The power of discussion

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Dermot Bryers, Becky Winstanley and Melanie Cooke

Introduction

The Power of Discussion was a participatory ESOL project that built on previous work carried out with support from the British Council, the *Whose Integration?* project (Bryers, Winstanley and Cooke, 2013). Participatory ESOL is an approach to teaching English language and literacy that draws out and builds upon the experiences of students and develops a shared critical understanding of the world. This chapter documents a six-week period of research in which we dedicated all of our classroom time to discussions. We describe our reflections on the discussion topics that emerged and the pedagogic tools and techniques we used, as well as our observations on the impact of these lessons. We begin with a brief summary of the potential for classroom discussion for second language development and its significance for education more generally.

Research on interaction, dialogue and discussion

There are various reasons to study the role of discussion in ESOL teaching. The role of dialogue in learning has been a topic of interest since ancient times. In Socrates' famous dialogues, for example, he employed questions and answers to scrutinise his interlocutor's opinions and doctrines in an attempt to move beyond 'false beliefs' to the 'truth'. In the early part of the 20th century, the Russian scholar, Mikhail Bakhtin, proposed that meaning is not fixed but lies in the spaces which open up in dialogue as ideas are exchanged. Also in Russia in the 1920s, the psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, argued that human cognitive development was rooted *primarily* in dialogue with others, i.e. the interaction happens first and is subsequently internalised in an individual's mind. Vygotsky's 'socio-cultural' approach to learning, with its emphasis on dialogue and interaction, has been highly influential in theories of teaching and learning, from primary schools to higher education, as well as language learning.

Our own approach to teaching and learning, participatory ESOL, draws partly on the work of the Brazilian Marxist educationist Paolo Freire. His work raised important questions about the role of power in interaction, which we attempt to address in *The Power of Discussion*. Whose voices tend to be heard? Whose are silenced? How are disagreements managed? Whose opinions are the ones which dominate? How do we deal with asymmetry between speakers?

Discussions in language teaching

Theories of second language acquisition (SLA) stress the importance of interaction, leading to the popularity of classroom tasks that encourage students to talk: classroom discussions, debates, ranking tasks, decision making and so on. Research has shown that different tasks produce different kinds of talk, e.g. tasks that require interlocutors to reach an agreement produced 'convergent' talk while tasks such as debates and discussions produced 'divergent' talk. Duff (1986) showed that 'divergent' tasks such as discussions produced longer turns, extended discourse and complex syntax. Consequently, discussions and debates are common activities in language classrooms and there are a wealth of materials and textbooks that contain ideas for conducting these. However, in our experience, many of these are not particularly motivating for students as they do not speak directly to their interests and concerns and often serve merely as a vehicle to practise 'target language'. The teachers in the action research project reported in Cooke and Roberts (2007), for example, found that students carrying out textbook discussion activities seemed to just go through the motions of expected classroom behaviour; they rushed through the tasks and did not stretch themselves or they struggled to express their own meanings. They also found, however, that when teachers sought ways for students to 'speak from within', discussing issues that were relevant to their lives and made certain discourse patterns such as narratives or types of argumentation explicit, they produced longer stretches of language that were more complex, more fluent and more accurate.

In participatory ESOL we go one step further than this by expecting students to engage in discussions about social and political issues which spring directly from their experiences in the world outside the classroom – an under-exploited resource in ESOL. In previous projects we have experienced what happens when students have a deep personal investment in the content of a discussion and we have seen that students strive to find the most effective ways to use their linguistic resources in an effort to reach understanding.

The ESOL class and the research design

The research took place in one class at Tower Hamlets College, East London over a period of six weeks (one 2.5-hour class a week) between November and December 2013. The class was an Entry level 2 class, which met three times a week for an academic year. The 16 students were from Bangladesh, Somalia, China, Brazil and Portugal. The majority had generally been in the UK for between one and ten years. Most of the students were not in paid employment and were either dependent on their spouses and/or receiving welfare benefits. In a discussion on social class before the start of the project, many of the group felt that their socio-economic status had declined as a consequence of migration to the UK. This may explain why the topics emerged and played out in the way they did (see discussion of topics, page 40).

We followed up each class with a reflective meeting in which we planned for the following session. Our data consisted of the lesson plans and audio recordings of the lessons, observation field notes, reflections, students' written work, visual documentation of tools and other classroom work, and the postings by students and staff on the class blog and Twitter account.

First of all we established with the group what we meant by 'discussion': a meaningful exchange between at least three people which involved a degree of formality and seriousness. We focused mainly on two different types of discussion. Using Carter and McCarthy's (1997:10) categorisation of spoken texts we can say that these discussion types were, respectively, *debate and argument* in which 'people take up positions, pursue arguments and expound on their opinions on a range of matters' and *decision making/negotiating outcomes*, i.e. 'ways in which people work towards decisions/consensus or negotiate their way through problems towards solutions'. These two discussion types provide opportunities for students to practise strategies which are essential in the world outside the classroom – the first type because highly political topics do not always lend themselves to easy consensus so students need to be able to express opinions, listen to those of others, possibly modify their views and live with disagreement and compromise, and the second type because they also need to be able to work effectively with others when attempting to effect change.

We ruled out chats, small talk and one-to-one conversations and focused on 'substantial' social/political topics. For this reason we started out by asking students to share what had interested them in the news and picked out topics from that for discussion. There was a commitment to start in an open way and to avoid overloading the students with texts and 'expert opinion' when they were beginning to explore a topic.

[1] CEFR A2

We used participatory tools to go deeper into a topic, such as the problem tree[2] and problem posing[3].

In this project, we continued to keep meaning at the fore of our pedagogy but shifted some of our research focus from *what* the students were saying to how they were saying it. We recorded all the discussions the students had in the six sessions, listened carefully to their language use at each stage and noted their development over the six-week period.

Listening to the recordings we were impressed with the progress the students made and the way in which they integrated the explicit language work we did into their contributions during class discussions. By Session Three they were having successful, coherent, group discussions for up to 40 minutes. As we discuss below (in section four), students began to employ strategies for taking the floor, interrupting and ceding the floor to others, which helped to make the discussions more equally distributed. By Sessions Five and Six, students were operating with far less input from the teacher than they were at the beginning and were using their discourse strategies to interact with each other effectively and to engage in some of the complex social and political debates of the day.

Participatory pedagogy

In this section we focus on our participatory approach to: a) topics: finding them and sustaining them, b) making participation more equal and c) explicit language work.

a) Finding topics

The critical linguist Alastair Pennycook (1994:132) states that '*the search for content in language teaching is a contentious one*'. He criticises language classes for maintaining a dichotomy between linguistic structures and social structures and thereby failing to link the language being learned to the lives of the students (ibid). English language teaching has also been called a '*blandscape*' (Clarke and Clarke, 1990:39) and '*a subject in search of subject matter.*' (Harrison, 1990:1)

In participatory ESOL we attempt to address this divide by ensuring that both the language being learned and the content of the classes are directly relevant to students' lives. For this reason we believe it is important to begin without a list of topics or set of activities chosen in advance. This allows students to find topics

[2] A problem tree is a graphic used to record a discussion of the causes and consequences of a problem. The roots of the tree are the causes, the branches the consequences and the fruit the potential action that can be taken (see Whose integration? P. 30).

[3] Problem posing is a five-stage exploration of a problem shared by the group. The teacher facilitates a sharing of personal experiences relating to the problem and then an analysis of its causes and consequences (see Whose integration? P. 25).

Tool: What's New?
Students work in three groups. One group focuses on local news (Tower Hamlets or London), the second on national news (UK) and the third on global news. The prompt is simply: 'What's new? What have you heard in the news or from your friends?' Students have 30–40 minutes to have a discussion and record their ideas on a spider diagram. One member of each group then takes the spidergram and summarises it for one of the other two groups. After 10–15 minutes, a new spokesperson from each original group moves on to the second group. The teacher listens, monitors and finds out where the students' interests lie, which issues are igniting discussion and which are left by the wayside.

that relate to their own lives and experiences, and produces a more urgent need to communicate. At the start of the project we opened out the first session using a tool we have labelled 'What's New?'

At first, the students did not immediately have much to say and they needed time to think and warm up. However, after five or ten minutes the students came across a topic they were able to exchange opinions on – the health service and 'health tourism' – and the discussion took off. We reflected later that during these initial phases it can be very tempting for the teacher to abandon the activity or take it over, but the ability to 'hold your nerve' is important in participatory ESOL and, as we have seen, in this case it paid off quite soon.

From the 'What's New?' tool we generated themes for future discussion. Initially, one of the salient themes that emerged was 'immigration' and specifically 'illegal immigrants'. There had been a large immigration raid in Whitechapel a few days beforehand, which the students had brought to our attention and were anxious to discuss. We decided to focus on illegal immigration for at least three lessons and then assess. At the end of Session Three we consulted the students and the consensus was to move on to something different, so we moved on to the theme of poverty because it had emerged during earlier discussions. Although at first the topic did not take off quite as we had hoped, after changing the angle from a philosophical discussion around poverty to a more practical focus on what action can be taken to combat it, it was far more successful. In the following session the students were re-energised, had more to say and the mood was lighter. We are not suggesting the hard, difficult subjects should be avoided, but if a topic seems wrong it may need to be re-thought rather than abandoned.

b) Sustaining topics

As with our previous research project, *Whose Integration?,* we chose to work with one theme over a number of classes so that students had time to go deeper into complex debates and issues. However, in the time that elapses between classes, it is normal for students to forget what has been said or to lose interest in a topic; bridging the gap between classes therefore becomes crucial and the teachers

often had to help the class remember what had happened previously.

Activities and a variety of interactions can also be used to keep topics going. This relates to 'holding your nerve' and not moving on at the first flat moment. On more than one occasion during the project, a change in dynamic or activity re-energised the group and it wasn't necessary to abandon the topic. For example, in Session Five the group had been discussing action against poverty for around half an hour. We wanted to evaluate the efficacy of a variety of actions the students thought of but felt that the students needed a change of focus. We therefore chose to do this as a spectrum line where students physically position themselves along a line in response to how strongly they agree or disagree with a statement, and by doing so the discussion became lively and funny despite the seriousness of the topic.

c) Making participation more equal

As well as the vital issue of topic, other pedagogical factors contributed to the creation of conditions for real dialogue.

The role of the teacher in participatory ESOL is significantly different to the role in traditional approaches to language teaching. In terms of facilitating discussion it is not necessarily the teacher's job to provide language or topics, as we have seen. There is a responsibility, however, albeit not a sole responsibility, to enable students to participate. One of the chief barriers to a successful discussion is domination by one or two people, with the result that other students disengage. We observed this at several stages during the project, with one student particularly prone to holding the floor for too long. It seemed that the rest of the class, particularly at the beginning of the course, did not have the ability to interrupt, ask for clarification or move the discussion along. Instead they tended to stop listening and the student increasingly addressed his speech to the teachers. This happened far less by Sessions Five and Six, as students developed the skills to keep the discussion on track and to ensure more equal participation.

We addressed the issue of unequal participation through a discussion with students about their own perspectives on the problem. In Session Two some students had said: 'What we want in our discussions is for it to be equal' and 'We are trying to get it more equal'. As sensitively as we could, we juxtaposed the quiet and the more vocal students by doing a 'speaking line' (see box below) in which students positioned themselves according to whether they had participated a lot or a little. In this way, everyone was drawn into the problem and shared responsibility for the solution. In the meta-discussion that ensued, the *features* of discussions were the *object* of discussion, and we believe it had a powerful impact on the group dynamic. After this point, the question of equal participation arose on various occasions and for the rest of the project students appeared to be mindful of ensuring greater equality among themselves.

Tool: Speaking Line
We used the 'Speaking Line' tool in Session Three to nudge the students towards making participation in the discussions more even. After a group speaking activity, the students lined up according to how much they spoke, with the person who spoke most at one end and the person who spoke least at the other.

This activity necessitates negotiation among the group and often provokes fierce debate. This tool is effective because it places the responsibility for making discussion more even in the hands of the whole group. We used it after a discussion, partly to assess whether raising the issue of speaking equally in the previous session had had any impact and partly to provoke further change in behaviour.

Part of the work we did on equal participation involved explicit language work, which equipped students with the language they needed to create more equal discussions. We asked students in Session Two what they could say in order to take the floor if they wanted to speak. They came up with 'Can I interrupt?' and 'Can I say something?' and we debated whether it was appropriate to say 'Excuse me' or not. We also worked on asking for clarifications: 'Sorry? What did you say?', 'I didn't catch that.' We used an activity where the teacher said something completely incoherent and each student had to use a phrase to ask for repetition.

Teacher roles in a class discussion

We experimented with at least five distinct teacher roles during the discussions:

1. The teacher stays out of the discussion and only keeps time and listens.

2. The teacher stays out of the discussion but provides students with individual feedback on post-its to encourage them to use new language or a skill we have worked on.

3. The teacher acts as a facilitator, working to repair, summarise, clarify and bring in quieter students.

4. The teacher acts as an 'equal' contributor and gives opinions.

5. The teacher uses problem-posing questions to lead the group through an examination of the causes, consequences and potential solutions of a shared problem.

The teachers reflected at various points during the project that it is important to decide which role to play before and to be clear about this. Here is an example of one teacher making her role explicit before problem-posing questions in Session Three:

> *I'm going to try and get you to think about this picture. I'm not going to be part of this discussion. It's going to be you. My role is going to be asking questions. So, I'm not going to say what I think, I'm not going to give my opinion. I'm just going to ask more and more questions to try and get you to think more, to think more deeply.*

If the teacher always plays the classic role of 'chair' it can encourage students to speak to the teacher. This is a common reason teachers cite for classroom discussions not working. During one discussion one teacher deliberately avoided eye contact with a student who was directing all his comments at the teacher, forcing the student to turn to the group to find an audience. On the other hand, if the teacher is *in* a discussion they can use personal anecdotes to help the discussion along and to encourage other students to disclose.

Meta language: discussions about discussions

At the beginning of the project we spent considerable time 'discussing discussions'. We posed questions for collective consideration as follows: What does a discussion look like? What are the components? What makes people speak during a discussion? What makes them silent? Is discussion different in different languages? We asked students to think of examples of discussions they had had in any language and to describe the context and the purpose of these discussions.

As well as being productive for language work, discussions about discussions were also interesting from a topic point of view, and we heard several examples from students that were useful for our meta work. One of these was a group of friends who had been saving a small amount of money for many years. Recently they had amassed enough to be able to begin a small business. They gathered together to discuss the type of business they would set up. We used this example each time we spoke about an action-planning discussion. Using students' own rather than teacher examples sent a strong message that the language used in the classroom was theirs, not given to them to use by the teacher. Talking with students helped to demystify the language work on discussion skills and to share the expertise, and challenged the usual role of the teacher being the keeper of the expert knowledge about language.

Explicit language teaching

We followed this meta-level work with an explicit focus on particular discourse strategies. Initially we chose three from the students' lists of strategies they regarded as important: *asking for further explanation*, *inviting others to speak* and

taking the floor. Later, three more were added: *making suggestions, accepting suggestions* and *rejecting suggestions*. We asked the students to work together to come up with possible language for each strategy. For example, for *making suggestions* students suggested, *let's*, *we could* and *what about*. We then chose some of these to practise before re-incorporating them back into the discussions. In this way we hoped to take students' output and focus explicitly on it in order to build on it. As each student had different strengths, sometimes they were consolidating existing skills, and sometimes they were developing new skills that were initially part of another student's repertoire. In this way we were creating a kind of linguistic pool that all of the students could draw upon.

As the project progressed we found that time spent on more controlled language work became the fun part of the lesson where students could have a rest from serious issues. We found the combination of the two aspects refreshing and productive. In the post-lesson reflective log after Session Two we observed:

> *Language work in participatory ESOL can feel like a break, whereas, normally the opposite can be true; with an overload of grammar it is the speaking task that is light relief. Our speaking activities stretch students so much that language work can seem easy. Language focus ended up being somehow funny, a laugh.* (Post-lesson reflection 2)

We also found that students almost immediately started to incorporate the language we had practised into the discussions. In Session Three, for example, we discussed the government initiative to use an advertising van to 'invite' illegal migrants to go home. In the post-lesson reflections we observed: *Students used several of the realisations to good effect, such as: What do you think? Can you say a bit more?* It appeared that students felt that the controlled practice was of immediate use in their discussion.

Language of discussion

We now look at the possible impact of the six weeks on the students' ability to engage successfully in discussions. After listening to the recordings we were able to observe a marked difference in complexity, coherence and collaboration between the first and the final discussion. Although in the first discussion students showed an ability to make relevant points followed up with examples and to respond to each other, as a jointly produced discourse it lacked coherence. Students made good points and there were some impressive individual contributions but there was limited *dialogue* and the discussion as a whole lacked key features of the genre, such as responding to and developing other people's ideas. In one exchange, which was typical of the first discussion, one student makes a point about some of the problems faced by migrants with student visas: '*Bangladesh coming student apply this college then two three months close college.*

Very big problem'[4]. Although students showed signs that they were listening, the point is not developed or taken up and is followed by another individual contribution which does not acknowledge or build on the theme of the previous utterance but goes back to the general topic: '*Nobody knows what happened when you go to another country. Same same everybody same. I don't know anything.*' Students displayed limited awareness of co-operation strategies in interaction, talked over each other and interrupted each other frequently.

However, after six weeks of group discussions the strategies displayed by the same students were noticeably more effective and the discussions contained considerably more features of the genre. In contrast to the first session, the final discussion flowed smoothly and it was easier to follow the various points made by the students and the overall development of the discussion. The students can be observed exploring, challenging and even co-constructing their ideas. In the following extracts from the final discussion, we can observe students discussing the difficulties of fulfilling attendance requirements in their ESOL class and can see more evidence of development and follow up:

1. ***R:*** *Can I say something? My attendance is very low, 75 per cent, because my son every time nose operation, check-up hospital appointment, everything headache my life. Sometimes coming sometimes not.*
2. ***D:*** *OK, but when you don't coming school, you need prove?*
3. ***R:*** *Yes, I need letter, every time text Becky.*

Later on in the discussion the students turn to possible solutions and again we see them developing and following up on each other's points:

1. ***R:*** *What about we could boycott, what do you think?*
2. ***D:*** *I think it's hard but maybe it can work … Maybe not all students accept this, what do you think? I think it's [it'll] work.*

There are no examples of students talking over each other without listening and there is evidence of a high degree of coherence. The teachers felt no need to intervene or chair, as the discussion was run and managed by the students themselves and there are many instances of co-construction of meaning, i.e. students working out their ideas in real time during the discussion itself.

[4] Examples of students' spoken language have been transcribed as near as possible to the original utterance, i.e. the grammar has not been altered. Where this interferes with comprehensibility, we have indicated the probable meaning in brackets.

Conclusion

The first conclusion we can draw is that working almost exclusively on discussion for a period of six classes was enjoyable and produced clear improvements in students' skills. Not only did students successfully employ their existing linguistic resources and strategies, but they also seemed to develop new ones. The comparison of one of the earlier discussions with one of the final ones shows that on a number of levels the students were using language more effectively by the end of the project. From the perspective of the teachers and the students, it was an overwhelmingly positive experience. In their final evaluation, students said that they thought the classes had been unique and, importantly, they were aware that they were learning.

Secondly, the experience of working with real, serious topics was not easy, but there seemed to be something productive about the difficulty. There were periods of silence, awkwardness and occasional discomfort. As we have shown, the work was tiring, to the extent that the controlled language focus felt like a break. The students recognised that the classes had been difficult too. One student stated that sometimes she felt 'sad' and another wrote that: 'When we don't understand we're nervous'. At the end of Session Two students were struggling to express complex ideas, but this urgent desire to find a way to communicate difficult ideas seemed to drive the students to speak beyond their ascribed level.

Thirdly, we felt that the amount of time we spent on explicit language work and the meta-language work we did around discussion itself were crucial ingredients in the students' success, as was working with the class to make the discussions more equal. Talking about the importance of discussion can help to persuade any sceptical students that they are a crucial element in their learning. In terms of the explicit discussion skills work, the power of learning how to take the floor (*'Can I say something?*', etc.) and cede the floor (*'What do you think?',* etc.) should not be underestimated. Working with two or three discussion strategies in the way we describe above transformed the discussions in a short space of time.

Finally, in addition to the power of discussion to develop language, it is also fundamental to the principles of dialogic teaching that participatory ESOL espouses. Dialogic teaching is regarded not only as an effective means of learning, but also as essential for citizenship; in a democracy citizens need to be able to participate in discussions about the issues which affect them and their communities (Alexander, 2007, 2010). Michaels, O'Connor and Resnick (2008:283) summarise this point as follows:

Dialogue and discussion have long been linked to theories of democratic education. From Socrates to Dewey and Habermas, educative dialogue has represented a forum for learners to develop understanding by listening, reflecting, proposing and incorporating alternative views. For many philosophers, learning through discussion has also represented the promise of education as a foundation for democracy.

Throughout the project, but particularly towards the end, we saw the language learning and the students' lives interact in a powerful way. The combination of real-life, collective learning and democratic, collective action we saw in Session Six is testimony to the power of ESOL and the power of adult education in general.

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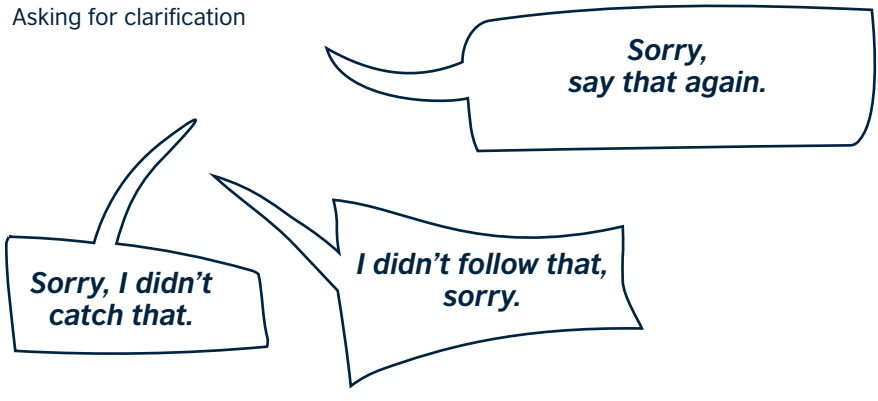
Becky Winstanley is an experienced ESOL teacher and teacher educator working in Tower Hamlets and the Institute of Education. Her particular areas of interest include participatory approaches to education, emerging language and language and literacy development for social change. She worked on Action Aid's Reflect ESOL project, adapting the international Reflect model for language learning in the UK and trained with Reflect practitioners in Liberia. She has been an active trade unionist for many years and is interested in teachers' and students' struggles in education and beyond.

Since 2004, **Melanie Cooke** has worked in the Department of Education and Professional Studies and the Centre for Language, Discourse and Communication at King's College, London, having previously taught ESOL in London and EFL in Spain. From 2004 to 2008 Melanie worked on ESOL projects for the National Research and Development Centre for adult literacy and numeracy (NRDC). She is particularly interested in participatory pedagogy and the role of socio-political issues in ESOL and is currently completing doctoral research into the teaching of citizenship to ESOL students. With James Simpson, Melanie is the joint author of *ESOL: A Critical Guide* (2008).

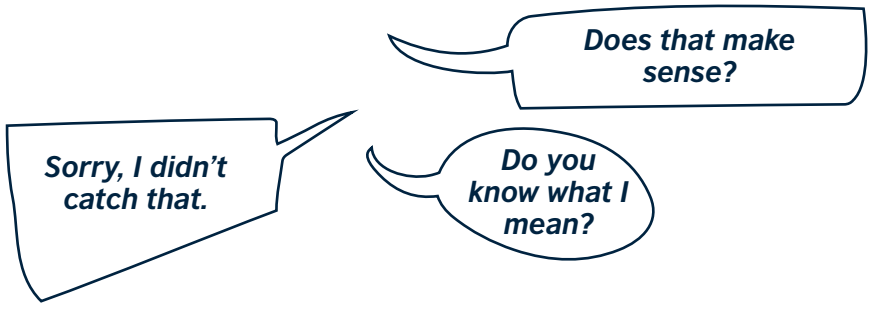
Appendix 1

Discussion skills

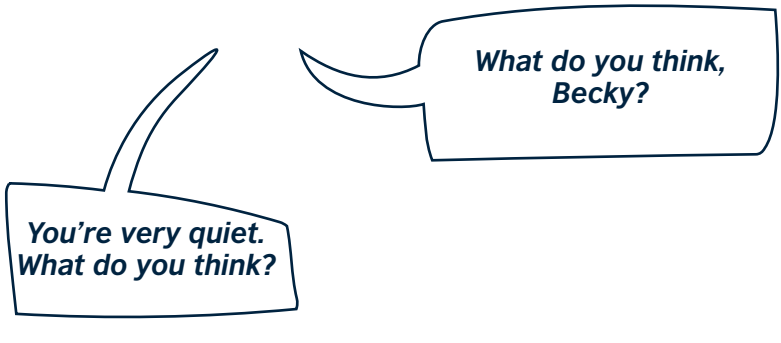
Asking for clarification



Checking others understand you

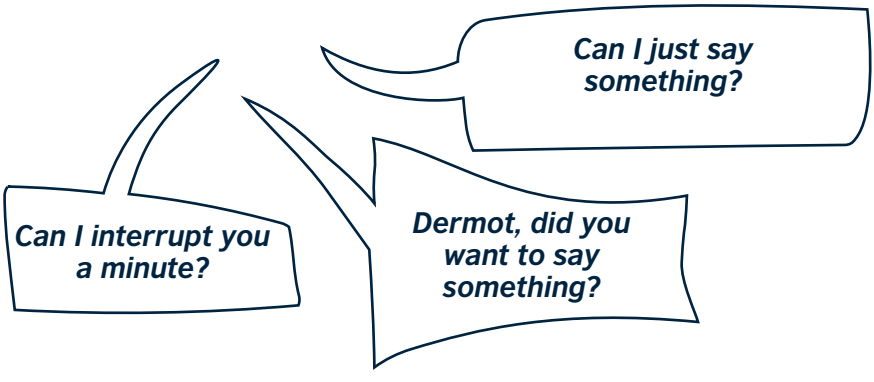


Inviting others to speak

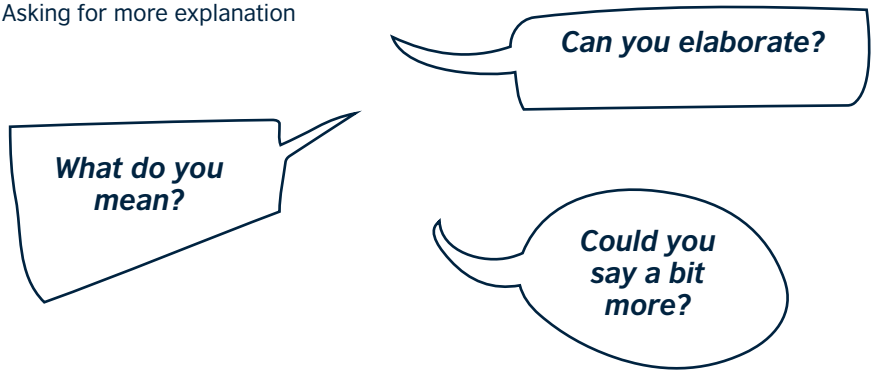


Discussion skills

Getting space to speak

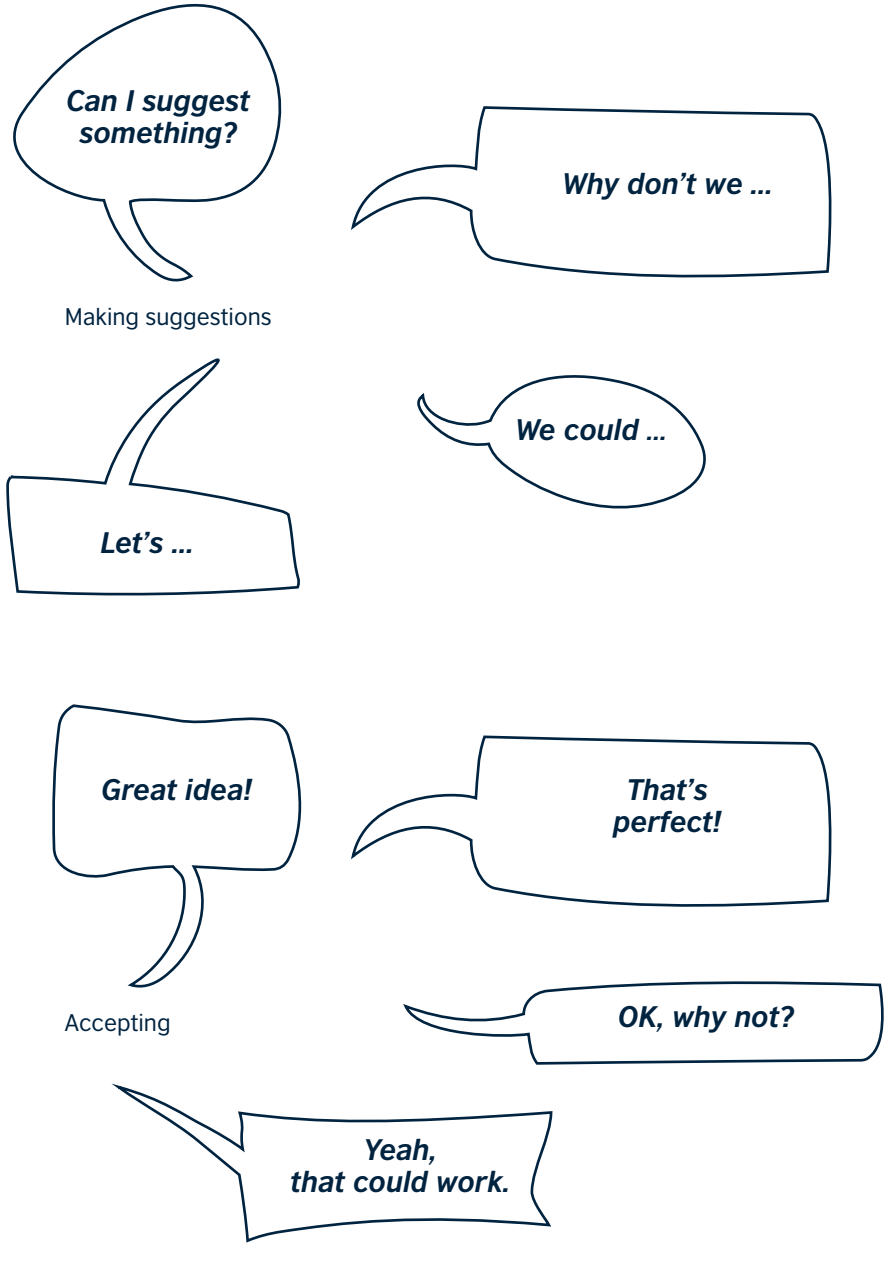


Asking for more explanation



Appendix 2

Discussion skills



Discussion skills