

# Developing Discussion and Tutorial Leadership Skills in EFL Students

by **MICHAEL GUEST**

Imagine an English as a foreign language (EFL) course that combines all of the following merits:

1. It encourages both learner autonomy and creativity.
2. It allows for extensive spoken interactions between students.
3. It allows students to learn and teach about their own particular interests.
4. It involves all class members on all occasions.
5. It supports learners' cognitive development.
6. It aids in expanding both vocabulary and knowledge.
7. It helps to inculcate a valuable social-discourse skill.

Now, imagine such a course with the added feature that it demands relatively little teacher input or direct teacher control. Does it sound like a dream class? In my own case, in over 30 years of teaching EFL, it is likely the most successful and popular course that I have ever taught. It is an elective class called Student-Led English Tutorials.

Student-Led English Tutorials is a course in which students take turns in developing and then leading and managing small-group discussions on topics dear to the leaders and/or academically relevant to the class members. Students also learn to become

active discussion participants. In this article, I explain the practice in detail, discuss teacher and student roles, and offer suggestions for making the tutorials productive for all participants.

While many English teachers incorporate English presentation skills into their curricula, the increasingly valuable skill of developing and managing a small-group discussion (or an interactive tutorial) is often overlooked, despite its prevalence in many professional and academic settings. The ability to discuss a topic of one's own interest, such that it also becomes of interest or value to others, eventually allowing for extended interactions, is an underrated talent. It encompasses the ability to exposit, engage, and (hopefully) stimulate all those participating.

Many teachers will, quite understandably, not be able to devote an entire course to teaching tutorial leadership skills. Near the end of the article, I offer suggestions for adapting the practice to a few classes, as part of a course.

## **CLASS STRUCTURE AND MANAGEMENT**

First, allow me to explain how the course or class can be arranged before I discuss how the content might be managed. Let's use as a (flexible) model a 14-week semester, 90 minutes per class, with 28 students. With one initial period set aside for a course introduction and orientation, and one at the end of the course for follow-up and evaluation, 12 weeks then remain in which students will actually engage in

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leading or actively participating in peer-led tutorials.

In a class of 28 students, seven leaders can be designated each week, with the other 21 students then serving as active participants. Under this setup, a full rotation of all students will take four weeks. Over the 12 weeks, each student will thus serve as a leader three times, or once every four weeks, dealing with a new topic each time. On the other nine occasions, they will serve as participants while their classmates serve as leaders.

The 21 non-leader students in each class can be divided into seven participant groups of three members each. During a 90-minute class, these participants will rotate from leader to leader, with each session taking about 15 to 20 minutes to complete. The sessions are held concurrently. Leaders will thus interact with four rotating groups of participants during the same 90-minute class. In other words, the leaders will lead their same tutorial four times in the same class—allowing for opportunities to improve on their initial effort and hone their performance. Participants, on the other hand, will be entertained by four topics and leaders as they rotate from session to session.

#### **DISCUSSION/TUTORIAL CONTENT**

It is the leaders’ job to choose a topic on which they will lead a tutorial-type discussion. Leaders are told of their roles at least one class in advance. The scope of the topic they choose should be wide enough to capture the interest of others but not so wide as to state the obvious or cover well-established territory. Those teaching in English for specific purposes (ESP) fields should limit the range of topics to the professional or academic area

in which students are studying. Since I teach medical and nursing students, I require that they limit themselves to topics that have at least peripheral medical or healthcare value.

In a recent first-year medical English class in Japan, among the topics my students self-selected were the following: *The Medical Benefits of Laughter*, *How Right- or Left-handedness is Determined*, *The Medical Use of Cannabis*, *Potable Tap Water*, *Game Addiction*, *Medicinal Effects of Tea Varieties*, and *Music Therapy*. If the course does not have an ESP focus, any topic that students have interest in and a certain level of knowledge about could serve the purpose, as long as there is novelty value for the participants. In fact, topics that might initially appear as mundane as, say, *How Lava Fields Are Made* or *Why Toiletries Go Out of Fashion* force the leaders to capture the interest of participants in a way that more broadly “popular” topics (*Chinese food*, for example, or *the Olympics*) might end up skirting.

As homework over the week preceding the performance, leaders prepare an outline or introduction of their self-selected topics, often using tablets or other electronic devices/media, whiteboards, handouts, and even hands-on props. I strongly discourage leaders from reading directly from fully prepared scripts during their tutorials. Leaders should prepare to ask questions to, and generate commentary from, participants. This controlled preparation stage allows even the less English-proficient students to acquire greater confidence in their performance.

The purpose of this performance, however, is not merely to serve as a prestige stage for the leaders to expound in English (although the

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ensuing sense of responsibility will generally lead to deeper levels of research and greater care in terms of the final English product). Rather, it is to interact with the participants and stimulate responses from them. The development of these interactive skills is at least as valuable as the development of the tutorial product.

In this way, leading tutorials is quite distinct from giving formal presentations, in which the text is largely a monologue (at least until Q & A). Tutorials, however, are assumed to be more dialogic; that is, participants are encouraged to actively add to the output. The notion of being “participants” thus explicitly distinguishes them from being a member of a passive “audience.”

### THE TEACHER'S ROLE

Since the class period revolves almost completely around students leading or participating in the tutorials, the teacher's in-class role is limited largely to that of group creation and movement, monitoring, and time management. On performance day, the teacher should produce a map or list of group members and rotations. Teachers can provide two-minute closing warnings and call time for each session, plus be quick to help jump-start (but then quickly remove themselves from) discussions that have gone quiet or those that are not otherwise engaging all participants. If time remains at the end of the class, the teacher can also review leadership techniques that worked well and call attention to those areas that students might want to reconsider or improve upon.

The teacher should use the introductory class to not only outline the schedule but also to model the skills that it is hoped students will be using when it is their turn to lead. I use the first lesson to conduct a

model mini-tutorial on *Red vs. White Wine*, using four or five students as participants, while the other students are encouraged to take notes on leadership techniques that I am employing in order to stimulate discussion and interest.

### GOOD-PRACTICE TIPS AND PERFORMANCE SKILLS

During the initial class meeting, I also distribute, as a handout, a list of 18 “good-practice” tips that students should consider for developing interesting and successful tutorial discussions. After the model mini-tutorial demonstration, I first elicit tips like these from students rather than simply presenting them, before sharing and going over the handout. The tips are as follows:

1. *Choose a topic that you know something about and that you are truly interested in.*
2. *Remember the goal: To make others more interested in and knowledgeable about your topic.*
3. *Don't hand out a paper at the beginning (people will just read it and ignore your speech). Give out any papers in the middle or at the end.*
4. *Choose only a few learning points and focus on something members are unlikely to know.*
5. *Try to find out the participants' familiarity with and knowledge of the topic at the beginning.*
6. *Try to create a personal atmosphere.*
7. *Think carefully about how to open the session—don't start by stating your topic directly.*

8. *Think about how to clearly and effectively close the session. Don't suddenly say, "That's all" or "I'm finished."*
9. *Give participants time to respond (more than just one word). And respond to participants.*
10. *Elicit content from participants (then feel free to add or modify). Don't just **tell** them things.*
11. *Make sure to include every participant in the discussion.*
12. *Teach only a few new, key vocabulary items when necessary. Also consider whether these have long-term or short-term value.*
13. *Use physical examples or props if possible; make your tutorial visual or tactile if you can.*
14. *Consider including a short quiz, task, and/or summary of key points.*
15. *Don't talk for too long. Allow other members to respond, comment, or do a small activity. Don't read from a script or paper (at least for more than 15 seconds or about 25 words).*
16. *Use a whiteboard or tablet if necessary. If you use a paper handout, bullet or point form is better than paragraph form. Use strong, attractive visuals.*
17. *Do research on your topic so you can be sure about what you are discussing.*
18. *Allow time for questions, feedback, a summary, and comments at the end.*

## **EVALUATION AND RELATED CONSIDERATIONS**

Teachers are likely to be concerned about how to effectively evaluate students in such a course. It is not the type of course that suits itself to a written exam, so instead I grade students throughout the course, based upon their performances both as leaders and as participants. This involves monitoring

all sessions while they are in performance, noting such features as how well the leader has prepared the tutorial, how ably the leader initiates interaction or discussion, whether the content contains novelty, whether the content appears to stir the interest of participants, and whether the language forms (written and spoken) are effective in communicating the content.

To carry this out, I spend my viewing time visiting all leaders on multiple occasions of one to two minutes each (so as not to interrupt the session) and compiling notes regarding strengths, weaknesses, and other relevant points that may warrant further commentary. Feedback based on these observations can be given in the moments between sessions, at the end or beginning of an individual lesson, or in a post-lesson response online. I also schedule a final-class follow-up, outside the regular class time, in which each student is given 12 minutes with me one-on-one in order to convey the following:

- The topics they chose
- Three central thematic points for each of those topics
- What worked or did not work well regarding the discussion of those topics (This can further indicate whether they adjusted or improved their skills over the duration of the course.)
- What they learned from other leaders, including another student's tutorial they found compelling (and why)
- A summarization of my collected notes regarding their performances as leaders and as participants

A mid-program class could also be set aside for peer evaluation, with students providing helpful feedback to one another and self-reflecting upon their performances thus far. In addition to the above, attendance, effort, and active participation form the bulk of the grade.

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There are, of course, certain cautions that the teacher should keep in mind and may have to explicitly convey to the students over the course. Primary among these are the following:

- There should always be some novel content in the tutorial.
- The level of English, as well as the academic level of the content, should be suited to the proficiency levels of their classmates.
- Plagiarism will not be accepted. Quotes from other sources must be cited.
- Taking content from Wikipedia entries alone, as well as using dubious websites, is to be discouraged.
- It is the duty of the participants, not only the leader, to expand or expound upon the topic at hand.
- Formal, conference-style presentations should be discouraged in favour of a more collegial atmosphere.
- Use of the L1 should be included only for single vocabulary items or phrases when the leader wishes to foster a quick grasp of an item or concept among participants.

### TEACHING IN SMALLER OR SINGLE UNITS

A question teachers might have is whether the use of student-led tutorials can be adapted to a single class meeting or just a few class sessions. The answer is yes, especially if the class is relatively small. In a class of 12, for example, all students can prepare a tutorial as a leader, rotating within a group of four

students, with each serving as a leader once. This will mean, though, that each student will likely have only one chance to lead his or her session, making detailed preparation that much more important. Unfortunately, managing these types of tutorials in very large classes (over 40 students) can be unwieldy and is not recommended.

However, tutorial practice is well suited to virtual teaching, particularly via platforms such as Zoom with its breakout rooms, provided that students are familiar with the tools of managing a presentation in the platform they are using.

### FINAL WORDS

Student-Led English Tutorials is a joy to teach and, judging by both attendance and feedback over ten years, is my most popular and stimulating class. Indeed, I have learned much myself from the students' tutorials, which are often highly entertaining. More than that, the fact that students are cognitively engaged in articulating and conveying English content that is self- or peer-generated, while also developing practical interactive social skills, means that I can confidently give my recommendation of this practice to any English language teacher worldwide.

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