generally do not expect students to express themselves orally in front of a class. This means that students who do not like to speak have not been compelled to leave their non-communicative comfort zone. In terms of discussion, this means that a teacher-centered type of discussion has less chance of success.

b. The relationship between students in terms of age and rank (先輩-後輩 relationship):
   Hierarchical relationships associated with age or grade difference might inhibit the freedom of some students to communicate. At Tohoku University students in the same grade may differ in age from one to three years, and some students from upper grades may retake a course.

c. Social interaction between genders:
   A mixed gender university class may include students from all-girls or all-boys high schools. This means that discussion activities will involve them in a type of social interaction they did not experience in high school. Some students have commented that they were initially uncomfortable speaking with either men or women they did not know.

d. Previous English language education:
   English education in junior and senior high school does not focus on enabling students to express their individual thinking either orally or in writing. Students view English as an entrance exam subject rather than as a tool to communicate.

e. Previous essay writing experience:
   Classes across the secondary curriculum do not emphasize writing logically constructed essays, and students do not have significant experience creating logically constructed arguments.

Potential enabling factors:

a. Familiarity with group assignments:
   Throughout their school life most students have been part of a homeroom class where they are typically divided into groups and given various responsibilities or assignments. Students are used to quickly using the rock-paper-scissors game to determine who does what. This enables a group based activity to be implemented fairly easily.

b. Desire for harmony:
   The cultural desire for general harmony means that there is a natural tendency to let people participate equally. This increases the probability of discussions being done in a respectful manner in which people are given an equal chance to speak.

c. Previous English language education:
   Through preparation for the entrance exam students develop a relatively large English vocabulary. This can aid in understanding natural English input. Further, because students have had little opportunity to use English to
communicate there may be some students who desire such an opportunity.

3. What is the extent of students’ knowledge and opinions about topics that might be discussed?
   Most students do not have extensive knowledge and have not extensively developed their opinions or thinking about many topics. It is thus unreasonable to expect them to talk at length about a topic.

4. How sufficient is students’ English language ability for discussion in English?
   In general, students are not able to talk freely but have sufficient vocabulary and grammar knowledge that with the aid of a dictionary they can comprehend natural English input from a newspaper, magazine or video. They also have sufficient writing ability to prepare their thoughts for sharing with classmates and to write a final summation of their thinking.

Using these questions and my 25 years experience teaching Japanese students as a guide, the basic elements of this activity were determined:

- Student-centered discussion has the greatest chance of success.
- Discussion in small groups of 3-4 students is practical.
- Input on a topic for discussion can be in natural English, but before asking students to proceed with discussion, providing an opportunity for some written preparation enables them to organize their thoughts and gather appropriate vocabulary. This preparation greatly facilitates subsequent discussion.
- It is reasonable to expect a prepared student to speak for 5-7 minutes about a topic.
- Discussing the same topic multiple times in a class period should help students develop English fluency.

- A timed written final summation on the topic and discussion is an appropriate means to ensure individual accountability and conclude the activity.

These basic elements were experimented with over the last two years and resulted in the activity that will now be described in detail.

Description of the Discussion Activity

I. Preparation Phase

Overview:
In the preparation phase (45-90 minutes) students develop knowledge and form opinions on a topic. A discussion preparation handout is completed and used during subsequent discussion. Students who do not complete the handout find it difficult to participate successfully in discussion, and their lack of preparation also impedes the success of their group as a whole. This has proved motivating to students in faithfully completing their preparation. A conscious effort is made to avoid labeling this preparation as “homework,” which has a negative connotation, and rather to emphasize its role as a discussion enabler.

1. Input about a Topic
   Students are given input about a topic through either a written article or video that is freely available on the Internet. The input is offered to introduce students to related vocabulary and viewpoints and is not intended to be comprehended and dissected in depth.

   Topics are primarily selected from student responses to a set of three separate homework assignments: 1) identify major problems in your native country, 2) identify major problems in the world, and 3) find an article or video that is of interest and write discussion questions about it. Some topics are nominated multiple times and might
be used because of their popularity. But, what is most impressive is the wide range of topics. For assignment 1 a total of 126 topics emerged. The use of student generated topics increases the likelihood that students will participate positively. Some topics are used across all departments while others are selected specifically for a certain department. Also, an effort is made to have a balance between serious, weighty topics and more light-hearted topics. This approach has been well received.

This year, the topic that generated the most interest was nuclear power, which is directly attributable to the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster. Other popular topics included the problem of food-self sufficiency for Japan, the unstable political leadership situation in Japan, and the declining number of Japanese university students studying abroad. Popular light-hearted topics included the use of dialects in Japan and the spread of otaku culture around the world.

2. Discussion Preparation Handout (Appendix 1)

Along with the input, students are given a discussion preparation handout consisting of three major parts:

Part 1: Students write four vocabulary words that are new to them which will be useful for this discussion. Students have varying vocabulary needs and this is a way to develop self-learning of vocabulary.

Part 2: Students are given 4-6 open-ended questions with each question having 4-5 lines for an answer. The first question is always about the input that the students read or watched. The other questions are about the topic. Students are expected to use all of the lines available to develop and explain their thinking.

Part 3: Students write an original question about the topic along with their answer. This is to help students to create questions and increases the number of questions discussed for each topic.

II. In-class Discussion Phase

Overview:

During a typical discussion class period students engage in three, 15-20 minute discussions, each with a different group of students. A student will therefore hear the thoughts of at least six other students and express their thoughts three times. This timeframe is in line with the degree of knowledge and language ability of students and also alleviates interpersonal relationship problems since partners change quickly and frequently.

Operation of a Typical Discussion Class:

1. Prior to the start of a class students pick up their name card, the reaction sheet they will use to write their summary for that day’s discussion, the input and preparation handout for the next discussion, and the graded discussion preparation handout and reaction sheet from the previous discussion.

2. The instructor circulates around the room, visually checking that all parts of each student’s discussion preparation handout have been completed and stamping the handout with either an OK or X stamp. Any student receiving an X will automatically receive the lowest evaluation score.

3. The instructor counts the number of students present, calculates the number of groups to be made based on a group size of three, and writes the location of groups by number on the blackboard. Depending on the number of students, up to two groups of four students can
result.

4. Students are verbally assigned to a group by number, move to the location of their group, arrange the desks for discussion, and place their name card so it is clearly visible to the instructor.

The proper arrangement of desks is important to facilitate discussion. In the case of three people, a triangle arrangement ensures the greatest eye contact, and in the case of four people, a cross-shaped arrangement is used. A group size of three seems to maximize student participation.

5. Students choose a discussion leader. This is generally done using the rock-paper-scissors game. The leader’s job is to decide which questions to discuss, to ensure that each person speaks an equal amount, and to keep the discussion going if there is too long a pause.

6. Discussions 1-3 (50-60 minutes)

The instructor uses a stopwatch to manage the time for each discussion. The minimum time is 15 minutes and the maximum is 20. During the discussions the instructor circulates through the room listening to students and occasionally joins in or even leads a discussion. Oral English mistakes that are overheard are corrected if the situation seems appropriate. When Japanese is overheard students are sometimes helped to say what they want in English. Being in constant proximity also makes it easier for students to ask questions. Students making an extraordinary effort are noted, as well as any who might not be participating. There are specific instructions related to each of the three discussions.

For Discussion 1 students are permitted to read the answers they have prepared on the discussion preparation handout and use dictionaries, cell phones, etc. to look up words or expressions. The leader chooses which questions on the handout to talk about. Students are not required to talk about all of the questions.

For Discussion 2 students are instructed to begin by talking about the original questions they have prepared and to only refer to their discussion preparation handout as needed. They are not permitted to read their answers. They may continue to use any type of language reference resource.

For Discussion 3 the leader is permitted to use the discussion preparation handout to ask the questions and other members may only use their handout to ask their original question. All members are expected to talk about the questions without referring to the preparation handout.

Following Discussion 3 students remain seated with their group and take out the reaction sheet that they picked up at the beginning of class.

III. Post-discussion reaction phase

The reaction is the most important element for evaluation and for this purpose a reaction sheet (Appendix 2) has been developed. It ensures individual accountability for this activity. When the reaction sheet is first explained, emphasis is placed on the reaction sheet being a means to communicate to the instructor the student’s thinking. If the English impedes that communication then it affects the evaluation. The reaction time has been set at 15 minutes because it is long enough to deliver substantial content but not so long that it becomes the dominant element of the class or that the quantity of writing becomes too much for the instructor to handle. As students become accustomed
to this system the amount they produce in 15 minutes increases.

A reaction should focus on the topic and content of the discussion and be written in paragraph form with proper unity and coherence. Students are instructed to demonstrate their knowledge of the topic through vocabulary usage and are encouraged to share pertinent opinions, experiences and information, and respond to comments from other students. Arguments are to be made logically. When a topic has a strong cultural element students are encouraged to compare and contrast with their own culture. They are discouraged from writing about the difficulty of doing discussion or writing in English.

During reaction writing students are free to use their preparation handout and any reference resource they want. Students are particularly encouraged to use the vocabulary they have written on their preparation handout to reinforce it.

The reaction sheet also has a two line Question section in which students are free to write any question they wish to ask the instructor about the topic discussed. The instructor tries to reply to any reasonable question submitted. This is a means to create personal interaction with students and is used by a number of students each discussion.

**Evaluation**

Each phase of the discussion activity is evaluated.

**I. Preparation Phase**

The preparation discussion handout is evaluated to determine whether a student has written vocabulary words, prepared enough content to talk for 5-7 minutes about the topic, and written an original question. As previously described, a visual evaluation of the handout is done immediately at the beginning of class and a final evaluation is made after it is collected. A student who received an X stamp during the initial visual check receives a score of **Could do Better (1)** for the final evaluation. The final evaluation is a more thorough visual check which evaluates the degree of effort given in preparing for the discussion. In particular, the answer written for question one reveals the extent to which the input was comprehended and considered. The scale used for the final evaluation is: **Excellent (3) ; Satisfactory (2) ; Could do Better (1) ; Not Done (0) .**

**II. In-class Discussion Phase**

This is an observation based evaluation which is generally made during Discussion 3 when students are instructed not to use their handout and to talk freely. The scale for this evaluation is: **Extremely Positive,** **Normal,** **Negative.** The evaluation is based on what is observed in terms of a student’s effort to communicate through use of English, eye contact, and body language as well as to listen to what others are saying.

**III. Post-discussion Reaction Phase**

The reaction evaluation is the most important element of a student’s grade. It is largely determined by the depth to which a student is able to explain an opinion, make a comparison/contrast, share information about a topic, or reflect on what other students shared in the discussion. Grammar and use of vocabulary are evaluated in terms of whether they inhibit or contribute to what a student is trying to communicate. The evaluation scale is: (11+, 10) = AA & A range, (9, 8) = B range, (7, 6) = C range, and (5 and below) = D range.

The length of a reaction is important to the extent that it means there is more English and content that
can be evaluated. It does not automatically equate to the highest evaluation but it does generally demonstrate that a student has a certain comfort level with writing English. Figure 1 shows the results of an examination of the word count of 67 reactions about the same topic.

These results show that there is a significant variance in what students are able to produce. Over the course of a semester the amount that some students write significantly increases as they become more experienced and comfortable doing this type of writing.

**Survey of C1 communication course students about discussion and conclusions drawn from it**

In the first semester of 2011-12 this discussion activity was used in five sections of the C1 communication course with students from six departments: Agriculture, Dental, Economics, Engineering, Law, and Medical. A questionnaire was given in Japanese at the end of the semester and completed by 122 students. The questionnaire is presented below with English translation and following each question is the conclusion made based on the results. At the end of the questionnaire students had the option to write a comment. (Appendix 3)
C 1 Communication Class に関するアンケート調査 (2011年8月)
C 1 Communication Class Questionnaire (August 2011)

Q 1 現在受けている他の講義のなかで学生間でのグループディスカッションを行っている講義はいくつありますか？
In how many of your other current university courses do you engage in group discussion with other students?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>人数 (# Students)</th>
<th>%</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>その他（other）</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comment based on Q 1: Students are not gaining experience in small group discussion through their university courses.

Q 2 現在受けている他の講義の中で教師がリーダーになって学生とのディスカッションを行っている講義はいくつありますか？
In how many of your other current university courses does the teacher lead students in a discussion?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>人数 (# Students)</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>その他（other）</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comment based on Q 2: Discussion is not being widely used as a teaching strategy by university faculty.

Q 3 今までに受けた英語講義と比較した場合、この講義における英語を話す量について答えてください。
How much did you speak English in this class compared to other previous English classes?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>人数 (# Students)</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>今まで受けたどの英語講義よりも多い More than any previous English class</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>今まで受けたほとんどの英語講義よりも多い More than most previous English classes</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>今まで受けたほとんど英語講義と同程度 The same as most previous English classes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>今まで受けたほとんどの英語講義より少ない Less than most previous English classes</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comment based on Q 3: This activity enabled students to have a significant speaking experience in terms of the amount of English output. For most it pushed them to a new level of speaking output.
Q 4 How would you rate your experience of doing group discussions in English?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th># Students</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. とても良い</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. 良い</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. 普通</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. あまり良くない</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. 良くない</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comment based on Q 4: The majority of students had a positive experience.

Q 5 How much do you feel your discussion ability improved in this class?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th># Students</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. とても向上</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. いくらか向上</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. 少し向上</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. 向上しない</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. 良くない</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comment based on Q 5: Overall, students were able to see self-improvement in their discussion ability. Further, the number who felt no improvement is negligible.

Q 6 How much time did it usually take you to complete a discussion homework assignment?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th># Students</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. 15-30分</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. 31-45分</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. 46-60分</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. 61-75分</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. 76-90分</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. その他</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comment based on Q 6: This activity required a time commitment in line with what was expected and did not generate any negative reaction as being too simple or too difficult.

Q 7 Do you feel that your ability to communicate in English improved through this class?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th># Students</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. はい</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. いいえ</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comment based on Q 7: The high degree to which students felt this activity contributed to improving their ability to communicate in English positively affected the classroom atmosphere for this activity.
Q 8  この講義はディスカッションで取り上げたトピックについてあなたの考察を深めるのに役に立ちましたか？

Do you think this class has contributed to developing your thinking about some of the topics discussed?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>人数 (# Students)</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. はい（Yes）</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. いいえ（No）</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comment based on Q 8: A majority of students believe that this activity helped them develop their thinking about the topics discussed. Students consistently commented in reactions that their viewpoint was expanded through the input and by listening to other students’ opinions. This contributes to developing their critical thinking ability. Generating topics through homework assignments and then selecting some for use positively motivated students and clearly communicated to them that this is a student-centered activity.

Q 9  この講義を通じて新しい友達ができましたか？

Did you make any new friends through this class?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>人数 (# Students)</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. はい（Yes）</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. いいえ（No）</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comment based on Q 9: This format provided a significant social function in helping a large number of students make a friend.

Q 10  グループディスカッション活動について教師から適切な指示と指導があったと思いますか？

Do you feel the instructor gave adequate directions and guidance regarding the group discussion activity?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>人数 (# Students)</th>
<th>%</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. はい（Yes）</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. いいえ（No）</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0 %</td>
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</table>

Q 11  教師から適切なフィードバックがあったと思いますか？

Do you feel the instructor gave adequate feedback?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>人数 (# Students)</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. はい（Yes）</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. いいえ（No）</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comment based on Q10 & Q11: The majority of students were satisfied at the role the instructor played in terms of direct interaction and feedback.
Q12 英語コミュニケーション能力の向上はあなたにとって重要だと思いますか？

Do you believe it is important for you to improve your English communication ability?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>人数 (# Students)</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. とても重要</td>
<td>Very important</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. 重要</td>
<td>Important</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. 普通</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. あまり重要ではない</td>
<td>Not important</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comment based on Q12: Students have a predisposition that it is important to develop their English ability. The instructor can take advantage of this predisposition.

Possibilities for Improvement / Innovation

For the preparation phase there is a need to determine with more clarity which topics are of interest to students in a particular department and to more fully assess the level of input that is most accessible. Video input is of particular interest because it can contribute to developing the listening skill which is generally more underdeveloped than the reading skill. In addition, more extensive use of the vocabulary section of the discussion preparation handout needs to be considered.

For the in-class discussion phase, since students have so little experience with discussion, there is a need to develop a model of an appropriately high level discussion to introduce the process and introduce English for discussion purposes. Possibilities include the creation of a model discussion script for use by students and the production of a video of a model discussion. Developing a tool to enable students to do self-assessment of their discussions would also be useful.

For the post-discussion reaction phase there is a need to help students become more competent in paragraph writing. Introducing the basic five-paragraph essay is one available approach to addressing this problem.

Conclusion

This activity aims to contribute to the development of students’ critical thinking and English communication ability through enabling them to have a successful experience preparing, discussing, and reflecting about a topic in English. The three distinct phases of the activity require students to naturally use all four language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. A survey of students revealed that the majority of students felt this activity helped to develop these abilities and was a positive educational experience. With this being the case I will continue to refine this activity and examine how discussion can be more fully utilized in the Japanese university classroom.

Endnotes

3) Brookfield et al. P. 21-22
Appendix 1: (This is an example of a discussion preparation handout that received an Excellent (3) evaluation. The input was an article about the decreasing number of Japanese university students studying abroad.)

Vocabulary: Write 4 new words that will be useful for this discussion.
1. financially
2. lighten
3. rectify
4. enterprise

Discussion Questions
1. What do you think about this article?
   I think it is big problem that the number of students studying overseas are declining and I agree to the author’s opinion. Today, it is very important for students to study abroad, to get ability to speak foreign language fluently, and to learn other countries culture. I think Japan should prepare the situation in which students can study abroad actively.

2. What do you think are the advantages/disadvantages of studying abroad?
   By studying abroad, students can learn other countries culture, expand values and get ability to cooperate with other country’s people. I think these things are advantages of studying abroad. But it costs a lot and take much time to study abroad and students may lose the chance to find employment though they have the ability because of the Japanese recruitment practice. I think these things are disadvantages.

3. Do you want to study abroad? Explain.
   Yes, I want to study abroad if I can. I want to live other country, improve speaking ability, expand values by learning other country’s culture and become a person who can compete and cooperate with other country’s people. But it is almost impossible for me to study abroad because much money and time are necessary for that and I have neither. I want to get a chance to study abroad.

4. What do you think could be done to get more Japanese students to study abroad? Explain.
   To get more Japanese students to study abroad, the government can support financially by scholarship. I think many students who want to study abroad worry about money, so I think it is very effective to support financially. Now there are scholarships for studying abroad in Japan, so I think government and other organizations should increase rate but there are many people who can’t use that.

5. Write your own question related to this topic and write your answer.
   Original Question: What country do you want to study in if you will study abroad? Why?
   If I can get a chance to study abroad, I want to study in China.
   Because China is near country and there is a close relationship between Japan and China. Many Chinese come to Japan and work. And now China develops, Chinese technology are progressing. So I think it is very important to come to be able to communicate with Chinese. That is the main reason I want to study in China. And I like Chinese culture very much. That is the reason, too.
Appendix 2: (This is an example of a reaction which received an evaluation of 11. The discussion was based on an article about the decreasing number of Japanese university students who are studying overseas. The reaction has been typed just as the student wrote it.)

Name romaji: Japanese: 
Name Card #: 

Date (mm/dd): Period: Student ID #: 

Question: 

Evaluation: (11,10) (9) (8) (7, 6) (5 …) 
format / length / unity / coherence / vocabulary / logic / opinion / 
comparison-contrast / experience / information

Reaction (Write in paragraphs in English):

1. In this class, I discussed studying abroad with many students based on the article and I listened many ideas of many students.
2. I think it is very big problem that the number of students studying overseas are declining. Students can learn other countries culture, expand their values and get the skill to communicate and cooperate with other countries people. Studying abroad has many advantage. So I think government and enterprise should support the students who want to go abroad and solve the problem.
3. Main causes of students who study abroad declining is Japanese recruitment practice. Student can’t get job after they go back to Japan though they have enough ability. So I think enterprises should change the practice and give chances to get job to student who have studied abroad.
4. And I think there are many students who want to study abroad but can’t because they don’t have enough money to go to and live in other countries. It costs a lot to study abroad. So if there are student who have good ability and are eager to study abroad, they may not go abroad because of financially problem. I think that is a big problem and I think government and other organizations should support students financially. There are some scholarships in Japan, but there are many students who can’t use it, so I think government should increase rate.
5. I think today’s topic is very important for us, university students. I’m very happy to have a chance to discuss this topic with other students.
Appendix 3: (Student Comments from the C1 Communication Class Questionnaire - August 2011)

These are representative examples of the comments received which were written in Japanese. The English in parenthesis is an approximate translation.

1. もともと人前で話すのは得意ではないので、不安を感じていましたが、とても楽しく授業を受けることができました。（Basically, I am not good at talking in front of people, so, I felt anxious. But, I enjoyed taking this class very much.）

2. 今まで受けた英語の講義のうちでも、1番積極的に臨むことができた授業だと思いました。楽しかったです。ありがとうございました。（I felt more positive about this class than any English class I’ve taken before. It was enjoyable. Thank you!!）

3. 今回の講義を通して自分の英語コミュニケーション能力が足りないことを痛感すると同時に毎回毎回、新たな英語表現に挑戦することができました。重い話題と軽い話題のギャップも面白かったです。ありがとうございました。（Through this class, I keenly realized my lack of ability to communicate in English. At the same time, each class I experienced the pleasure of using new English expressions. The difference in talking about a weighty topic versus a light topic was interesting, too. Your class was very fun. Thank you.）

4. 今まで「英語で話す」ことに何となく抵抗があったが、何度もディスカッションしていくうちに、英語でコミュニケーションをとることが楽しくなって行きました。自分も英語を話すことができる！という自信につながる授業を提供してくださり、ありがとうございました！Thank you very much！（I used to somewhat feel uncomfortable ” speaking in English.” But, after several discussions, communicating in English became fun for me. I appreciate that you offered a class that led me to believe, ” I can speak English！” Thank you very much！）

5. 従来の先生主導の授業よりも、この講義は大変有意義だったと思います。また、先生にはめてももらったことは英語のコミュニケーションを行う上で大変自信になりました。本当にありがとうございました。（Compared to common types of classes led by the teacher, I think this class was very meaningful. In addition, the praise from the teacher gave me a great deal of confidence in communicating in English. Thank you very much.）

6. 今までこのような形式の授業は受けたことがなかったため、とても新鮮であった。（I’ve never taken this kind of class before. It was very refreshing.）

7. 原稿を見ないで、英語でディスカッションをすることの大変さが分かった。また、今後英語でのコミュニケーションの機会が増えると思うので、この講義はそれを学ぶための有意義な時間となった。（I learned how tough it is to do discussions in English without notes. In addition, I expect that there will be more opportunities to communicate in English in the future. In this context, this class provided a meaningful learning time.）

8. グループディスカッションにより、他人の考えを直接聞いたり、議論できたので、英語の能力向上以上に有意義な授業だった。（Through the group discussions, I could directly hear what other people think and experience discussion. In this way, this was a meaningful class in addition to improving my English ability.）