Proposing a Task-based Approach to Developing the Discussion Skills of Students in the ELI Listening/Speaking Class

Task-based approach to language teaching has its great potential application in EAP and ESP settings. Constructing the syllabus and lessons around the tasks that students or professionals do in their academic disciplines or at their workplaces not only can motivate the learners, but also is an effective approach to teaching. This paper proposes a task-based approach to developing students’ discussion skills in an EAP listening/speaking class, suggesting how tasks can be used in building up the syllabus and lessons for this task type.

Discussion skills in the ELI listening/speaking curriculum

The English Language Institute (ELI) has the explicit goals and objectives to develop students’ discussion skills in the listening/speaking curriculum, specifically to develop their skills as an effective leader and participant in discussions (ELI Online Resource Room). To this end, it correctly identified the students’ needs to develop their discussion skills. However, exactly how those goals and objectives can be achieved through class work is not specified or suggested. One of the ELI 80 textbooks has a list of responsibilities of group leaders and participants, and some descriptions of the reflective-thinking method (“a more effective technique for solving problems”, p. 44). And there is no material about discussion skills at all for ELI 70, though the goals and objectives are
clearly stated on the course syllabus. Under this kind of conditions, I am wondering how well students are able to develop their discussion skills in the ELI class.

**Discussion as a target task**

Sub-task types and situations

Discussion is a frequent and important task university students do for both academic and non-academic purposes. The discussion task can be divided into three sub-task types, i.e. information/opinion exchange, decision making and problem-solving, depending on the situations and expectations of the task. In academic situations, the discussion task is usually goal-oriented, requiring students to have a better and more in-depth understanding of the content of the course, or to apply what students have learned to make a decision or to solve a problem. For example, the discussion might be based on some questions generated from the reading materials, so that students can exchange their understandings and perspectives about the content. The discussion might also be based on a social problem, a business plan, or a law case, in which a decision or a solution need to be made. Through well-guided and successful collaborative learning in small group work, better learning outcome can be expected. In non-academic situations, campus discussions ranging in different topics to students’ interest and relevance are part of university students’ life. For those discussion tasks, though varying from situation to situation, underlying is also some form of information/opinion exchange, decision-making or problem-solving. For example, in those free chitchats on topics of interest involve more of information/opinion exchange, and in those member meetings of a campus club or
organization, the discussion is usually oriented towards a decision or solution that needs to be made.

At the same time, it needs to be pointed out here that there are overlapping elements in the three discussion sub-tasks. As can be shown in Figure 1, in any kind of decision-making and problem-solving discussion tasks, it is obvious that group members need to exchange information or opinions. And a problem-solving discussion task, which include “defining the problem, identifying or creating possible solutions, and choosing among the solutions” (Galanes & Brilhart, 1994, p.210) is “a more comprehensive procedure that includes decision making (choosing)” (Galanes & Brilhart, 1994, p.210).

![Figure 1: Discussion Sub-tasks](image)

**Figure 1: Discussion Sub-tasks**

**Suggesting using tasks to build up the syllabus and lessons for developing students’ discussion skills in the ELI listening/speaking curriculum**
Introduction

In a task-based approach to teaching, tasks are the basic units for constructing the syllabus and lessons (Long & Crookes, 1993; Ellis, 2003). Based on this underlying principle for designing task-based syllabus and lessons, I suggest sequencing the sub-task types outlined above into three phases (See Figure 2 below.) at the syllabus level, incorporating pre-task and post-task options in task-based lessons, and also recycling task elements from phase to phase. Firstly, the consideration for sequencing the sub-task types into three phases is based on the analysis of the target tasks, including task difficulty and frequency of use, and also the students’ needs and language proficiency. Secondly, drawing on Ellis’s (2003) suggestions for designing task-based lessons, I deem the very need to incorporate pre-task and post-task options, for they “can serve a crucial role in ensuring that the task performance is maximally effective for language development” (p. 243), here arguably guaranteeing real development in discussion skills. Thirdly, since discussion is in itself a complex type of task consisting of three sub-task types and different levels of task components, the idea of recycling task elements along the three phases touches on the necessity to transfer previously developed skills to new sub-task types and task situations, where new task elements are introduced.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase I</th>
<th>Information/Opinion Exchange 1: Students-initiated free discussion (topic of common interest + agenda)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase II</td>
<td>Information/Opinion Exchange 2: Discussion based on a text or some other written or listening materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase III</td>
<td>Decision-making and Problem-solving: Discussion based on a text or some other written or listening materials</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2: Phase I, II and III
The following parts will elaborate on the implications and applications of the above considerations in using a task-based approach to building up the syllabus and lessons for developing students’ discussion skills in the ELI context. First, a general introduction to the pre-task and post-task options will be provided. Then, the suggested three phases at the syllabus level will be laid out with their corresponding types of discussion tasks, pre-task and post-task options and other methodological considerations.

General introduction to pre-task and post-task options

Pre-task options
The purpose of incorporating pre-task activities is to prepare students for during-task performance that can better facilitate learning (Ellis, 2003) and specifically to emphasize on linguistic factors and/or to reduce the cognitive demands of the main task (Skehan, 1996). Ellis (2003) and Skehan (1996) also provided a number of pre-task activities, which can serve different purposes in preparing for main task performance. Based on those examples, I suggest three main pre-task options for the discussion task, for potential use along the three phases: Consciousness-raising, Language input and practice and Modeling.

The purpose of consciousness-raising is to introduce some task elements which students are expected to attend to during task performance, e.g. how to be a good discussion participant and what is the procedure and expected outcome of a problem-solving discussion task. The focus of the consciousness-raising will differ across the three phases,
so that students will be gradually introduced to the task elements for different sub-task types. Language input and practice, as a pre-task option, is essential in that it will mobilize the language needed for task performance (Skehan, 1996), so that students will not be much constrained by the language they need to use for task performance and at the same time will be able to use more appropriate language. The language input options for participating, facilitating and reporting on group discussions, as listed in Appendix 2, can be distributed among the specific pedagogic tasks along the three phases. Some kind of pair, group or class practice of the input language is also necessary, so that students will feel more at ease or comfortable to use the language during task performance. Then modeling, another pre-task option here, seems particularly relevant and useful for a discussion task. The possible use of video-taped real discussions can be very effective, in that they can serve as vivid examples of role-playing (participating, facilitating and reporting), group dynamics and language use in the discussions. Again where possible, video-taped discussions belonging to different sub-types and focusing on different elements, e.g. participating, facilitating, reporting and language use, can be used along the three phases. Besides the three main pre-task options, other options like performing a similar task and strategic planning (Ellis, 2003) can also be adopted for specific pedagogic tasks.

Post-task options

The purpose of incorporating post-task options is to check over whether there is really certain restructuring of the students’ interlanguage, or to reinforce the restructuring. Here, the post-task options can serve to examine whether students are really developing their
discussion skills by attending to the gradually introduced task elements and language. I suggest three main post-task evaluation options, for potential use along the three phases: Peer/teacher evaluation, Self-evaluation and Follow-up evaluation in real-world tasks.

Foremost, teachers need to guarantee that the students understand the value and importance of the different forms of evaluation. In addition, the criteria for evaluation, what is to be evaluated on and why should be carefully explained to the students and be well-accepted by the students. Some kind of evaluation checklists or guidelines is needed for the different sub-task types and for the task elements and language that students need attend to. The evaluation checklists or guidelines, with their different foci and purposes, can be used along the pedagogic tasks in the three phases. Peer/teacher evaluation can happen online with or after the task performance. In a non-threatening manner, another student or the teacher can sit behind the group, and evaluate the group members’ task performance according to the evaluation checklist or guidelines. Or in an accepted manner, one group can repeat their task performance in front of the whole class, and other students and the teacher give their comments. Sometimes it is difficult to make online evaluation and some important details might be missed out. Thus it is also quite recommendable to video-tape the discussion for the peers or the teacher to watch again to do the evaluation. The video-taped discussion has its great use for the students to do self-evaluation. Quite often, the students are not aware of how well they performed in the task. Even with the feedback they get from their peers or teacher, they may not have concrete ideas unless they have a chance to watch their own performances later. Usually self-evaluation based on their video-taped performance is very effective. Lastly, if possible,
students can do follow-up evaluation of their performances in real world target tasks. The purpose of this kind of evaluation is to examine whether the discussion skills developed in the ELI classroom is transferred to real world task performances, which is the eventual goal of the task-based teaching approach. However, how this kind of evaluation can be done is yet to be explored.

Phase I

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pedagogic Tasks</th>
<th>Information/Opinion Exchange 1: Students-initiated free discussion (topic of common interest + agenda)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Pre-task Options | 1. Consciousness-raising:  
2) Introducing the role of discussion participants.  
2. Language input and practice (Participating)  
3. Modeling (Video: Participating) |
| Post-task Options | 1. Observant evaluating group members’ participation  
2. Self-evaluating one’s video-taped participation  
3. Follow-up evaluation of one’s participation in real-world discussions |

Pedagogic tasks

The pedagogic tasks at phase I are one type of information/opinion exchange, in which students have relatively free discussion on topics of their common interest. Students, in their stable groups, take turns to bring up a topic that is of common interest and relevance to group members, and prepare a simple agenda built around the topic. There is not much limitation on the topic, as long as the students can make sure that everyone has interest in it and would enjoy sharing their information and opinions about it. And the agenda can be several open-ended questions generated from the topic. For example, as I observed in my
ELI 70 class, one of the students brought up the topic of “Valentine’s Day” on Valentine’s Day, and prepared several questions like “Do you celebrate Valentine’s Day in your country?” (as students in a group came from different countries), “How do people celebrate the festival in your country?” and “Do you think we should celebrate western festival and why?” It turned out that students were very much engaged in the discussion and were very active in exchanging their information and opinions. The heterogeneous backgrounds of the students in the ELI are an ideal condition for this type of discussion.

The pedagogic tasks at this phase much resemble the free discussions in non-academic situations, and at the same time the information/opinion exchange going on constitutes the core of any type of discussion. It should be pointed out that free discussion does not mean there is no goal in it. The purpose of phase I is to let students practice their speaking fluency in discussions, to encourage students to actively participate in group discussions, to encourage their initiatives in discussions, and most of all to develop their skills for participating in group discussions. This phase is particularly necessary when considering that discussion is not part of the English classroom practice in quite a number of students’ home countries, or even not part of their culture. The task difficulty level at this phase can be expected to be lower, so that students can be easily oriented towards the discussion task, and have ease with participating in discussions without much constraint put on by the code, cognitive or communicative demands (Skehan 1996) of the tasks. In addition, I do not think there is much need for the teacher to give the students the discussion topics and agendas for this type of task, since students at this level can take care of the job easily by themselves and also self-initiated discussions can be more
motivational and pertinent to students’ life. But at the same time, it is also necessary for
the teacher to provide some good examples of topics for discussions and their possible
agendas.

Pre-task and post-task options

Since the major purpose of phase I is to develop students’ skills in participating in
relatively free information/opinion exchange discussions, the pre-task and post-task
options will orient toward this purpose. The consciousness-raising activities can include
an introduction to this sub-task type and to the role of discussion participants. It should be
made explicit to the students that it is one type of discussion they do in their daily life,
and in this type of discussion, students are expected to actively participate by sharing
their information and opinions. In addition, students can be introduced to the general
responsibilities of discussion participants (See Appendix 1 for a list of the
responsibilities.) The language input and practice can focus on the language needed for
participating in a group discussion, e.g. giving information/ opinion, asking for
clarification and interrupting (See Appendix 2 for a list of the language input options.)
Ideally, video-taped discussions of this sub-type can be used for modeling. Students can
learn from good examples of participation and use of language, and students can also
critique bad examples of them. The focus of the post-task options will be the evaluation
of the students’ participation in this type of discussion.

Phase II
### Phase II

| Pedagogic Tasks | Information/ Opinion Exchange 2:  
|                | Discussion based on a text or some other written or listening materials |

### Step 1

#### Discussion based on ready-made discussion questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-task Options</th>
<th>Pedagogic tasks at phase II are another type of information/opinion exchange, in which students base their discussion on a text or some other written or listening materials. This type of discussion is pretty common in the students’ academic situations. In target task situations, students might base their discussion on several discussion questions from</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
|                  | 1. Consciousness-raising:  
|                  |   1) Further introduction to this sub-task (expectations);  
|                  |   2) Introducing the role of discussion facilitator.  
|                  | 2. Language Input and Practice (Facilitating)  
|                  | 3. Modeling (Video: Facilitating)  
|                  | 1. Observant evaluating group facilitator’s task performance  
|                  | 2. Self-evaluating one’s video-taped facilitation  
|                  | 3. Follow-up evaluation of one’s facilitating real-world discussions  
|                  | 1. Observant evaluating minutes-taker’s task performance  
|                  | 2. Self-evaluating one’s video-taped oral report or written report  
|                  | 3. Follow-up evaluation of one’s reporting on real-world discussions  
|                  | |
the textbook, other reading materials or from the instructor. Or sometimes, students are required to prepare for discussion questions and lead the discussion. And occasionally, students are asked to report on their group discussion to the whole class. Exactly what the students are expected to do for this type of discussion in the real classrooms largely depends on the academic discipline, the course and the instructor’s choice. The purpose of this type of discussion is usually for the students to have a better and more in-depth understanding of the course content by sharing with each other their understandings and perspectives. The materials used for the pedagogic discussion tasks can be the texts from different academic disciplines at the introductory level or some articles on current social issues. It is also quite recommendable to use some relevant listening materials, audio or video.

Procedure

Although there is great difference in what exactly students are required to do with this type of discussion in the real classrooms, I nevertheless think it necessary to equip the students with all the important discussion skills in the ELI class. Hereby, I suggest dividing this phase into three steps: 1) Discussion based on ready-made discussion questions; 2) Group facilitator preparing for discussion questions and leading the discussion; and 3) Minutes-taker preparing for and delivering oral or written report of the discussion. Through the three steps, students will gradually develop their skills in participating, facilitating and reporting on this type of discussion. At the same time, task elements introduced in the previous steps can be recycled in later steps, where new task elements are introduced.
Step 1/ Pre-task and post-task options

In step 1, students will base their discussion on ready-made discussion questions. Teachers can prepare the discussion questions if they are not available, and ideally the discussion questions can serve as good examples so that students can learn how to generate good discussion questions from a text. At this step, though the discussions are somehow of a different type from the ones in phase I, with their new added elements, most of the task elements at phase I can be recycled here, which has a focus on participating. And the focus of the pre-task and post-task options is similar to that of phase I, but also different because there are some different expectations of this type of task, e.g. reading or listening to the materials carefully and critically before the discussion, and deepening their understanding of the materials through the discussion.

Step 2/ Pre-task and post-task options

After becoming familiar with this type of discussion through step 1, and getting to know what kind of discussion questions are good ones, in step 2, students will take their responsibility to prepare the discussion questions and lead the discussion. In their relatively stable groups, students can take turns to do the job. Students will become more motivated by facilitating a discussion based on the questions they prepare by themselves. It is also possible that the facilitators choose the reading or listening materials on which the discussion is based. At this step, during pre-task activities, students should become aware of what they are expected to do as a facilitator for this type of discussion, and can be introduced to the responsibilities of a group facilitator in general (See Appendix 1 for
a list of the responsibilities.) Video-taped real discussions of this type, with the
involvement of group facilitators, can be used for modeling. And language used for
facilitating a group discussion can be gradually introduced and practiced along with the
pedagogic tasks (See Appendix 2 for a list of the language input options.) The post-task
options will center around the evaluation of the group leader’s job in facilitating this type
of discussion. At the same time, it seems obvious that the task elements introduced in the
previous step and previous phase will be recycled here.

Step 3/ Pre-task and post-task options
Then in step 3, students will take their turns to act as the minutes-taker (or alternatively
called recorder), and prepare for and deliver an oral or written report of the discussion.
During the discussion, the minutes-taker also needs to take notes of the important
information and details. Students, in performing the task, need to learn how to summarize
a discussion and how to summarize and report the information and opinions. Students
also need to become familiar with the format and organization of an oral or written report
of a discussion, including minutes. All these elements can be introduced in the pre-task
sessions. So during pre-task activities, students need to understand what they are
expected to do as minutes-taker for this type of discussion, and can be introduced to the
general responsibilities of a minutes-taker (See Appendix 1 for a list of the
responsibilities.) The language used for an oral or written report of a discussion, e.g.
summarizing, reporting and the format and organization of a discussion report, can be
introduced and practiced along with the pedagogic tasks (See Appendix 2 for a list of the
language input options.). Video-taped oral report and also written report including
minutes for this type of discussion can be used as models for the students to learn from.

The post-task options will focus on the evaluation of the minutes-taker’s oral or written report on this type of discussion. Again, task elements introduced in earlier steps and phase will be inevitably recycled here.

Phase III

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pedagogic Tasks</th>
<th>Decision-making and Problem-solving: Discussion based on a text or some other written or listening materials</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Procedural Options</td>
<td>1. Recycling the three steps in Phase II; 2. Putting on the task demands at the same time (Participating, Facilitating and Reporting).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pedagogic tasks

The pedagogic tasks at phase III are the types of decision-making and problem-solving, in which students make decisions and solve problems through discussions based on a text, or some other written or listening materials. The reason to group these two types of discussion tasks together is that as mentioned above, problem solving is “a more comprehensive procedure that includes decision making (choosing)” (Galanes & Brilhart, 1994, p.210). While in practice, decision-making discussion tasks can be introduced first, and then problem-solving discussion tasks later. In real-world situations, these types of discussion tasks may be very common in some academic disciplines or subjects, e.g. business and law, but may be very rare in others, e.g. language and literature. But there is the possibility of their great use in the students’ non-academic life and future career. Thus, arguably developing students’ skills for these types of discussions is necessary and should be included into the ELI class. The reading or listening materials for the
pedagogic tasks need to be carefully selected and developed, so that there are emerging problems needed to be addressed and solved, and at the same time, students also need adequate evidences to reason in the decision-making and problem-solving process.

Procedural options

During this phase, I suggest either 1) recycling the three steps in phase II, or 2) putting on the task demands at the same time from the beginning of the phase (Participating, Facilitating and Reporting). Option one can help students to consolidate their skills developed in the previous phases gradually, under new task type situations. But given that students have developed their skills in participating, facilitating and reporting on group discussions quite well, it is also recommendable to put on these task demands from the very beginning of this phase. At the same time, it should be noted that new task elements will be introduced at this phase, since the pedagogic tasks are of different types from the previous ones and have some different expectations for task performance. Thus the pre-task and post-task sessions need to address the new task elements and expectations.

Conclusion and suggested further work

In this paper, I proposed a task-based approach to developing the discussion skills of students in the ELI listening/speaking class, dealing mostly with the methodological considerations for task-based syllabus and lesson designs. It shows one example of how tasks can be used to build up the syllabus and lessons in developing students’ discussion
skills. And it should also be noted here that there will be alternative work plans and configurations in taking the same task-based approach, depending on the classification and sequence of the discussion sub-task types and decisions for lesson designing.

For implementing the proposal, some immediate work that needs our attention includes 1) needs analysis, and 2) material development.

Needs analysis needed

In order to generate the pedagogic discussion tasks that build up the syllabus and lessons, a more detailed and careful identification and analysis of the target tasks are essential. This requires a comprehensive and triangulated needs analysis, which can include collecting the real performances of the target tasks across different disciplines and under different situations, analyzing the features of the target tasks and finding out the basic elements of the different kinds of target tasks, interviewing the instructors to get at their expectations of the discussion tasks, and identifying international students’ specific difficulties in performing the target tasks by analyzing their task performances and interviewing them and etc. Information obtained through the triangulated needs analysis will be able to inform teachers of what are the essences of the different kinds of sub-tasks, and what should be the considerations and components in generating pedagogic tasks, and in building them into the syllabus and lessons.

Material development needed
When generating the pedagogic tasks and using the suggested pre-task and post-task options, material development is the necessary step. The materials needed to go along with this proposal include the reading or listening materials on which the discussions are based, video-taped real discussions used as modeling, evaluation checklists or guidelines, lists of concrete language expressions used for language input, and etc. The material development seems to require substantial attention, since different materials will be needed at different phases and steps and for different specific pedagogic tasks.

REFERENCES


Appendix 1: Responsibilities of Participants, Facilitator and Minutes-taker

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Roles in a small group discussion</th>
<th>Responsibilities</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| Participant                       | • do necessary preparatory work;  
|                                   | • give information/opinions;  
|                                   | • clarify and elaborate on one’s ideas;  
|                                   | • seek information/opinions;  
|                                   | • respond to others’ information/opinions;  
|                                   | • respect others’ contributions;  
|                                   | • listen to others attentively and critically;  
|                                   | • stay on the topic;  
|                                   | • disagree politely;  
|                                   | • not monopolize the discussion;  
|                                   | • avoid side talks;  
|                                   | • treat all group members fairly;  
|                                   | • avoid personal attacks and conflicts;  
|                                   | • cooperate with group facilitator;  
|                                   | • …… |
| Facilitator                       | • set up the agenda before the discussion;  
|                                   | • do other necessary preparatory work;  
|                                   | • start and conclude the discussion;  
|                                   | • guide the discussion along the agenda;  
|                                   | • have a control over time;  
|                                   | • make sure minutes are kept;  
|                                   | • give equal chance to participants;  
|                                   | • involve participants;  
|                                   | • stay neutral;  
|                                   | • encourage critical thinking;  
|                                   | • clarify communication;  
|                                   | • summarize periodically;  
|                                   | • control monopolization, digression and side talks;  
|                                   | • resolve conflict;  
|                                   | • …… |
| Minutes-taker                     | • take minutes during the discussion;  
|                                   | • prepare for and deliver an oral report of the discussion;  
|                                   | • prepare for and distribute an written report of the discussion;  
|                                   | • initiate further discussion;  
|                                   | • …… |

Note: The responsibilities are summarized from Galanes and Brilhart (1994), ELI 80 textbook, ELI online resource room and the author’s personal thoughts. And the specific responsibilities might be more pertinent to some types of discussions than others.
# Appendix 2: Language Input Options

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Roles in a small group discussion</th>
<th>Language Input Options</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Participating                      | - giving opinions/information;  
                                          - clarifying;  
                                          - elaborating;  
                                          - seeking opinions/information;  
                                          - asking for clarification;  
                                          - evaluating others’ opinions/information (agreeing, disagreeing, arguing and etc.);  
                                          - jumping into the discussion;  
                                          - interrupting;  
                                          - holding the floor;  
                                          - …… |
| Facilitating                       | - starting the discussion;  
                                          - introducing the discussion agenda;  
                                          - involving participants;  
                                          - asking open-ended questions;  
                                          - responding;  
                                          - controlling monopolization, digression and side talks;  
                                          - summarizing;  
                                          - testing consensus;  
                                          - moving on to a new topic;  
                                          - concluding the discussion;  
                                          - …… |
| Reporting                          | - format and organization of oral and written report of a discussion, including minutes  
                                          - summarizing the discussion;  
                                          - summarizing and reporting opinions/information/decision/solution;  
                                          - highlighting key contributions and also unresolved concerns;  
                                          - initiating further discussion;  
                                          - …… |

Note: The options are summarized from Galanes and Brilhart (1994), Hemmert and O’Connell (1998), ELI online resource room and the author’s personal thoughts.