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# The Education University of Hong Kong

## Academic Speaking: Discussion (2)

By completing this worksheet, you should be able to:

1. Critically evaluate the performance of a discussion leader
2. Apply turn-taking skills when participating in a discussion
3. Identify potential moments for entering a conversation
4. Give signals to show you intend to hold a turn

### *Part 1. Understanding the role of a discussion leader*

If two or more people discuss together, a leader often emerges naturally to help manage it. You may consider trying to lead the discussion, because it is a convenient way to impress the assessor and it often allows you to set the discussion direction towards a way more manageable for yourself.

#### **Duties of a discussion leader**

Although people are not generally given formal titles during a group discussion, they may take on different roles as the discussion goes on. Somebody may emerge as a leader, whether s/he intends to do so. This person will help to fulfil the following functions:

1. Introducing the topic and purpose of the discussion (and give suggestions on how the topic may be approached)
2. Trying to avoid anybody to dominate the discussion and inviting less active participants to speak up
3. Managing hidden or agreed ground rules for discussion, e.g. stay calm and polite, be concise, give evidence and stay on-topic
4. Managing the discussion dynamics by asking questions (to clarify or to bring the discussion back on track) or giving suggestions on points to be covered
5. Leading the group to consider both sides or different aspects of the topic
6. Wrapping up the group's discussion and achievements objectively

Despite the advantages of leading a discussion, you should beware of two points:

1. The leadership in a discussion is often fluid, you may assume some of the responsibilities even if you do not appear as a leader from the start.
2. It is a double-edged sword –it helps you impress others more easily if done well; if you lack adequate technique or knowledge in the topic, you disappoint everyone just as easily.

#### **References:**

<https://www.student.unsw.edu.au/discussion-skills>

<https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/leadership/group-facilitation/group-discussions/main>

**Activity 1.** Watch Video A ([https://dses.eduhk.hk/?page\\_id=1592](https://dses.eduhk.hk/?page_id=1592)) about a discussion on the topic of 'Public Health' among a group of students from the Education University of Hong Kong. Who assumes the role of a discussion leader? Please evaluate his/ her leadership, according to the points mentioned above and your own knowledge.

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**Activity 2.** Based on the discussion in Activity 1, list what qualities the leader shows in Video A would help him/ her lead the discussion. Then, gives some suggestions for him to improve his performance.

**Qualities:**

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**Suggestions for further improvement:**

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## *Part 2. Exploring the turn-taking skills*

By now, you probably have noticed that the expectations for a group discussion is different from that of a presentation. Even though some good qualities of a presentation have been shown in the video, it was far from an ideal discussion.

One defining feature of a group discussion is turn-taking. Unlike a presentation, one cannot only prepare for one's part and stick to it. One needs to listen carefully to others and respond to their ideas.

Let's focus on turn-taking in a discussion. To participate in a discussion, you either take the floor or are given the floor. Little needs to be worried about when you are given the turn, but the real question would be when and whether you will be given such a turn. The latter involves uncertainty and so is unreliable. We shall focus on how one may actively try to join the discussion.

There are different ways to do so:

### 1. Take the initiative

- ❖ When there is a moment of silence, grab the chance to speak first.

### 2. Add to the existing discussion

- ❖ An easy way to join in is to add to the existing discussion, e.g. by agreeing with a certain point or asking them to expand on a point.
- ❖ Then, you may find a chance to add an example, certain details or ask a question.
- ❖ In order to do this, you have to listen carefully at what others are talking about.

### 3. Signal your presence

- ❖ When the speaker feels that s/he is talking to you, it is likelier that s/he will pass you the turn when a point is finished.
- ❖ You may make eye contact and nod to show that you are attentive.
- ❖ You may say "aha", "right", "I see", etc. at the sentence ends to share the floor.
- ❖ Sometimes you can use hand gestures to signal that you wish to talk.

### 4. Interrupt

- ❖ If you try all the above and still cannot find a way to join in or when a participant speaks non-stop and there is no discussion leader to stop him/ her, you may need to interrupt.
- ❖ You can usually find a point of time to say politely "Excuse me", explain that they have talked for a long time and then you raise your point.

**References:**

<https://www.usingenglish.com/teachers/articles/how-to-teach-turn-taking.html>

<https://www.student.unsw.edu.au/discussion-skills>

**Activity 3.** Go on to watch Video B ([https://dses.eduhk.hk/?page\\_id=1592](https://dses.eduhk.hk/?page_id=1592)) on the same topic. Pay attention to how the students interact with each other. Describe and comment on their turn-taking.

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**Activity 4. Self-reflection:** Think about your past turn-taking experience. Suggest ways in which you can improve your own performance.

Area of improvement	Suggestions

### *Part 3. Recognising the right moment to have a turn*

Reflecting on your past experience in group discussion, you would probably agree that the ways turn-taking happen are vast. The case shown in Video B is simplified. The speaker stopping entirely after talking or inviting someone else to join the discussion do happen sometimes, but are only two of the many possibilities. In this section, we shall discuss some possible moments you may consider taking a turn. They include:

#### **a) Silences**

Sometimes, speakers may simply fall silent to signal completion. This is an obvious way to hand over the floor, but is somewhat uncommon and dramatic in a dynamic discussion.

#### **b) Change in intonation, pace and pitch**

Keep your eyes open for less obvious but probably more common signs of completion of a point. According to Brazil (1997), speakers may signal the end of a turn by: i) Slowing down; ii) Speaking more quietly and iii) Lowering the voice pitch. When you notice these features, you may get prepared to speak when possible.

#### **c) Questions**

It is not uncommon for a speaker to ask a question, be it rhetorical or genuine, in his or her turn to address the other participants. It could be a natural moment to claim the floor, by offering an answer to the question.

#### **d) Predicted or assumed sentence completion**

Similarly, it may be possible for you to begin to speak when you spot that the current speaker is at a loss of words. S/he may not stop speaking altogether. Instead, s/he may pause in the middle of a sentence with a filler like “erm” or conjunction. (Coulthard (op cit.: 64)) reports that in one study, it was found that 28% of all interruptions occurred after a conjunction.) You may use it as a chance to join in by offering a possible word or phrase to complete the sentence.

#### **e) Self-repetition**

Likewise, you may be possible to take a turn when the speaker is running out of ideas. At a certain point of time, the speaker may keep repeating what s/he has said before (possibly accompanied by features shown in (b)). In this case, you may be able to interrupt politely at the end of a sentence.

**f) Open-ended turn passing**

Sometimes, a speaker may signal the end of his/her turn by finishing with falling intonation of shifting gaze. At the same time, s/he may make a concluding comment for the point being discussed. Since nobody has been addressed specifically, anyone may self-select to continue the interaction.

**Activity 5.** Watch an online lesson by Oxford Online English on “Taking Turns in English Conversations” and fill in the following table. (<https://www.oxfordonlineenglish.com/take-turns-in-english-conversation>)

Ways to show that one is ready to speak	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. make a _____ signal, e.g. raise your hand or _____ your posture.</li><li>2. make vocal signals, make noises like _____ with emphasis</li><li>3. say words like “well” to _____ the conversation</li></ol>
Ways to _____ the turn	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. use phrases like “first of all”, _____ to show that you have a few points to cover</li><li>2. ask _____ questions, e.g. “Can I make a few suggestions?”</li></ol>

**Reference**

<https://www.eltoncourse.com/training/in-service/discourse/turn-taking.html>

#### *Part 4. Holding the floor*

From the video and your own experience, you may agree that entering the conversation is only the beginning. You take the effort to join it to make a point. To finish making the point, you have to resist interruption from others. Some skills are needed, for instance:

##### **a) Intonation, pace and pitch**

As we mentioned in the last part, these features can be used to signal the end of a turn. To resist interruption, one could try i) speeding up, ii) speaking more loudly, iii) raising the voice pitch.

##### **b) Verbally respond to interruption**

Speakers may resist interruption by referring to the fact that it has been attempted. For example: “Let me finish” or “Just a moment, please”

##### **c) Incompletion markers**

It is possible for speakers to insert markers (often subordinating conjunctions) to signal that a thought is incomplete. Usually, these must be emphasised and produced with a rising rather than falling intonation. For example: The situation will get worse because ↗ ...

This method may not be reliable, as we saw that people might interpret the use of conjunction as signalling potential completion and simply cut in.

##### **d) Initial markers**

A more effective variant is to put the conjunction at the front, and to end the clause in a rising tone, e.g. “Because there is such uncertainty ↗ ...” which would be more obvious for the listener that the turn has not ended.

##### **e) Pre-structuring**

A speaker could hold the floor by stating in advance that s/he has several points to share, e.g. “I need to say two things here ...”

##### **f) Fluency**

Fluency in the speech discourages others from interrupting. The fewer the uses of hesitations and fillers such as erm, well etc. the less vulnerable the speaker is to interruption. You may use some short phrases (“in my opinion...”) with emphasis to fill the thinking time.

#### **Reference**

<https://www.eltconcourse.com/training/in-service/discourse/turn-taking.html>



### Vocabulary in the videos

1. **obesity (n.)** /əu'bi:səti/ the quality or fact of being very fat, in a way that is not healthy
2. **instil (v.)** /ɪn'stɪl/ to gradually put an idea or attitude into somebody's mind
3. **spoil (v.)** /spɔɪl/ to give a child everything that they ask for and not enough discipline in a way that has a bad effect on their character and behaviour
4. **intervention (n.)** /,ɪntə'veɪʃn/ action taken to improve or help a situation
5. **role model (n.)** /'rəʊl ,mɒd.əl/ a person who someone admires and whose behaviour they try to copy
6. **accompany (v.)** /ə'kʌm. pə.ni/ to go with someone
7. **imply (v.)** /ɪm'plaɪ/ to suggest that something is true without saying so directly
8. **catering (n.)** /'keɪtərɪŋ/ any job making or serving food
9. **regulation (n.)** /,regju'leɪʃn/ an official rule made by a government or some other authority
10. **perception (n.)** /pə'sepʃn/ an idea, a belief or an image you have as a result of how you see or understand something
11. **implement (v.)** /'ɪm.plɪ.ment/ to make something that has been officially decided start to happen or be used
12. **accreditation (n.)** /ə,kredɪ'teɪʃn/ official approval given by an organization stating that somebody/something has achieved a required standard

### Further study

- **How to Manage 8 Tough Personas in a Group Discussion** by Andrew Dlugan:  
<http://sixminutes.dlugan.com/group-discussions-personas/>
- **How to teach turn taking** by Alex Case on UsingEnglish.com:  
<https://www.usingenglish.com/teachers/articles/how-to-teach-turn-taking.html>

## Possible responses

### **Activity 1**

Bekzat assumes some of the responsibilities of a discussion leader. However, he did not do it well. Many of the duties of a leader are not handled. He begins the discussion and focuses it on the role of parents on children's health, but he skips the steps of introducing the topic and the approach taken. Instead of promoting balanced participation in the discussion, he himself dominates it and simply presents the points he has prepared. When the quiet student said "I agree with you", Bekzat probes her to elaborate but lets her go immediately as she gives up. Moreover, he interacts with the others but his language is too blunt, not very polite. The video only shows the beginning of the discussion, so we cannot comment further on.

### **Activity 2**

#### **Qualities:**

1. He appears to be well-prepared – his points are backed up by research findings.
2. He speaks with confidence, logic and clarity.
3. He is quick-witted – he can point out that the evidence Yi-Ling provides actually supports his point immediately, when she still thinks she is disagreeing.

#### **Suggestions for further improvement:**

1. With his language ability, he can lead the group to get into the discussion effectively if he begins by introducing the topic and invites people to participate rather than presenting his points only.
2. He can use his interpersonal skills and analytical power to manage the flow of the discussion and balance the participation of each member.
3. He can use some of the data he has found to respond to others' points rather than to present his points in isolation.

### **Activity 3**

#### **Possible points to mention:**

- ❖ Yi Ling leads the discussion. She begins by introducing the topic and presents her view as one of the possibilities.

- ❖ The students basically begin by agreeing with (part or all of) what others say, and add points or examples. Or, paraphrase what has been said and then present their own points and evidence.
- ❖ Basically, everyone talks for about a minute and stops letting others take the next turn.
- ❖ Yi Ling invites the quiet student Diana to join the discussion.

**Activity 5.**

<p>Ways to show that one is ready to speak</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. make a __physical__ signal, e.g. raise your hand or __straighten__ your posture</li> <li>2. make vocal signals, make noises like ____“uh-huh” ____ with emphasis</li> <li>3. say words like “well” to __enter__ the conversation</li> </ol>
<p>Ways to ____hold____ the turn</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. use phrases like “first of all”, “to begin with”/ I have a couple of thoughts about that” ____ to show that you have a few points to cover</li> <li>2. ask ____rhetorical__ questions, e.g. “Can I make a few suggestions?”</li> </ol>