

# How a 'Leader-Led Discussion' Task can be Effectively Used in a Japanese University Setting and Provide a Productive Method of Assessment

リーダーレッドディスカッション課題を使用する利点と  
どのようにEFLクラスで実践できるか

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## ABSTRACT

*The goal of this paper is to introduce the 'Leader-Led Discussion' task and outline its benefits as a form of speaking task and assessment. This paper will also assess student perceptions and offer insights and conclusions based on these findings. With a significant difference from most 'carousel' speaking tasks, this paper aims to inspire and share the benefits of this valuable teaching resource and explain the ways in which English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) learners can benefit from this task. This article will discuss the pedagogic rationale behind the task, how it can be successfully implemented in the Japanese ELF university classroom and other concerns such as suitable topics and grading.*

**KEYWORDS:** Assessment, Carousel speaking task, ELF, Leader-led discussion

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As English teachers in a Japanese university setting, we often have to deal with classes where the learners are composed of those who are there out of compulsion rather than choice and where their levels of motivation and participation could perhaps at times be improved. To engage a class for a sustained period of time and have students preparing at home and actively participating in a clearly defined task would seem the ideal situation. The 'Leader-Led Discussion' task, if properly implemented, promises to satisfy all of the above criteria.

A key goal of the 'Leader-Led Discussion' task is oral fluency. Kellern (2009) and Nation (1991) identify the following important features of fluency building in classroom language tasks: preparation, time pressure, repetition, and familiarity with language and content. To establish the rationale for this paper I feel it is important to clarify how the 'Leader-Led Discussion' targets these fluency-building features in turn. First, careful preparation is required to carry out the task effectively. This will be explained more fully

later in the paper, and it is essential that each student independently chooses a topic and conducts detailed research about that topic. The time pressure element must be clear and all students should be aware of how long they have to prepare for their discussion, how long their introduction should be and for how long they are expected to ask questions and lead the group discussion. Repetition is a crucial stage of the task and students will be expected to lead their discussion three to four times in groups, which, after the carousel rotations have been completed, will include nearly every member of the class. It is important to clarify that while the learners will mostly repeat their introduction and discussion questions, due to the alternating members of their discussion group, the group dynamic and consequential conversation will often vary dramatically. While familiarity with language and content cannot always be guaranteed, as the topics and questions originate from the learners themselves, albeit with some guidance from the teacher, it can usually be assured that there will be some familiarity amongst the class with the themes the individual students choose. While surprises and innovative topics are encouraged, the questions themselves should be tailored to the audience and it must be emphasised that accessible, intelligible questions are required to lead an active group discussion.

Another key element of the 'Leader-Led Discussion' task is that it strives to encourage student-centered fluency. As the focus of this paper is on teaching university-aged adults, it is essential that learners encounter challenging topics and are stimulated to discuss these issues openly. In my experience, teacher-led discourses or discussions in front of the whole class can often stifle some students. The 'Leader-Led Discussion' avoids this as the students' work in smaller groups and the teacher, while present, is not directly part of any of the groups. Essentially, each learner chooses a topic of some criticality (e.g., plastic surgery, terrorism, marrying a non-Japanese person, *karōshi* - death from overworking) and their goal is to introduce the topic, its background, key terms and their own research, before proceeding to ask questions to stimulate debate and 'lead' the discussion. As Morgan (2012, p. 167) explains, 'when students are guided to research information or recycle language about familiar and interesting topics such as local/global issues, they must engage deeply with content, personalise their final product and so effectively expand their overall world knowledge.' While perhaps not its primary aim, a pleasing outcome of the 'Leader-Led Discussion' task is that it usually encourages learners to engage with relevant global issues and most crucially, from an ELF point of view, topics with some criticality encourage learners to behave as active world citizens.

This research paper is divided into the following sections: initially there will be a literature review which will ground the 'Leader-Led Discussion' in the relevant academic and ELF concepts. Secondly, the procedure will be clarified in detail to ensure readers of this paper will have a lucid and comprehensive picture of how to implement the task in their classroom. This section will include some example topics, useful discussion language which could potentially be introduced and a pre-task practice idea which can be a fun stand-alone lesson. The overall goal of this paper is to introduce the 'Leader-Led Discussion' task, identify some positive and challenging aspects and highlight why it should have a prominent place in the pedagogic arsenal of ELF teachers.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

As Jenner (1997) makes clear, it is now fully accepted that, ‘we must bear in mind that non-native users of English in the world today already greatly outnumber native speakers’ (p. 13). With this in mind, I spend a great deal of class time conveying this point, for example, if the learner travels, lives, works, or volunteers in a non-inner-circle country they will normally have to converse in an ELF setting. I feel the 'Leader-Led Discussion' demonstrates this practicality well for it allows learners to experience English language immersion for a prolonged period of time, and this nearly all takes place without native speaker input (i.e., any prolonged teacher-led instruction or direct participation).

Accommodations skills are also crucial to the task. Individual learners have a great deal of subtleties in their overall English abilities including their vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, confidence, motivation, and even their overall personality and character (Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003). As such, it is fundamental that they work together and support each other. Through working together to negotiate meaning, learners will hopefully scaffold, accommodate, and teach each other to avoid a breakdown of meaning (Foster, 1998). While, as Foster openly admits, this often does not come naturally to students, it is our job as language teachers to encourage the virtues of this and stress to the learners that it is not optimal to simply revert back to their L1 when they feel they do not fully understand. The 'Leader-Led Discussion' will hopefully play a major role in stimulating this negotiation for meaning. As simultaneous groups take place at the same time and repetition is a key factor, students are also less inhibited, and I feel their fear of making mistakes is greatly reduced. As Walker (2010) makes clear, because ‘accommodation skills will equip learners to actively adjust their pronunciation in order to help their interlocutors [...] they are important for ELF communication’ (p. 45). This places a primacy on intelligibility rather than specifically on form or comparing their linguistic repertoire to that of a native speaker (i.e., when they are conscious a teacher is listening to them and assessing them). The heart of the matter is intelligibility and the prioritizing of communication, rather than a strict adherence to native-speaker norms forms the crux of the Lingua Franca Core and carries the overriding focus of group accommodation and a negotiation of meaning in non-native speaker interaction as its goal (Jenkins, 2000). I feel the leader-led discussion fits very well with these values.

A great advantage of our classes at CELF (Centre for English as a lingua franca) at Tamagawa University is that we meet two times a week for 100 minutes per class. However, for Japanese university students, there may be very little additional exposure to or opportunities to communicate in the target language. As such, it is essential that fluency-building tasks are well planned with a coherent and sound pedagogical underpinning. Kellem (2009, p. 9) introduces seven key values to be mindful of when implementing fluency building tasks: (1) incorporate repetition, (2) increase speaking time, (3) prepare before speaking, (4) use familiar and motivating topics, (5) ensure the task is set at an appropriate level, (6) impose time limits, and (7) teach formulaic sequences. Throughout this paper, it will be demonstrated, through both theory and practice, how the 'Leader-Led Discussion' task addresses each of these principles directly.

As Doe and Hurling point out, with regard to developing ‘L2 speaking fluency,

there has not been a great deal of research into the effectiveness of speaking activities that can be used in the classroom' (2015, p. 256). However, I will now briefly discuss the relevance of some studies which concern the merits of similar fluency-building tasks, which are comparable to the 'Leader-Led Discussion'. Lynch and Maclean (2000) carried out research pertaining to Japanese university students taking part in a poster carousel task and noted that there were a great number of benefits regarding the repetition of the task, including an improvement in learner content, language, self-correction, and their overall level of fluency. As they claim, 'task repetition of the type reported here may be a useful pedagogic procedure and that the same task can help different learners develop different areas of their interlanguage' (Lynch & Maclean, 2000, p. 221). In Arevart's (1990) and Nation's (1991) studies, it was reported that learners improved in accuracy, fluency, and sentence complexity. They also found that there was an overall reduction in their propensity to repeat themselves, make errors and hesitate when speaking. Nakamura (2008) also studied the effects of task repetition on a poster carousel task with Japanese students and concluded that learners improved their fluency, especially with regards to a decrease in repetition and pauses and an increase in rates of speech.

### 3. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE LEADER-LED DISCUSSION

As previously stated, the key aspect of the 'Leader-Led Discussion' is to build and improve effective group communication and fluency. As a teacher, our role is to make it very clear that this is not a presentation. Learners will receive a favorable grade for how they facilitate and encourage group discussion; it is not a pressured one-time delivery. The focus of the task is on questions and leading the group discussion, not controlling and presenting one's own individual opinion. It is important for the leader, and all members of the group, to encourage everyone to participate and ask follow-up questions. It is also an important goal of the leader to help those who may not be so familiar with their topic and make it comprehensible and accessible to all, by explaining any new, genre-specific vocabulary. Leaders and participants are expected to encourage everyone to contribute and show their own passion, motivation and leadership to inspire others to contribute. While the topic may be critical and even intricate, their questions (5-8) should be accessible to all participants to encourage lively discussion for approximately ten minutes. Repetition is a fundamental element of the task and it is important to encourage students to communicate in a natural and uninhibited way. Each learner will repeat their leader discussion three to five times. It should be emphasised that the focus is not on memory or reciting a pressured one-time delivery, but of accommodating and supporting the group and adapting the conversation to the changing group members and its shifting dynamic.

For successful implementation of the 'Leader-Led Discussion,' each learner must think of a suitable topic to lead a 10-minute group discussion. Example discussion topics can be shown on a PowerPoint or drawn on the whiteboard with some elicitation to help support students. Some example topics I may provide could be: Should tattoos be acceptable? Do Japanese people need English? Japanese people should visit more foreign countries, or Smartphone use is bad for social interaction. It is important to give students a wide variety of examples and make it clear that while a formal or more casual topic is

acceptable, some level of criticality is certainly desirable. Initially, many learners will need time to digest the topic, and it is important not to pressure them into a topic too early. In my experience, the best ideas come from patient, considered preparation.

It may also be useful at this stage to provide learners with some examples of suitable discussion language (Appendix One). This can be typed out on a presentation slide for the class or provided as a hand-out. However, it is vital that the sentences fit the students' learning style and can be used naturally. Additionally, it would be valuable to elicit alternatives from the class as a mini exercise to emphasize that there are viable alternatives to the ones provided. Next, it is essential that teachers provide each student with a hand-out to aid them in the structuring of their preparation. It will also give them a clearer idea of the different components of the task. An example hand-out for students is shared in Appendix Two, and Appendix Three has an example of a student's plan. Initially, the learners must prepare a one to three-minute introduction with the optional use of a script or notes to justify why they chose the topic, why it is relevant to the class or Japanese, global society as a whole and make it accessible and inspirational enough to encourage group discussion. The next stage, which is optional, is to explain new or difficult vocabulary, to ensure all information is comprehensible and to demonstrate leadership skills by taking the initiative and teaching others about useful vocabulary. It is important they do not use Japanese to explain the new vocabulary. Finally, preparing five to eight questions to generate a group discussion for the remaining part of the 10-minute cycle is the most important element of the task. How the students can anticipate the audience's understanding of their topic, respond to questions, and adapt to the flow of the conversation will go a long way to determining their overall success.

Once each learner has thought of a suitable topic and has adequate questions, the assessments will take place over two to three 100-minute classes. For example, if the class had 20 students, then four 'leaders' would be chosen to start with four other participants in each of the four groups, making four groups of five learners. The first rotation would be an ungraded trial lasting approximately ten minutes, two to three minutes for the leaders' introduction and approximately seven minutes for group discussion based on the leaders' questions. The leaders then remain seated and the groups rotate to the next table and this process is repeated until all groups have heard all the leaders discussions (four times in total). After two or three classes, all learners would have played the role of the leader and all members of the class would have taken part in all the Leader-Led Discussions.

### 3.1 Pre-Task Practice

Alternatively, the teacher could forego this pre-task practice and use PowerPoint, the whiteboard, or even a video or illustration demonstration to explain to the students how the task will work in practice. However, I feel the best way, which reduces much teacher-led, top-down instruction and encourages the most student engagement and interaction, is to have them do a mini leader-led discussion to demonstrate the task in practice. While this is an optional stage, I feel it proves to be extremely useful for lower level students to gain confidence and also understand the basic structure of the task in practice; especially with regards to the timed rotation of the group discussions and the concept that it is the group 'leader', not the audience who has to prepare the questions. This type of classroom

concept checking is important to ensure all learners grasp these essential elements of the task.

The procedure of this pre-task practice lesson starts with having students choose a simple topic (e.g., animal, city/country, sport). Then, they write between five to ten facts or sentences to introduce their topic and five open-ended, accessible yet engaging, questions through which to lead a mini group discussion. Make sure to give students adequate time to prepare and, depending on their level and motivation, it occasionally takes time for some to think of a topic. They may also require some support thinking of suitable questions. Often they will initially think of closed questions which will not generate the desired level of group discussion. However, this pre-task practice lesson certainly does not need to be perfect as its primary function is allowing the class to become familiar with leading a mini group discussion and rotating in a carousel formation. This pre-task practice works as a great self-contained lesson and demonstrates key concepts of the 'Leader-Led Discussion' efficiently while increasing learner output and minimizing teacher-led explanation. It makes the implementation of the full 'Leader-Led Discussion' smoother and ensures thorough understanding.

### 3.2 Grading

There are many different issues to address regarding the grading process of the 'Leader-Led Discussion', however, ultimately it is a relatively subjective process and each individual teacher is free to amend the below advice and instruction in the way they feel is most appropriate. In my opinion, it is best if the teacher observes from the middle of the classroom and, as the groups rotate naturally around the teacher, they will get the chance to listen to all groups and leaders during the various repetitions of the task. Perhaps be careful not to sit too close to the learners. I feel it is best to remain in a consistent seated position and position the carousel around you rather than walk around the class and stand over different groups, as this may potentially fluster more reticent or weaker members of the class. However, depending on the class and the teacher's preference, this can be tailored accordingly. Marking rubrics may vary in criteria and the weight of score which is allocated to each individual element, but an acceptable example I feel would include: preparation, introduction to the topic, introduction of new vocabulary (which could be optional, or at least a lower weighting), questions, and leadership. Leadership should be the most important of the criteria, as it is the main focus of the task, and includes factors such as asking follow-up questions, helping more quiet members of the group to participate and adapting the topic and questions to different groups. Other elements to consider in this category are to what extent the leader dominated the group or was too passive and lost control. Also, while some Japanese is unavoidable in this task due to the level of the learners and the sheer length for which they are expected to speak, it is important to gauge the strength of which the leader encouraged the group to revert back to English. It is also possible to collect the learners' hand-outs (See Appendix Two and Three) to more accurately mark certain elements such as preparation, etc.

### 3.3 Post-Task Activity

As you can see from Appendix Four and Five, there are two optional hand-outs which could be used to give learners a follow-up task to assess their performance as a leader and/or participant to raise their awareness of their strengths and weaknesses and what they have achieved throughout the whole process. As an additional task, the learners could write this up for homework, and it could even potentially form a part of their overall assessment. This could prove to be a useful exercise to consolidate their progress, as by the end of the task they will have participated in so many different leader discussions covering a huge range of topics and question, that an additional assignment to spend a bit of time and contemplate the 'Leader-Led Discussion', should further strengthen their improvements made throughout the task.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Overall, I feel the 'Leader-Led Discussion' has an important part to play in any ELF language syllabus. This paper has demonstrated how it provides a great many benefits including task preparation, time pressure, repetition, developing accommodation skills, and the potential to cultivate learner motivation, which will hopefully play some small part in inspiring them to learn long after the course is over. The 'Leader-Led Discussion' is student-centered and provides an opportunity to discuss a vast array of mature, often thought-provoking topics, where the onus is on the leader, and all group members, to scaffold and accommodate each other with limited teacher intervention. As young adults, the 'Leader-Led Discussion' gives our learners the chance to think and prepare independently and then take responsibility and leadership over a group of their peers to critically discuss their topic. Whenever I have implemented this task, I felt a true sense of achievement and even a very real notion of not only fluency building, but also of teamwork, enjoyment, criticality, and a clear engagement with the issues at stake. Hopefully, this paper has been successful in its goal to explain the 'Leader-Led Discussion' and how to implement it in your classroom.

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## APPENDIX A

### Agreeing

That's right. / You're right. / You're absolutely right.

That's true. / That's correct.

I couldn't agree with you more.

You're absolutely right.

### Agreeing in part

I agree with you up to a point, but...

That's quite true, but...

I agree with you in principle, but...

### Disagreeing

I'm not sure I agree with you.

I don't agree. / I disagree.

(I'm afraid) I can't agree with you.

### Asking an opinion

Why (do you think so)?

What do you think about X?

What does anyone else think about this?

Do you agree with me that Tokyo is more interesting than London?

### Giving an opinion

My feeling is (that)....

Personally, I think (that) ...

It seems to me that ....

### Referring to other speakers

As David said just, ....

I can't agree with what David said.

But don't you think, David, that .....

### Giving an opinion

My feeling is (that)....

Personally, I think (that) ...

Generally speaking ...

It seems to me that ....

On the whole, Tokyo is more interesting than London.

### Asking an opinion

What do you think about X?

What does anyone else think about this?

Do you agree with me that Tokyo is more interesting than London?

# APPENDIX B

background information	main point	vocabulary discussion questions
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<p><b>background information</b></p> <p>Today, many people go to the university, but the university is not compulsory. Why do we go to the university? And now, university's entrance examination is more difficult than ever, but many people want to pass the exam of more highly grade university. why? <del>write</del> <sup>what is their purpose?</sup> we can study in the university, <del>through</del> but, we can also study by ourselves. However, the rate of students who go on to the university's education has increased more and more.</p>	<p><b>main point</b></p> <p>Why do we go to the university? And is the university good place to study or not?</p> <p><b>more information</b></p> <p>While the university is not compulsory, almost all university give students homework, at least. Musashi university give too much homework. Is homework necessary? We can study by ourselves, I think.</p> <p>I chose this topic because I think Japanese education system is strange. For example, schools assign homework to students, but a lot of I think studying hard or not is free thing. And, in our final year of university, we have to spend</p>	<p><b>vocabulary</b></p> <p>compulsory education school rules homework class → How much do you spend? → what homework do you like/hate?</p> <p><b>discussion questions</b></p> <p>Is homework necessary? and why? Are school rules necessary? and why? Is distinction between literature and science necessary? and why? Are classes necessary? and why? what's your favorite/worst class? Is educational career necessary? and why? (academic) What the best/worst point of the university? (do you think?)</p>
<p>So I want to know your opinion about why do we go to the university.</p>	<p>→ much time searching for a job, but I think we should be studying in the classroom, because we are students.</p>	

<b>Leader</b>		<i>Date:</i>
<i>Topic:</i>		
Did I prepare enough?	Y / N	Y / N
Did I teach appropriate vocabulary?	Y / N	Y / N
Did I encourage everyone to speak?	Y / N	Y / N
Did I use 'discussion' language?	Y / N	Y / N
Were my language skills good?	Y / N	Y / N
Comments about the discussion, and about my performance:		
		I would give myself this grade:

<b>Participant</b>		<i>Date:</i>
<i>Leader:</i>	<i>Topic:</i>	
Did I contribute enough?	Y / N	Y / N
Did I support others?	Y / N	Y / N
Did I use 'discussion' language?	Y / N	Y / N
Were my language skills good?	Y / N	Y / N
Comments about the discussion, and about my performance:		
		I would give myself this grade: