
The Value of Action Research in Exploring Methodology: A Case of Instruction on Questioning in Debate

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Abstract

Action research should not be defined narrowly as a method to resolve problems in classrooms but should instead be viewed as a type of exploratory teaching. How Japanese university students use questions in formal debates is the puzzle explored in this paper. As the research cycle unfolded, the principle investigation transformed into a springboard for a more general study of methodology. As a consequence, this action research description focuses on what teachers can learn about their teaching, not necessarily through the results generated by a study but by the very act of entering into the cycle of action research. The contention presented is that methodology is never perfectly appropriate and so continuous action research should be pursued by educators in their classrooms.

Introduction

This paper documents a small classroom research project. The action research project arose through shared observations concerning first-year Japanese university students' use of questions in English debates by my colleagues and I. This past term was the sixth year for me to teach this course which culminates with inter-class debates. In past years the principal focus of the debate preparation exercises I have developed was to introduce to my students language practice connected with stating and refuting arguments. I had come to believe that the performance of my students in debate events indicated that a greater emphasis on questioning was needed. In 1999 I made a conscious attempt to include more extensive instruction on questioning in debate contexts. What follows is the process I engaged my students and myself in as I examined a small part of my methodology in one course.

Setting

The research for this paper was conducted in a class of first-year students at a small English medium four-year liberal arts college in Japan. In their second term of study at the college the students all must enroll in one English communication course

called English Two. This course meets three times per week. There are two 75-minute class periods and one 50-minute lab held weekly. English Two focuses on oral production skills with presentations, speeches and debates as the central tasks. In addition, throughout the academic program students are often required to make class presentations in English that can include asking or answering questions. For research purposes also some students need to conduct interviews in English.

My English Two class in the fall of 1999 consisted of eight first-year Japanese college students; four male and four female. On average, the college's students may have relatively good communication skills in English; however, courses are heterogeneous in language proficiency with some beginners enrolled. The students in English Two have completed their first term of study at the college and have an understanding of the academic culture, classroom environment and teacher expectations. They also have had exposure to English beyond the instruction offered in Japanese high schools.

Accepting that Japanese high school graduates typically "have difficulty understanding, and thus responding to, a single question" (Richards, 1993, p. 50) in English, the development of listening skills is central to preparation for the debate task. Anderson and Lynch (1988) outline two different functions of listening. The purpose that listeners have might be interactional (primarily socially oriented) or transactional (primarily message oriented). Participants in a debate should be considered to have a transactional purpose for communicating. That is, conveying a message accurately in a direct way is the listening-speaking function central to debating. Formal debates have the objective of convincing a neutral third party, a judge, that your arguments are better than those of your opponent. The objective is simple but achieving it within the constraints of formal rules and time limits is a considerable challenge. As the purpose is for judges to weigh the strengths of argued positions, debate is clearly a transactional event as one message triumphs over another. Transactional language can be taught in the context of a specific transactional task wherein "the message must be understood" (Brown & Yule, 1983, p. 13) and what is said needs to be clear.

Researchers in the field have stressed the need for learners to be interactive in listening (e.g., Anderson & Lynch, 1988; Dunkel, 1991; Helgesen & Brown, 1994; Mendelsohn, 1994). The traditional approach to developing listening skills that separates speaking and listening into discrete skills is now criticized as inadequate because in these classes listeners often do not interact with the input and this may encourage students to perceive listening as a passive skill (Anderson & Lynch, p. 15). Active, or participatory, listening involves the use of reception strategies which require listeners to check their comprehension or supply feedback to achieve successful communication (Vandergrift, 1997). Faerch and Kasper (1986) indicated that active listening assists language learning when the listener becomes aware of a

problem in comprehension and uses a reception strategy to negotiate meaning. Of course a listener may infer meaning and signal for the interaction to proceed. As long as listeners can comprehend the input, communication/language learning is possible.

Focus of Action Research

According to the model provided by Kemmis and McTaggart (1985), action research is a continuing process of investigation that is divided into four component parts: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. These components operate as a cycle but they do not necessarily need to follow in sequence. For this study, I have used this cycle and combined it with Allwright's (1993) concept of *exploratory teaching*. This view of investigation does not limit practitioners to identifying and solving *problems*, but encourages teachers to explore classroom *puzzles*. In this way, educators can study any matter of interest.

From previous experiences teaching in this course, my colleagues and I had noticed that during English debates many of our students did not follow up on responses to the questions they had prepared. This sometimes resulted in a loss of the context of the exchange as some questioners seemingly jumped from one area of a topic to another without adjusting the line of questioning when appropriate to fit new information supplied by a respondent. The problem is a general one that I have noted over several years of teaching Japanese college students. The three colleagues I consulted with on this matter all agreed that they have experienced this problem. Our intuition gained from experience indicates that students at our university have difficulty with questioning strategies and, therefore, often do not make good use of questioning time in debate. The puzzle I set to explore my methodology was, How could I help my students to better understand question types used in debates and to formulate relevant follow-up questions in debate contexts?

The final debate events for the English Two course are scheduled for early December each year. The debate format presented in Appendix A has been refined by my colleagues and I for four years at MIC. It is a hybrid of educational/academic debate (Richards & Rickett, 1995), standard debate (Goodnight, 1993) and cross-examination debate (Le, 1995) formats. This format has been refined according to the perceived needs of our EFL learners by the faculty members teaching debate skills. We sought primarily to lessen the potential for frustration in EFL debaters due to listening comprehension difficulties. The format includes a time to consult with team members after the major arguments section in order to determine the lead questions in the cross-examination attack. Teams preview the two main cross-examination questions prior to the cross-examination section and are able to ask clarification questions about their content before commencing the actual cross examination. This

adjustment provides extra time for EFL debaters to process language. The second break provided just before the cross-examination section is time for language learners to consult, prepare responses and select additional questions to pursue.

The inter-class debate events are held before an audience of students and faculty. There is a faculty moderator/timer and three judges; one student and two instructors. The debates begin with short introductory statements from each team outlining their position and arguments. In the major arguments section, each team member has a 90-second turn to state his/her argument. Immediately following each argument, the opposing team has 60 seconds to ask a question about the argument or to respond to it with a statement. After all of the arguments are heard, the teams state two major questions they will use in the cross-examination section. They then ask these and other questions in the cross-examination part of the debate. To conclude there is a one-minute final appeal by both teams.

Response

It has been asserted that for second language learning to be effective students need input which is comprehensible (Krashen, 1982) as well as many opportunities to produce comprehensible output (Swain, 1985). Common sense should tell us that to learn to communicate in a language a learner needs to have some degree of understanding of what they are reading or hearing and be able to produce responses in language that is understandable. If a listener does not or cannot understand a message conveyed to them, communication will not take place. Thus, speaking and listening skills are interdependent.

Central to effective communication are production and reception strategies. In an interaction the speaker and listener work together to negotiate meaning. Lynch (1995) offered two broad categories of reception strategies: questions about old information (backward orientation) and questions about new information (forward orientation). A speaker will assist with problems in communication by employing production strategies that clarify, repeat or modify the message (Vandergrift, 1997).

Anderson and Lynch (1988) summarize three primary skills for second language listeners gleaned from studies in discourse analysis. First, listeners need “the ability to recognize the topic of conversation” in order to make a relevant response. Second, listeners need “the ability to make predictions about likely developments of the topic” to consider a response. Third, a listener needs “the ability to recognize and signal when he has not understood enough of the input to make a prediction or a response” (p. 42). All of these readily apply to the interaction between debaters in a timed debate event.

Implementation

The approach I chose to implement is a *process-oriented* one (Rost, 1990). The main *product* is relevant questions. Students were engaged in a variety of small group and pair tasks that required them to listen and respond appropriately. The instructional plan I envisioned at the start was to create a number of tasks to: raise student awareness of what constitutes active listening; introduce students to different question types including follow-up questions; and allow students to develop listening and speaking skills. Next is a description of sample activities.

The concentration on preparation for debate-related tasks really began in the tenth week of the sixteen-week course. I decided to begin by soliciting a definition of “follow-up question” from the students. Ultimately they settled on the definition: “An additional question on something said before”, by negotiating the meaning cooperatively with the aid of a dictionary (Newbury, 1996, p. 330), and prompting from the instructor.

Table 1
Sample Classroom Exercises

<u>Task Description</u>	<u>Aim</u>
Students listened to short dialogues recorded on a cassette tape in the listening lab and checked which questions were follow-up questions.	To make students aware of different question types and their purposes.
Students first practiced paired speaking activities by listening and stating arguments provided by the instructor. In the next session, the same arguments were distributed to different students and the listener had to try and match one of questions provided and the pair had to agree and name the question type.	To listen, paraphrase and identify types of arguments and questions.
Students completed two controlled dictations of debate arguments prepared by the instructor.	To listen to full debate arguments and create follow-up questions and counter arguments.

I developed several other speaking and listening exercises for practicing identifying and producing different argument and question types as my students prepared for the final debate event. Prior to the third class period of the debate-specific preparation just described, I conducted a practice debate with minimal preparation and supplied each team with arguments. This was intended to serve two purposes. First and foremost, it was an opportunity for the students to become familiar with the debate format and the type of interaction they should expect in a debate. Second, by making a video recording, this debate provided the needed base-line data for this study.

Evaluation

To restate, the purpose of this action research project was to judge whether I could develop effective procedures to prepare my students to engage in questioning during formal debates in English. I wondered if an emphasis on questions and questioning would actually increase the use of questions in EFL debates. As background, the students had used follow-up questions well in earlier course tasks that focused on conducting interviews in English. Furthermore, five of the eight students were able to correctly identify follow-up questions 70% or more of the time in the listening exercise discussed initially as part of the *implementation* section of this paper.

The baseline data gathered from the practice debate conducted during the lab period on November 17, 1999 is summarized in Table 1. In this debate the Affirmative team (AF) asked a total of 12 questions. Three of these questions were for “new” information in areas of the topic not previously mentioned during the debate. The Negative side (NEG) asked a total of 15 questions of which 11 were follow-up questions. This result was most impressive and called my original assumption into question.

Table 2
Number and type of questions asked in 17 November Practice Debate

	<u>Comprehension/Clarification</u>	<u>Follow-up</u>	<u>New</u>
AF	4	5	3
NEG	3	11	1

In the next class session, I set an exercise in which pairs of students who participated on the same practice debate teams worked together to identify the three question types in a transcript of that debate. Only one of the four pairs had more than minor difficulty distinguishing between follow-up and new information questions. This lesson concluded with a debriefing of the students on what aspects of the debate they had found to be difficult and where we should concentrate our preparation. There was a consensus among them that it was difficult to listen to arguments and formulate questions. Another pair realized that the Affirmative team had used up valuable time in the cross-examination section because one member insisted on pursuing a confusing line of questioning. So we discovered that while it is necessary to follow-up and challenge the opposition, it is also good debating strategy to drop a question if meaning is not negotiated after a couple of attempts.

With this experience to lead us, my students and I moved ahead in the next five classes with the preparation activities described in Table 1. The debate events were held over three days; 6, 8 & 10 December. The course concluded the following week with two class sessions in which the students and I discussed the unit on debate.

Analysis of the transcripts of the three debates my students participated in (see Appendix B for an edited sample) are summarized in the tables below. For the purpose of this study, question types were defined as follows, borrowing from Vandergrift (1997). Comprehension or clarification questions involve requests for simplification, rephrasing, repetition of whole or partial phrases or single words. Listeners may also indicate that they understood nothing or may check their understanding. Follow-up questions are those asking for additional information on something said before in the interaction. New questions involve asking about something not previously said in the interaction.

Table 3
Number and type of questions asked in 6 December Debate

<u>Comprehension/Clarification</u>	<u>Follow-up</u>	<u>New</u>
1	5	3

Table 4
Number and type of questions asked in 8 December Debate

<u>Comprehension/Clarification</u>	<u>Follow-up</u>	<u>New</u>
5	5	1

Table 5
Number and type of questions asked in 10 December Debate

<u>Comprehension/Clarification</u>	<u>Follow-up</u>	<u>New</u>
3	7	0

Between 9 and 11 questions were asked by my three debate teams in these culminating debate events. There were 5 follow-up questions asked by two teams and 7 by the third. The team in the 10 December debate event did not ask any new information questions, while the other teams did. All of the teams asked some comprehension/ clarification questions. These results are not surprising given that the format (see Appendix A) allows teams composed of three members each a total of nine minutes for questions and answers, excluding the preview question section. What is surprising is that the practice debate generated a greater number of questions (12 and 15 by the two teams) than any of the three final debate events. This result could have been due to the topic, group dynamics, lower stress levels or other reasons.

In the final two meetings of the course I engaged the students in a few debriefing exercises to learn more about their perceptions of the course generally and specifically the debate task and preparation related to that. First I asked each debate

team to complete a transcript of their cross-examination of the opposing team. Teams were provided with a video tape excerpt of their debate and a video viewing station to work at. Their task was to transcribe what their team members had said during that section of the debate and then to categorize each statement or question as one of the following: comprehension/clarification = Q1; follow-up = Q2; new area = Q3; statement = S; answer = A. I then created transparencies of interesting sections from each of the debates for the overhead projector and we reviewed in plenary the debates along with our understanding of the question types.

The next class began with a timed writing on the topic “Do you think that the time spent on debate in English 2 is useful? Why?” All of the students agreed that debate in English is difficult but interesting and is good practice for listening and speaking. Finally I engaged the students in a discussion on four questions about the debate task. These were:

- 1) Did you feel prepared to ask questions in the debate? Explain.
- 2) What did you find difficult about asking questions in the debate?
- 3) Were you happy with the questions you asked in the debate? Why?
- 4) How can this class be changed to help students more with asking questions?

Time in class was spent on discussing these questions and later the students were encouraged to respond by email to these same questions.

Student feedback in the class and email debriefing indicated that they did feel prepared for asking questions in the debate. The sentiment was that brainstorming potential questions prior to the debate was helpful. However, most of the students felt pressured in the debate event and agreed that they needed additional time “to make strong questions”. As one email respondent noted: “It’s difficult for me to understand their [the opposing team’s] arguments and to make new questions”. The students were divided on question number three. Some expressed their satisfaction with the questions they asked in the debate “because they [the opposing team] couldn’t answer our questions”. Yet, others were frustrated by their inability to ask precise questions. The students offered suggestions for changing the course in response their experience but these were all focussed on additional practice with similar types of exercises used in the course. “Listening, make questions and saying are difficult. We need to practice to make questions ...” “We have to speak or speech each other in class.” These are representative responses to question four.

These responses were encouraging as far as my general approach in the unit. On reflection, I wonder if the students are aware of the difficulty that native speakers have with communication and the complexity of the debate task. It occurs to me that perhaps I need to do more to raise their awareness of what effective listening is and emphasize the fact that comprehension is never complete.

Insights

Action research should not be viewed narrowly as a problem solving type of pedagogic investigation. Teaching and learning are complex activities and foreign language instruction often has an added dimension of communication between people from different cultures. Furthermore, many teachers are extremely reluctant to publicize *problems* they might see in their classes. The kind of cyclical investigation of teaching practice designed in action research is such an empowering tool, however, that more teachers need to be encouraged to enter into it. The lasting value of action research is not as a way to solve problems but it is found in the very act of entering into the cycle of investigation. This action forces teachers to think about what they are doing in the classroom in a systematic way through an lens focused on one particular area of their practice.

This action research is essentially focused at the use of questions in debate contexts for EFL learners; however, the investigation necessarily caused me to reconsider the use of debate as a language teaching task. I questioned whether the final unit of the course was being driven by the debate format to the detriment of the principal course goal of providing structure and guidance for language development. Student comments on exit questionnaires indicated that they unanimously enjoyed practicing for and performing in debates and saw the task as a meaningful one to direct language instruction and learning. Colleagues too, have all had similar responses from their students for the past six years. This is a strong indication that the debate event provides a good motivating focus in my English Two course.

My view of my methodological approach changed toward the end of this project. I began to question how attuned I truly am to my classes of students. I began this project with a normative interpretation of events and later it puzzled me when the results did not seem to fit the version of reality that I had constructed. Responding in a more reflexive way made me feel somewhat uneasy and uncertain. This reaction caused me to realize that I have preferred to control much of the activity in many of my courses. So much so that perhaps my interpretive skills are not well developed.

Thus, in my current view, one key to development in teaching methodology is the act itself of attempting to adjust or adapt. Although measurable success is what we desire, it is not always the outcome nor is it always immediately tangible. It seems to me that taking risks and making attempts provides the dynamic where learning might occur for all participants. Reflecting on my own practice through this project, has led me to see that I have been guilty of avoiding the time-consuming processes involved in a truly reflective methodology. I see the way to becoming a better teacher through Holliday's (1994) claim that method is never truly appropriate but is a permanent, ongoing process of "becoming appropriate" (p. 164). I end and begin here.

The Author

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Appendix A: Debate Format

	minutes
INTRODUCTION	
· Affirmative Team’s General Introduction	1
· Negative Team’s General Introduction	1
MAJOR ARGUMENTS	
· Affirmative Team’s First Argument	1.5
(questions or reaction by Negative Team)	1
· Negative Team’s First Argument	1.5
(questions or reaction by Affirmative Team)	1
· Affirmative Team’s Second Argument	1.5
(questions or reaction by Negative Team)	1
· Negative Team’s Second Argument	1.5
(questions or reaction by Affirmative Team)	1
· Affirmative Team’s Third Argument	1.5
(questions or reaction by Negative Team)	1
· Negative Team’s Third Argument	1.5
(questions or reaction by Affirmative Team)	1
· Affirmative Team’s Fourth Argument	1.5
(questions or reaction by Negative Team)	1
· Negative Team’s Fourth Argument	1.5
(questions or reaction by Affirmative Team)	1
MAIN QUESTION PREVIEW	
(two minute break to prepare questions)	2
· Affirmative Team States 2 Main Questions	2
(clarification questions from Negative Team)	
· Negative Team States 2 Main Questions	2
(clarification questions from Affirmative Team)	
CROSS-EXAMINATION	
(three minute break to prepare responses)	3
· Affirmative Team Answers Questions	6
(challenging questions from Negative Team)	
· Negative Team Answers Questions	6
(challenging questions from Affirmative Team)	
CLOSING STATEMENT	
· Affirmative Team’s Closing Statement	1
· Negative Team’s Closing Statement	1

Appendix B: English Two 1999 Debate Partial Transcript

December 8, 1999

Resolved: Doctors should be required to tell patients if the patients are dying

Introduction [shortened]

F1: Everyone. I want to explain about our proposition and argument. Doctors should be required to tell patients if the patients are dying. We agree this proposition and we have three arguments. First, patients want to know about their disease or condition. I will explain about this argument. Second, patient have right to know about their health condition. Mai will explain about second argument. Third, patient need to plan their limited life if they are dying. Yoshiko will explain about third proposition.

Argument [one sample]

F2: I will talk about second argument. All patient have the right to know about their body and their health. Right to know means that the patient to accept information from the doctor about the name of disease condition, effect of medication, side effect [laughing] condition ... medicine, operation, treatment, plan of medical examination and [inaudible]. Patient need to know this information to give them content for treatment. For example, if a patient has cancer, his or her health will become worse day by day. So a patient will have anxiety and will be suspicious about his condition if the patient does not know his disease. And also, if the doctor does not tell the patient the truth, their confidence will be lost. Therefore, the patient will hate the treatment and their health will not recover. But if the doctor tell the patient the truth, doctor or nurse can be treat and tell for the patient truth. To tell the truth which about the health of patient is necessary. That is why doctors should tell the truth to the patient. That's all.

A2: Everyone want to know the disease? Ah, their condition?

F2: Not, not everyone.

A2: Thank you. [laughing]

F1: Not every patient. Most of the patient. Do you understand this meaning? [other team members nod, yes]

A3: Not mo most of the people wanna know ah, want to know right ah. Everyone has right to know but not everyone want to know about health condition if they has the terminal illness. [timer sounds]

Cross Examination

A3: Do you know what requer, require means?

F3: Yes I know.

A1: Required means ... if it is required you must to do. It's anyway 100%.

A3: You said, you said every people want to know about disease or condition. Right?

F1: But patient also have the right to refuse to know their condition and their disease or treatment.

A3: No, you said you ah, I'm asking you again ah, that time you said yes. But we have some data for not every people want to know about health and condition.

F1: Every patient have the right to know their disease and condition but patient can refuse to know.

A3: You know this resolution, resolution? Doctors should be required to tell patients if the patient are dying. You know that meaning? 100% people, ah no. Doctor said to the, must to say ah you're die or you have big terminal ill.

F1: Yes doctor should, should be required because a doctor have possibility to be sued and if doctor ah ... will be sued, doctor have to pay much money in a court. This is doctor's ah ... fault.

A3: Is that Japanese law?

F3: If patients don't want to know the truth, but the most important thing is for the doctor to care for the patient. To, to care after patient, huh. After doctor tell the truth to patient, doctor should care that patient.

A2: Is it your opinion?

F3: No, our opinion [laughing].

A2: Are there evidence?

F3: Huh?

A2: Are there evidence?

F1: Yes I have according to this book [holds up book and shows cover]. I ah and I quote from this book.

A3: I, I read tho, that book. But it isn't, that one says not every people want to know about ... health condition and ah ... a health or condition. If pat, ah doctor said directly to patient, that's fine but not many ah, not every people doesn't ah, not every people want to know about health and condition.

F1: This information ah is. Ah, I quote this information from another book. Um this book cannot show. You said.

A3: You said thats book shows [laughing] that.

F1: That is a after care about a patient.

A1: That is to say you, you are 100% of notification? But you musto notify all patients. [timer sounds]

My class was against (A) the resolution. Please note that due to word limits only one sample argument is provided in the Arguments section. Also, only the cross examination by my students (A) of the opposing team (F) is recorded here. The comprehension questions asked in the Question Preview section have not been provided either.