

DISCUSSIONS THAT WORK: TASK-CENTRED
FLUENCY PRACTICE

Penny Ur

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Looking for ways to have students practice communicating in English? Then Discussions that Work has some ideas that should interest you.

Ms Ur has divided her book into two parts. The first is a short presentation of the general principles and elements involved in a good discussion; while the second and main part contains just what its title proclaims: many ideas and descriptions of activities that foster fluency practice through the discussion needed to complete some sort of task. Such ideas are always welcomed by teachers of English as a foreign language who want their students to learn to communicate in English and therefore try to incorporate this type of practice in their classrooms. At the end Ur has included a selected bibliography for more ideas and further information.

In order to understand the scope of Discussions that Work it is necessary to grasp that the term "discussion" is given an ample definition. In the author's words, "I am using the word 'discussion' here rather broadly to include anything from the simplest question-answer guessing process, through exploration of situations by role-play, to the most complex political and philosophical debates; I include not only the talking but also any reading and writing that may be entailed." (p. 2-3).

She then goes on to clarify that while efficient fluency practice is perhaps the most important aim of discussion, it is not its sole use in the language classroom. Others are achieving an objective, learning from content and learning how to participate in a discussion.

To reach these goals several factors should be present. There must be a defined and interesting topic and more importantly, there must be a reason to speak, a purpose that transforms word combinations into language functions. The task itself should be designed carefully, taking into account the thought processes involved, some way of noting results, efficiency in providing language practice, simplicity, interaction and interest. I especially identified with her thoughts on preparation:

The task should be simple from the teacher's point of view as well: that is, it should be simple to prepare. An activity with a great deal of complex preparation in terms of typing, duplicating, recording or the use of elaborate aids may well be successful - if it ever takes place! (p. 14).

Having commented on some advantages and disadvantages of group work and role-play previously, the author rounds off the first part of her book with several helpful suggestions regarding the actual organization of tasks involving discussion. These include ideas about presentation, the way the discussion is held, the teacher's role, endings and feedback with the students. Unfortunately, this first section is very brief, and topics which could profit from more extensive explanations are treated too quickly.

The "task-centred communication activities" which compose the second part of the book are an excellent source of ideas for the foreign language teacher. They are designed for fluency practice and hence, are mostly aimed at the intermediate and advanced levels in varying degrees of difficulty, with exceptions noted by the author. Each activity is described in terms of the processes and language in-

involved. Possible variations are given; examples of materials with good explanations as to their preparation are included; and ways of organizing and working with results and endings are suggested.

An interesting element is that the activities are grouped into three categories depending on the processes entailed. These are: brainstorming - which requires lots of creative input and hypothesizing from group members; organizing - which is based on use and accommodation of given information; and compound - which combines elements of the first two.

As a teacher, I found myself thinking of how and when to incorporate certain activities into my classes, or how to adapt others so that they could be more useful or attractive to my students. This is the real value of the book and what makes it worth the short time it takes to read. It is a helpful reference book of task-centered, fluency practice activities ready to be taken into the classroom with little or no modification.