

Simulation & Gaming

<http://sag.sagepub.com>

Teaching academic discussion skills with a card game

Curt Reese and Terri Wells

Simulation Gaming 2007; 38; 546 originally published online Oct 2, 2007;

DOI: 10.1177/1046878107308063

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://sag.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/38/4/546>

Published by:

 SAGE Publications

<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:

Association for Business Simulation & Experiential Learning

International Simulation & Gaming Association

Japan Association of Simulation & Gaming



North American Simulation & Gaming Association

Society for Intercultural Education, Training, & Research

Additional services and information for *Simulation & Gaming* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://sag.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://sag.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations (this article cites 21 articles hosted on the
SAGE Journals Online and HighWire Press platforms):

<http://sag.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/38/4/546>

Teaching academic discussion skills with a card game

Curt Reese
Terri Wells

University of Texas at Austin, USA

This article describes a game used for teaching discussion skills to English as a Second Language (ESL) students. It was originally designed for students wanting to prepare for graduate study at U.S. universities has been since used for other ESL students wanting to improve conversation skills. The game focuses on common phrases helpful for participating in seminar-style classes common to graduate school settings. The authors explain the rationale for choosing to teach skills using a game. They describe the procedures, benefits, and weaknesses of the game and students' experiences using the game.

KEYWORDS: *card game; conversation, discussion skills; education; ESL; game; interaction; seminar classes; simulation*

Games can be used in the language classroom to develop a variety of skills. Not all teachers and students, however, may view positively the use of games as a learning tool in the classroom. Teachers may see games as entertaining but providing no educational benefit (Bennet, Wood, & Rogers, 1997). Students may find games too trivial an activity for the serious task of learning (Rao, 2002) or not appropriate for adult learners. Conati (2003) noted that games, while engaging and entertaining, may not result in student learning. Gaudart (1999) suggested that such attitudes toward the use of games in the language classroom may result from a tradition of teacher-centered instruction and perhaps a lack of teacher awareness of how games can facilitate the language learning process.

Oxford and Shearin (1994) suggested the complexity of learner motivation in their review of motivation theory in language learning. Garris, Ahlers, and Driskell (2002) suggested that well-designed games can be valuable learning tools because they motivate students to participate in extensive practice of targeted skills in a system that requires students to engage in both repetitive and decision-making processes. Gaudart (1999) also suggested games motivate students. Premkumar and Bonnycastle (2006) reported on the successful use of games in a medical training context, and Halleck, Moder, and Damron (2002) acknowledged the positive motivational affect of a simulation used in a language classroom.

Games and simulations, in addition to motivating students, offer the opportunity for experiential learning, which entails active and reflective engagement with the material on the part of the student. Garris et al. (2002) acknowledged the link between

games and experiential learning in their model of the game cycle. In this game cycle, the learners' repeated interaction with the game environment facilitates learning.

Discussion skills

Class participation in the form of discussion is a common requirement in university classes although the extent of discussion required may vary across classes and disciplines (Ferris & Tagg, 1996), and discussion is typically viewed as a valuable learning tool (De Vita, 2000). Students may also see participation in discussion with classmates as a valuable learning tool (Wells, 2005). However, discussions can also prove to be difficult or frustrating for students (Do & Schallert, 2004; Fritschner, 2000). Tatar (2005) and Hodne (1997) provided examples of the difficulty international students experience in participating in class discussions at U.S. universities, and Tatar (2005) and Lee and De Vita (2000) suggested ways that university instructors can help international students feel more comfortable participating in class discussions. However, teachers of English, particularly in programs of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), should be aware of the difficulty that their students may encounter in university classrooms and help to prepare them to be able to participate in classroom discussions.

Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos (2003), Lam and Wong (2000), Cane (1998), and Clennell (1999) suggested the explicit teaching of conversation strategies and pragmatic awareness, but this is not an easy task. McCarthy and O'Keeffe (2004) noted that few textbooks contain material that explicitly teaches conversation strategies, and Grant and Starks (2001) noted the conversational models offered in texts are frequently unrealistic and do not reflect authentic discourse strategies. Green, Christopher, and Lam (1997) observed that some methods of teaching discussion skills do not provide any motivation for students to participate in the discussions and reported on an experiential method to teach discussion skills. Games, with their experiential and motivational features, provide a vehicle by which to engage students in conversations to facilitate the explicit teaching of conversational skills and address the lack of authentic conversation strategies in textbooks.

Game context

This game was initially designed for international students planning to attend U.S. graduate schools. The curricular objectives of the university intensive English program at which the authors worked stipulated that teachers conduct 30- to 45-minute moderated discussions at least once a week. These discussions were on a wide range of topics that students from various backgrounds and disciplines could understand.

What inevitably occurred in these sessions was that quiet students remained silent for the duration of the discussions and talkative students dominated. After each discussion ended, the instructor would give students feedback. Quiet students were encouraged to participate more and talkative students were encouraged to limit their

participation. Furthermore, the teacher gave students feedback on wording, vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. However, despite this feedback, students' language ability changed little. Quiet students remained quiet, and all students continued to make the same errors in vocabulary and pronunciation that they had been making at the beginning of the course.

This pattern of quiet and talkative students has been observed in U.S. classrooms (Fritschner, 2000), and quiet students have expressed frustration with this situation (Do & Schallert, 2004). A pedagogical problem that arises is the fact that from this unequal pattern, quiet students get substantially less opportunity to talk than do talkative ones. THE CONVERSATION GAME was designed to modify the existing curriculum to get students to participate more, learn more conversation moves, and use correct language structures.

Game procedure

THE CONVERSATION GAME consists of twelve 90-minute lessons. The lessons teach students different conversation moves both as leaders and as participants. Lessons can be taught one after another in a short program or interspersed with other lessons for semester-long programs. Typically, for semester-long programs, the teacher chooses one day a week to use THE CONVERSATION GAME.

Leaders and participants have different lessons. Participants learn to express their opinions and agree and disagree with the opinions of others in Lesson 1. Subsequent lessons build on these initial skills by teaching more advanced moves: how to more fluently express opinions, how to interrupt, how to avoid a question, how to ask for the repetition of statements, how to rephrase statements, how to check for understanding, how to rephrase what another person has said, how to correct misunderstandings, how to affirm others' interpretations, how to align oneself with another, how to express surprise, and how to state strong and weak opinions. Lessons for leaders include introducing and concluding a topic, keeping the discussion moving, and eliciting participation.

Students must prepare for each game. Students must read a one- to five-paragraph summary of an issue. Students respond to five questions on that topic. Students must give themselves goals for the number of cards they will play.

Each student has two decks: a participant deck and a leader deck. Cards are of various colors, and each color corresponds to a particular conversation strategy. For example, expressing one's opinion is yellow, agreeing is green, and disagreeing is blue. A phrase is printed on each card. For example, for expressing opinion, there are five/seven cards: "In my opinion," "I think (that)," "My sense is (that)," "I feel (that)," and "It seems to me (that)." Participant decks typically contain two or three copies of each of the five cards (see Figure 1).

Leaders start the first game with a full deck of cards but may choose not to attempt to use all three leader conversation moves the first time they lead. This typically depends on the proficiency of the class. Play begins as leaders introduce their

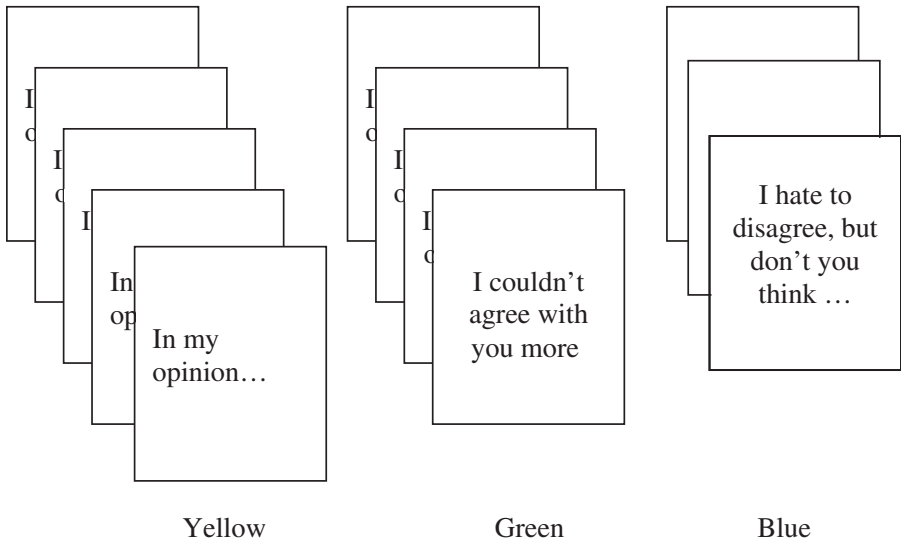


FIGURE 1: Participants' Initial Cards

topics with four introduction cards (see Figure 2). They read straight through these cards, and the cards are numbered.

When participants speak, they must use at least one card by saying the expression on it. If they misuse or mispronounce any card, they must return the card to their unused stack. Cards that are played successfully are placed in a “played” pile and cannot be used again during that particular game. Students may use the expressions on played cards, but they get no extra points for doing so. This rule helps to make sure students are using and learning the various phrases available to them; outside of class, they can use whichever expressions they like. Students may spread cards out and choose any, or the teacher may require students to shuffle their decks and spread only a limited number out to make the game more challenging by limiting their options and forcing students to use cards they wouldn't normally use.

Leaders end games by reading a series of four conclusion cards, similar to the introduction cards. Both leaders and participants count the number and kind of cards that they used. Then, they record the numbers of each type and the total number of cards they used on a scoring sheet. House rules typically encourage students to attempt difficult conversation moves such as disagreeing or interrupting by giving a greater number of points for these cards. Both leaders and participants give themselves grades based on their performances. From the scoring sheet, students and teachers can see which conversation moves students have mastered and which they are avoiding. Students set goals based on their past scores. Teachers often help students in setting goals.

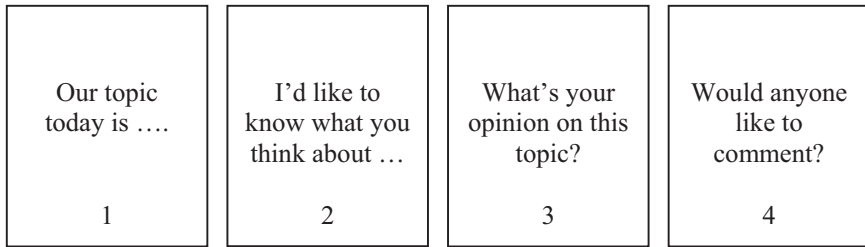


FIGURE 2: Introduction Cards

THE CONVERSATION GAME is very student centered as students lead, participate on their own, and grade themselves. The teacher's role in THE CONVERSATION GAME is not the person in charge but rather may take myriad forms. In initial lessons, it is usually helpful for the teacher to play along with students as a participant to give them an example of how to play the game. After students have gotten the hang of the game, teachers may challenge students to make difficult conversation moves by continuing to play. For example, teachers can make very controversial or strange comments to encourage students to disagree. Also, teachers can encourage students to make particular conversation moves by handing them particular cards at strategic times during games. Finally, teachers can take notes on pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary and give students feedback after each game has ended. Thus, although not teacher centered, teachers can play various roles while games are going on.

Sample game

The following is a transcript of a portion of a game in which four students participated. They were of different language backgrounds: Spanish (leader), Korean, Arabic, and Thai. This game occurred during the fifth lesson of the game. Students were accustomed to using the cards, but they had not yet learned all conversation moves. The transcript is from near the end of the game. It is 78 seconds long.

- 1 Leader: **Would anyone like to add something?**
- 2 Student 1: Yeah, **it seems to me that** multiculturalism is not bad for us
- 3 and will make our nation develop more diversely.
- 4 Student 2: Yeah, **but don't you think**, uhh (long pause) it's likely to be
- 5 responsible of some problems?
- 6 Student 1: **I feel the same way.**
- 7 Leader: What do you think about uh. food from the United States?
- 8 Everybody in country has a McDonalds. So **what do you think**
- 9 **about it?**
- 10 Student 2: **My sense is that** uhhh . . . (pause)
- 11 Leader: **Now let's hear from** (Student 3).

- 12 Student 3: **I feel that** the American food is uh good uh as long as it's not
 13 uh junk food like McDonald's or Kentucky Fried Chicken.
 14 Student 2: Yeah, but **my sense is that** there are too many junk food
 15 restaurants fast food so uh
 16 Student 1: **I've never thought it that way** . . . oh I said that for the second time.
 17 ALL: (Laughter).
 18 Leader: **I think we're getting off the subject.**
 19 Student 1: Eh . . . **I'm not I'm not so sure about that**, but, it's clear that
 20 like McDonald's is different in Korea like . . . it's . . . McDonald's
 21 is different in cultures uh
 22 Student 2: **Yeah I agree.**
 23 Leader: **I think we're getting off the subject.** Are you do you agree
 24 that McDonald's is everywhere?
 25 Student 3: **In my opinion** (pause) and based on the facts, yes.

In a little over 1 minute, students produced 15 phrases from the cards as well as much other language. In fact, the majority of speaking was not the memorized phrases from the cards but other language. Only about one third of the language came directly from the cards. Most noticeable is the amount of language that was produced. It is often difficult to get students to speak in the ESL classroom. These data show students not only speaking but also interrupting and disagreeing with each other and using other conversation moves to position themselves in the conversation.

Also noticeable is that phrases from the cards begin utterances. Students were able to use the phrases to get into the conversation. The critical skills taught in conversations that were used in the previous transcript include eliciting participation (Lines 1, 8 through 9, and 11), expressing opinions (Lines 2, 4, 10, 12, and 25), agreeing (Lines 6 and 22), disagreeing (Lines 4 and 9), and keeping the group on task (Lines 18 and 23).

The game prompted students to use formulaic expressions to enter conversations and position themselves in relation to others in the discussion. After five lessons, students had acquired several conversation moves. Talk proceeded rapidly.

Student responses

THE CONVERSATION GAME has been used in many kinds of classes: international students of mixed backgrounds planning to attend graduate school in the United States, international students of mixed backgrounds wanting to improve their English, K-12 ESL, and study abroad programs in the United States. The following responses we gathered from Korean university students who took a 4-week program at a university intensive English program.

The curriculum for the study abroad classes had three components: conversation, pronunciation, and writing. Students attended the conversation portion of the class Monday through Friday 9 a.m. to 12 p.m. Writing and pronunciation alternated afternoons from 2 to 4:30. THE CONVERSATION GAME was used as approximately one half of the speaking portion of the program, or approximately 30 hours. The

teacher provided summaries of controversial topics for the first week of the program, or 15 topics. Students generated summaries of controversial topics for the remaining 3 weeks of class in the writing component of the program.

Written responses to students' experiences of THE CONVERSATION GAME were collected in the writing portion of the program. For the final writing assignment, students were asked to complete a reaction/response paper to THE CONVERSATION GAME. For this essay, students were asked four questions: Do you like/dislike the game? What are the advantages and disadvantages of this game for teaching conversation skills? Would you use this in an English class that you taught? Did the game help you with conversation outside of class? The essays were collected by the writing teacher and given to the speaking instructor (game designer) after the course had ended.

Students reported overwhelmingly positive experiences with THE CONVERSATION GAME. A number who were planning on becoming English teachers wanted to use the game in their own classes. Students expressed the opinion that the game was fun. Many reported that the game had helped them with speaking situations outside of class. Anecdotal accounts corroborated this.

A few students observed that even with the cards, there was a gap between talkative and reticent students. Other disadvantages were reported.

Most students reported that the game enabled them to overcome their fear of speaking. The game was a confidence-building experience for most students. Others said that their confidence grew as they went from using only a few cards in initial lessons to many cards after the 12th lesson. For example:

First of all, it was hard for us to play well because we were not good at speaking English well. But as time goes by, we can have confidence.

Students reported that the game was enjoyable. Most students reported that they found the game fun and exciting. For many, this was a novel experience. One student wrote that she had never experienced this kind of game before. The novelty of the game and the colored cards motivated students to engage in conversation. Students liked using the different colors. Others liked being able to set goals for themselves and challenge themselves to see how many cards they could use.

Students mastered expressions on the cards and conversational moves that accompanied each type of card. They also stated that although the game was difficult to learn, they were able to learn it and learn increasingly more expressions over time. The use of cards led to fluency. Students were able to use cards, and then expressions, without having to think first. Students reported spontaneously using expressions on cards outside of class. Anecdotal evidence supports this as students were observed using the game's expressions on buses, during field trips, and in class when not engaged in the game. Also, the game permitted students to master one conversation move before learning a new one; thus, students progressively acquired new conversation moves.

The game created student-centered interactions. Students learned by watching more competent players and imitating their actions. They also learned by trying out new ways of interacting and risk taking.

The focus of students was playing the game and not having conversations. The game focus enabled students to practice speaking in a less constrained way than that typical of a language classroom.

Many students reported that the game made speaking easy. Furthermore, many reported trying to use as many cards as possible. Finally, some treated the conversation as a game. Thus, they would say things that they didn't necessarily believe to compete in the game. For example:

Sometimes I had no idea of my own, but by taking some opposite opinion, I could talk about the topic plentifully.

One student felt the cards enabled him to create logical arguments.

The game also caused some difficulties for students. The game required a significant investment of time for students. The game is difficult to learn, so the class had to invest initially a substantial amount of time learning how to play the game. Students had to read and answer questions on several topics and use three different kinds of game moves. At the end of the game, students had to spend time tallying their total points.

Limitations

The game is limited to teaching conversation skills and turn taking and is thus not particularly useful for helping students learn to produce longer pieces of discourse such as speeches and narratives. The game encouraged short utterances as students attempted to use as many cards as they could. One student reported that she felt the game made people make short utterances but not really discuss issues. Students often focused on using as many cards as they could, and developing the topic of discussion sometimes became less important. Students who did speak at length were often interrupted (via the interruption card) by classmates.

Another problem discussed by students was the difference in abilities between fluent and nonfluent speakers. Some students were more adept at the game and speaking in general than others. Students who had difficulty speaking and competing with their classmates often expressed the desire to be placed in groups of individuals who were similar in speaking proficiency. Low-level speakers also asked that the teacher limit the number and kind of cards that more proficient speakers could use. One student felt that the focus on using as many cards as possible was not helpful because it didn't teach grammar.

Despite these problems, the game appeared to exceed most students' expectations of how much they could improve their speaking. The vast majority of comments about the game were positive. For example:

*-I improved more than I had expected.
-I think this game is the most effective way for students to learn English easily.
-It was a great experience for me.*

- It helps me to improve English skill and I could learn many new expressions which were used to debate.
- The conversation game helps me to improve my English ability especially debating skills.
- Conversation Game is very helpful in making skills in discussing and talking.

References

- Bennet, N., Wood, L., & Rogers, S. (1997). *Teaching through play: Teacher's thinking and classroom practice*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
- Bou-Franch, P., & Garcés-Conejos, P. (2003). Teaching linguistic politeness: A methodological proposal. *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, 41(1), 1-22.
- Cane, G. (1998). Teaching conversation skills more effectively. *Korea TESOL Journal*, 1(1), 31-37.
- Clennell, C. (1999). Promoting pragmatic awareness and spoken discourse skills with EAP classes. *ELT Journal*, 53(2), 83-91.
- Conati, C. (2003). Probabilistic assessment of user's emotions in educational games. *Applied Artificial Intelligence*, 16(7-9), 555-575.
- De Vita, G. (2000). Inclusive approaches to effective communication and active participation in the multicultural classroom. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 1(2), 168-180.
- Do, S., & Schallert, D. (2004). Emotions and classroom talk: Toward a model of the role of affect in students' experiences of classroom discussions. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 96(4), 619-634.
- Ferris, D., & Tagg, T. (1996). Academic oral communication needs of EAP learners: What subject-matter instructors actually require. *TESOL Quarterly*, 30(1), 31-55.
- Fritschner, L. M. (2000). Inside the undergraduate college classroom: Faculty and students differ on the meaning of student participation. *Journal of Higher Education*, 71(3), 342-362.
- Garris, R., Ahlers, R., & Driskell, J. E. (2002). Games, motivation, and learning: A research and practice model. *Simulation & Gaming*, 33(4), 441-467.
- Gaudart, H. (1999). Games as teaching tools for teaching English to speakers of other languages. *Simulation & Gaming*, 30(3), 283-291.
- Grant, L., & Starks, D. (2001). Screening appropriate teaching materials: Closings from textbooks and television soap operas. *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, 39(1), 39-50.
- Green, C. F., Christopher, E. R., & Lam, J. (1997). Developing discussion skills in the ESL classroom. *ELT Journal*, 51(2), 135-143.
- Halleck, G., Moder, C. L., & Damron, R. (2002). Integrating a conference simulation into an ESL class. *Simulation & Gaming*, 33(3), 330-344.
- Hodne, B. (1997). Please speak up: Asian immigrant students in American college classrooms. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 70, 85-92.
- Lam, W., & Wong, J. (2000). The effects of strategy training on developing discussion skills in an ESL classroom. *ELT Journal*, 54(3), 245-255.
- Lee, D. (1997). What teachers can do to relieve problems identified by international students. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 70, 93-100.
- McCarthy, M., & O'Keefe, A. (2004). Research on the teaching of speaking. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 24, 26-43.
- Oxford, R., & Shearin, J. (1994). Language learning motivation: Expanding the theoretical framework. *Modern Language Journal*, 78, 12-28.
- Premkumar, K., & Bonnycastle, D. (2006). Games as active learning strategies: A faculty development workshop. *Medical Education*, 40(11), 1123-1147.
- Rao, Z. (2002). Chinese students' perceptions of communicative and non-communicative activities in EFL classroom. *System*, 30(1), 85-105.

Tatar, S. (2005). Classroom participation by international students: The case of Turkish graduate students. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 9, 337-355.

Wells, T. (2005). *Emotion and culture in a collaborative learning environment for engineers*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, Texas.

Curt Reese is a PhD candidate in applied linguistics at the University of Texas at Austin where he also teaches English as a Second Language (ESL). His research interests include language use in learning communities.

Terri Wells has a PhD in applied linguistics from the University of Texas at Austin. She is currently an instructor of ESL at the University of Texas at Austin, where she teaches oral communication skills courses for international graduate students and international teaching assistants. Her interests include intercultural communication and collaborative learning.

ADDRESSES: CR & TW: ESL Services, 600 West 24th Street, International Office, Room 1.200, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas 78705, USA; telephone: +1(512) 323-4277; fax: +1(512) 475-6810; e-mail: curtr@mail.utexas.edu, tlwells@mail.utexas.edu.