Teaching Contextual Vocabulary for Group Discussion Skills Using Formulaic Expressions in the ESL Classroom

Dr. K.N. Shoba
Assistant Professor of English, College of Engineering, Guindy, Anna University, Chennai, India.

Corresponding: shobakn@annauniv.edu

Article reference:
Shoba (2016). Teaching Contextual Vocabulary for Group Discussion Skills Using Formulaic Expressions in the ESL Classroom. ELT Voices, 6 (4), 9-17.

Abstract: Group Discussion (GD) is considered as a modern method of assessment of students’ overall personality for selection in interviews towards employment especially in the Indian context. It is also well-known that teachers of English train their students using several strategies to create adequate awareness among students to acquire the essential skills to participate and perform in GDs. Along with personality skills like Assertiveness, Critical Thinking, Leadership, language skills like appropriate Vocabulary for Agreeing, Disagreeing, Summarizing ideas also become indispensable to succeed in a group discussion. However, ESL learners find it difficult to initiate ideas, transit smoothly between ideas and argue politely. Many a time, they come across as aggressive and not assertive. In spite of valid arguments, the discourse markers or rather their lack thereof, create barriers in communication, especially in a GD. This conceptual study analyses the use of formulaic expressions or prefabricated chunks to help learners use them in the most appropriate contexts.

Keywords: Key Words: Contextual Vocabulary, Group Discussion, Formulaic Expressions, Lexical Chunks.
1. Introduction

As English teachers, we are keenly aware of the demand that language learning has to realistic in meeting the actual needs of the learners and are generally agreed on the value of spoken discourse both inside and outside the classroom. Language skills that aid learners in their employability deserve more attention and courses embedded in the general curriculum at the tertiary level focus on group discussions, oral presentations and handling interviews to fulfill this need. Many research studies have validated the importance of teaching group discussion skills for varied points of view. With group dynamics, psychometrical analyses, body language and other host of non-linguistic criteria on the radar, language skills become the primal area of concern to both survive and succeed.

Group discussion generates diverse ideas and opinions from participants delivered in a structured format. Unlike a presentation or a debate, group discussion accommodates a wide range of perceptions as felt and experienced by the participants. It is well established that a group discussion is a sociable means of solving mutual problems in groups. It is considered a step beyond brainstorming in the sense that it has a dramatic feature about it as in a beginning, middle and an end. Once the learner is familiar with the format, the technique of mastering group discussion skills is half-done. The gaping hole that faces the learner is the challenge to outline his/her ideas not only into coherent and organized frames but to look for scaffolds that package the ideas as demanded by the immediate context. It is in this reference that formulaic expressions come to the rescue of the learner that helps him/her to deliver ideas clearly and emphatically.

Proposed by Michael Lewis in the 1990s, the lexical approach advocates the teaching and learning of language especially vocabulary as multiword units or phrases rather than isolated words. It is also based on the premise that the lexical approach develops many of the fundamental principles as propagated by the Communicative Approaches in language teaching which emphasizes the learners’ participation in a communicative context, thereby making the relevance of employing lexical approach in teaching group discussion skills valid. By creating an increased understanding of the nature of lexis in naturally occurring language, the learner realizes its potential usage in the overall language learning process.

The key principles governing the lexical approach as discussed by Michael Lewis in his ground-breaking text The Lexical Approach: The State of ELT and a Way Forward (2002) can be summarized as the following.

- Language consists of grammaticalised lexis, not lexicalized grammar.
- The grammar/vocabulary dichotomy is invalid; much language consists of multi-word chunks.
- A central element of language teaching is raising students’ awareness of, and developing their ability to chunk language properly.
- Successful language is a wider concept than accurate language.
- The central metaphor of language is holistic – an organism; not atomistic – a machine.
- Socio-linguistic competence – communicative power – precedes and is the basis, not the product, of grammatical competence.
- Sub-sentential and supra-sentential grammatical ideas are given greater emphasis.
Thus by radically de-emphasising materials that teach vocabulary in isolated contexts, the lexical approach adopts a holistic approach towards language learning.

2. Group Discussion as a key skill

Group Discussion has been defined by many educationists from different perceptions. H.B.Keswani defines group discussion as an exercise to assess the behavior pattern of an individual under varying situations (1998). An individual may be an expert in his subject, but if he has difficulties in getting along with his co-workers and superiors, his contribution to the organization becomes minimal and his position in the company can be in danger. To measure an individual’s credential not only in his scholastic but co-scholastic areas, a group discussion becomes an appropriate tool in the selection process in most of the organizations today. Many students have been eliminated from recruitment due to their poor performance in group discussion. Thus, developing group discussion skills is an indispensable part of any language programme irrespective of the academic discipline.

A group discussion refers to an open discussion on a thought-provoking topic, a well-formulated problem to be solved or a case study by a selected group of persons. Every member of the group is expected to participate, analyse the topic of discussion by putting forward their opinion and perspective. Thus a group discussion paves way for understanding the subject of the topic in detail by exploring and exchanging information applying critical thinking skills. Discussion also helps in enhancing language skills. When the topic given reflects a problem, discussing the various aspects of the problem helps developing decision-making and problem solving skills which can also be used in both personal and professional lives. Group discussions offer an opportunity for extended speaking practice by all of the contributors. Group discussion practice and skill development is therefore useful for all students. It is now obvious that group discussion helps in gaining insights into the individual’s character, personality, attitude, their views and points of view.

3. Contextual Vocabulary

Contextual Vocabulary Acquisition is understood as deriving meaning of words based upon the context. It is also understood as a strategy a learner of a language uses when he/she comes across an unfamiliar word, and try to figure out its meaning “from context”, i.e., from clues in the text together with prior knowledge. While the contextual vocabulary framework operates on a bottom-up approach, i.e., the text or the discourse is already given and the language user is asked to create meaning out of it. The inverse of it, i.e., a top-down approach where a set of useful vocabulary chunks is already provided to the learner to be employed in creating a specific discourse can also be used. The context in question here is the vocabulary skill set required for group discussion. The various aspects of a discussion, the language facilitating a discussion in the forms of phrases can be methodically taught in the classroom using active-learning methods such as role-play, guided speaking, etc. To frame such useful language units, the theoretical framework of lexical chunking can be used. Instead of generating language from isolated words, gluing together using grammatical rules and delivering them, formulaic expressions are useful and effective scaffolds that can be helpful in enhancing the communicative competence of the learners.
4. Lexical Approach to enhance Vocabulary

The lexical approach concentrates on the role of lexis in English language learning rather than a focus on grammar (Lewis, 1993; Barcroft, 2004). The use of ‘chunking’ and collocations is at the centre of the approach as it assumes the students will learn bundles of words and collocations which can then be reused again (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Scrivener (2011) highlights that this approach also emphasizes the learners need to have more exposure and experimentation with the language rather than follow the more traditional methodology of ‘present and practise’ (p32). With the combination of chunking, exposure and experimentation the student can improve their target language through lexical items, for example looking at groups of words instead of individual word meaning (Hunt & Beglar, 2005).

5. Functional language for Group Discussion

Depending on the types of group discussions, it is useful to draw up a list of useful functional language for the students to refer to. This could include phrases for functions such as ‘Giving reasons’, ‘Giving your opinion’, ‘Agreeing and disagreeing’, etc. For each group discussion, you can then refer them to the appropriate section of the list and give them a few moments to consider the language before beginning the discussion. The following section offers the useful phrases that can be taught to learners

**Initiating and introducing the topic**

Initiating a group discussion is a vital component as it creates a positive first impression about the candidate and the candidate also gets an upper hand over the others. It is also an opportunity to display the leadership qualities one has and the person who speaks first can also give his opinion avoiding repetition which occurs when one gets a later chance to speak. When a candidate initiates, apart from grabbing an opportunity to speak, he also grabs the attention of examiners and fellow candidates. So, if a candidate who initiates is able to make a favourable first impression through his content and communication skills, it will help them. While initiating a group discussion has its own advantages, if the candidate uses the wrong choice of words, it can work otherwise. Using the right word combinations can be of great advantage in such contexts. Following are a few lexical phrases that can be used to initiate a discussion.

- Today we are here to discuss…
- The goal of our discussion today is…
- Let us discuss…
- First of all/To start with
- I’d like to point out ...
- What we have to decide is…
- There can be no doubt that…
- It’s a fact that…
- Nobody will deny that…
- As I see it everyone knows…

**Stating your own opinion**

Though many candidates have very valid statements to make, they hesitate as they are unsure of the language functions to state their opinion. The following formulaic expressions can be given to students:

- In my opinion, …
- Personally I think that …
- My own view of the matter/issue is that …
- It seems to me that …
Agreeing with an opinion

For the smooth conduct of a group discussion, participants should talk to each other, not just make statements which they think are important. To reach this end, participants should exploit various language functions like agreeing, disagreeing partially agreeing, etc. there are specific discourse markers or ready-made expressions which can be used.

- Yes, I agree (absolutely)
- I couldn't agree more to what you just said.
- That matches exactly my own view.

Partly agreeing with an opinion

- I see what you mean, but ...
- There is certainly some truth in your words, but you fail to notice that ...
- I don't entirely agree with you.
- I understand your reasons; however, I see some aspects a bit differently.

Disagreeing with an opinion

- I'm afraid I can't accept ...
- I simply don't agree with you.
- I fail to see the logic behind any of your arguments.
- Your arguments are not convincing at all!
- Excuse me, but I have to contradict you quite strongly here.
- I couldn't disagree more with what you just said.

Interrupting

- I'm sorry to interrupt here, but ...
- Excuse for breaking in here right now, but ...
- Can I stop you there for a moment?
- Hold on a second. (informal)
- Pardon me, but I think this just leads the debate astray.

Focusing/Structuring

- I think we should focus on the main aspects now.
- Let's now consider another important aspect of today's debate.
- I think we have exchanged our opinions on that point now and should move on ...
- You all highlighted crucial aspects, but have we really discussed ... in-depth?
- Thank you for your honest/thought-provoking views, but we should also pay attention to...

Asking about or for an opinion

- Could you tell me....?
- What do you think about/of....?
- What’s your opinion about...?
- Do you think/feel....?
- How do you feel about....?
- May I ask you....?
Teaching Contextual Vocabulary for Group Discussion Skills Using Formulaic Expressions in the ESL Classroom

Asking for an explanation

- Could you explain to me...?
- Could someone please tell me...?
- Just tell me the reason why...?
- I don’t really understand...
- I just don’t see why/what/how...
- Are you saying that...?
- What do you mean by that?
- I beg your pardon?
- I didn’t quite get that. Excuse me, did you say that...?

Giving your opinion

- In my opinion/view...
- If you ask me...
- As far as I can see/
- I’m concerned...
- It seems to me that....
- I have the/a feeling that....
- I think/feel/reckon/believe....
- Well, I’d say....
- If you want my opinion....
- You can take it from me that....

Clarifying a point

- Let me put it this/another way....
- Let’s get this clear (first)....
- Sorry to interrupt you, but....
- The point I’m trying to make is....
- Personally (speaking) I think....
- I’m absolutely convinced that....
- My view/point of view is that....
- The way I look at/see it is this
- What I actually meant was....

Giving an explanation

- Look, it’s like this:
- What I mean is....
- The reason for this is....
- The main problem is....
- Just let me explain....
- Well, the reason is...
- Well, the thing is....
- Above all we must keep in mind that....

Affirming a view

- I (quite) agree.
- I agree completely/entirely.
- I couldn’t agree (with you) more.
- I entirely/completely agree with you on that.
- That’s true/right. That’s just it.
- Quite/Exactly/Precisely/Right/Certainly.
- You’re quite so right.
- I think so, too.
- I don’t think so either.
- That’s just my feeling/opinion.
- That’s just how I see it/feel about it, too.
- That’s a very good/important point.
- You’ve got a good point there.
- That’s exactly what I mean/say.
- Yes, that’s obvious.
- That’s exactly how I see it.
- That’s what I think
- How very true.
- So do I/So am I
- Yes, indeed.
- I’m all in favor of what you’ve been saying.
Qualified agreement

- Yes, perhaps, but...
- Yes, possibly, although....
- Yes, but on the other hand....
- Yes, up to a point.
- I agree up to a certain point, but....
- Yes, in a way.
- Maybe, I suppose so.
- Well, it depends.
- I don’t think it’s as simple as that.....
- I see what you mean, but I think that’s not the whole story
- You may be right there.
- Yes, but there’s also another aspect to consider.
The above-mentioned lexical chunks can be taught to learners in various methods including worksheets, role plays, mock discussions, block and tackle games and other innovative but engaging methods. With adequate familiarity and practice, the learners can become confident in using the readymade expressions which can provide the necessary functional language to handle a group discussion. The lexical approach is inextricably linked to psychology and brain function, which are also key areas when understanding a student’s difficulties when speaking in a foreign language. Therefore, this paper has attempted to understand more deeply the lexical approach and the factors that help learners to fluently perform in a discussion.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, while the lexical approach offers students and teachers a basis to collect and learn new vocabulary, it is difficult to know how much it directly improves speaking fluency. In addition, knowing which key factors are reducing or increasing the student’s ability to improve their fluency and/or learn through lexical chunks is equally as difficult to decipher. However, by looking in more detail at the key lexical principle and the factors that underpin speaking and discussion skills it is possible to see how the lexical approach and its communicative style compliments the development of fluency as a whole. Though there are a few significant limitations, creating an atmosphere where students are made aware of lexical chunking can improve their general speaking skills and in particular group discussion skills.

References


