

Extreme Discussion Circles: Preparing ESL Students for “The Harkness Method”

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Abstract

This paper reports on the implementation of “The Harkness Method” of teaching at a private boarding high school in the United States in which 50% of the students were international (ESL) students. This private school adopted “The Harkness Method” across multiple subject areas, and thus, ESL students in mainstream courses had to participate in student-centered, text-based discussion on a daily basis. The ESL program had to adapt rubrics and materials to empower ESL high school students to succeed in these discussions alongside native speakers of English. The radical shift to a learner-centered format from the top of the school downward resulted in enormous pressure on ESL students and teachers to shift to this learner-centered, text-based discussion protocol. The implementation of “The Harkness Method” in private and International Baccalaureate (IB) high schools in the U.S. will continue to spread, making adaptation necessary for other ESL programs and those preparing EFL students for study abroad. This article will be of interest to school administrators who seek a way to improve the verbal participation of non-native English speakers in mainstream courses, and a reference for directors of ESL. The term Discussion Circles is suggested to describe a broader range of content and input.

Key terms: Harkness Method, English as a Second Language (ESL), Discussion Circles, reading circles, literature circles, text-based discussion, learner-centered curriculum

1. Introduction

The year 2007 was pivotal at the Annie Wright School in Tacoma, Washington, because the director of the Upper School along with the Head of School and Board of Directors had decided to move forward with the plan to become an International Baccalaureate (IB) Program under the auspices of the International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO). In order to ramp up to the higher standards that would be required of our high school students, the director of the upper school (high school) decided to implement the use of the “Harkness Method” –basically, a formalized discussion circle protocol used in every subject—including math and science, but starting with English and social studies. If you teach ESL in a school adopting the “Harkness Method” you will find this article of use. First, do not panic. In many ways, you should sigh in relief that your superiors have embraced a learner-centered teaching methodology. After all, way back in 1988, David Nunan’s landmark *Learner-Centered Curriculum: A Study in Second Language Teaching* led the way for the communicative teaching approach to spread throughout second language programs around the world, so if international students at your school will transition into small discussion circles with native speakers while still in the critical period for language acquisition¹ you have much to be thankful for. That is, gaining comfort with this pressure in high school, from my experience, quickly familiarized younger language learners with a wide variety of skills key to overall academic success: note taking from reading, common short-hand, turn taking etiquette, backing up opinions with reasons, text referencing, transition words and expressions, recognizing and playing different roles in discussion, and risk taking. The great experiment of Annie Wright

¹ See Tokudome (2010) for a recent review of literature on the Critical Period Hypothesis

School was that 50% of high school students were ESL students, mostly from Taiwan, Korea, and China. The Harkness Method met the needs of both native and non-native speakers alike, providing a window into the thinking processes of the students as they engaged with content, and motivating them to be more thoughtful in their preparation for and participation in class.

In 2008, the Annie Wright Upper School integrated high school ESL students from the first day. These 15 year old international students usually took ninth grade English, social studies, geometry and art with native speakers, and met once per day in a self-contained ESL course where content pulled straight from these subject areas could be scaffolded to provide support and focus on second language issues. Students had to be bright, outgoing intermediate level students in order to progress successfully toward the stated 100 score on the Internet Based TOEFL test before high school graduation. For primary and middle school EFL programs and agents that prepare middle school students for American boarding school entrance in ninth grade, implementing a gradual introduction to Discussion Circles will make for a much softer landing and transition. Relevant literature to consult includes that on Literature Circles (Shelton, 2011), (Mark, 2007), (Daniels, 2002) and Reading Circles (Soliman, 2012).

2. What is the Harkness Method?

For teachers of ESL steeped in second language teaching literature, it might come as a surprise that a revolution in mainstream educational teaching philosophy had started in New Hampshire in the 1920s when a philanthropist, Edward Harkness, approached the principal of Phillips Exeter Academy (PEA), offering to fund an innovative method of education that would improve American education. Ten years later, the faculty went back to Mr. Harkness with a plan to change Exeter's teacher-centered format to a discussion format where students take the lead in their learning, demonstrating critical thinking at a round table (Smith and Foley, 2009). More formalized than an *approach* to teaching, the "Harkness Method" was applied in all major subject areas, including math and science. The term "Harkness Method" is part and parcel to the discourse community of American independent schools, which comprises one sector of the audience of this paper.

For second language teachers, just hearing the word "method" after someone's name is a red flag—after all, we are in the post method era of second language teaching², are we not? For this reason, and to placate the second language teaching discourse community, the term "Harkness Method" would better be referred to as Harkness Discussion Circle to denote one kind of Discussion Circle that will find its place among all the other methods we employ. More broadly, I will use the term Discussion Circle separately from Literature Circles because Discussion Circles may be employed across the curriculum, not just in dealing with literature, and for second language teaching purposes, may draw from listening in addition to reading materials. In practice, the "Harkness Method" is just the adoption of a narrowly defined, intensive Discussion Circle as the default format for classroom interaction. Simply put, it is a student led, text-based discussion in which students talk about what a text means to them, while the teacher observes from outside the circle. In short, it is a great way for a teacher to listen and observe students in the process of interpreting a text, which gives the teacher a clear window into students' reading and or listening comprehension. The table usually does not stretch beyond more than 18 students in a mainstream class, with about 8-12 students being ideal for an ESL Harkness discussion. What is extreme about a *school* adopting the Harkness Method is that students are required to discuss content substantively in every class, on a daily basis.

² See Richards and Rodgers (2001) *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*

There is also a mainstream American University movement toward student-centered, student-initiated discussion, which was set out quite persuasively by Parker Palmer in *The Courage to Teach* (1998). He describes the status quo as the “Objectivist Myth of Knowing.” Figure 1 is my representation of Palmer’s model. While Americans may have heard about how few students raise their hand to participate in classrooms in Asia, leading American teachers realize that the teacher-fronted classroom is still the dominant format in American schools, too. Palmer describes the dominant model as teacher-expert who mediates the object of study for the amateurs who remain passive, dependent upon the experts for “pure knowledge” under clouds of ignorance and bias.

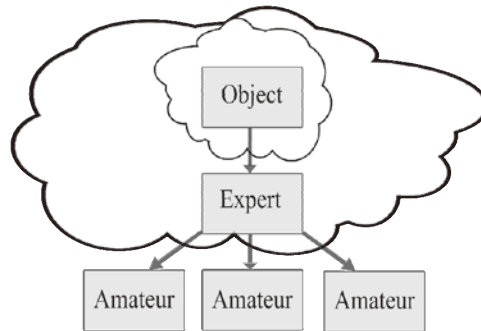


Figure 1: Palmer’s (1998) Objectivist Model of Knowing (with clouds)

Palmer describes his alternative ideal: “The Community of Truth.” He posits that the teacher and students are all equal participants with the subject of study in the middle of the circle, where the subject can be interpreted from many more perspectives. Truth, in the center of the circle, is identified in community, through discussion that leads to “recognition of consensus and conflict.” Figure 2 is an illustration of Palmer’s “Community of Truth” in the form of an ideal Harkness map. Both Palmer and the Harkness Method view students as equal “knowers” of a subject. Palmer, however, sees himself as an equal with the students—another knower within the circle. In the Harkness Method, however, the teacher is removed from the circle. He or she is an observer (and evaluator) of the students’ discussion. Otherwise, Palmer’s “Community of Truth” model is almost identical to the Harkness model (cf. Palmer, pages 99-102).

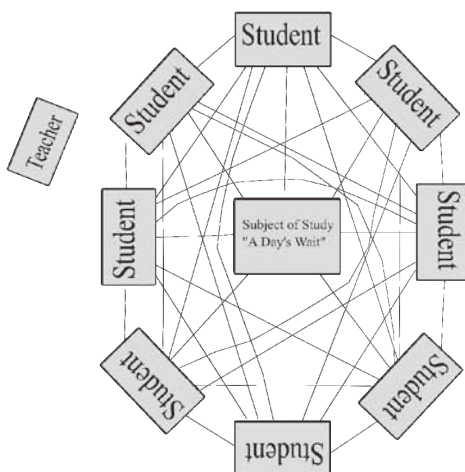


Figure 2. Harkness Discussion Circle with possible pathways for turns

3. Why have we not heard of the Harkness Method?

First, the method was developed in a first language high school context, and thus was not much heard of in second language acquisition contexts. Another reason that there has not been more transfer of the Harkness Method to other contexts may be the perception that class sizes need to stay small. However, there are ways around this problem. There can be multiple groups, multitasking, with one group preparing, and one doing Harkness with the teacher observing. Baurain (2007) describes how multitasking can make discussion possible in large EFL classes. A third reason the movement has not transferred more to second language contexts is the more rigid text-based focus, which makes it more appropriate for higher-level second-language learners. Herein lies the gap for EFL and ESL teachers—to sequence discussion protocols in stair-step fashion, to reduce the shock that intermediate students encounter when first experiencing intense, text-based discussion with other international students and native speakers of English.

4. Implementation of Harkness at a High School

High school English and social studies teachers will likely be the first teachers to receive training, with astute administrators including ESL faculty in the very first wave of training. Faculty Harkness Discussion Circles were the best way to get used to the new medium. At Annie Wright, teachers took turns choosing articles for the faculty group to all read. I personally found the experience quite positive, but also a bit competitive, as it is clear that one's contributions will have an impact on one's reputation at the table. Our group of faculty included the head of the English department, a social studies teacher, a math teacher and several others. First we read Ernest Hemingway's short story "A Day's Wait" (Hemingway, 1961). While this story is short, the pronouns alone make it difficult to interpret clearly. However, it was clear that with practice, this was going to be a very productive way to

learn from literature, social studies and science texts with our colleagues, because there was authentic pressure to prepare comments and questions in order to make a good contribution to the discussion.

For the ESL faculty, the next step was to discern how classroom teachers would evaluate our students in the Harkness Discussion Circles. It became clear very quickly that international students were threatened with failing courses because of the new emphasis placed on daily participation. Overall, the Annie Wright administration pursued a dogmatic, orthodox approach to the implementation, which made almost every class discussion feel like a high stakes performance. The real genius of Harkness discussions is that if one has not done her reading homework, she cannot escape. She will have nothing to do but keep silent. Unfortunately, for ESL students, even doing the reading does not guarantee participation in the discussion, and thus we started in earnest to develop tools to empower the students. What ESL students facing Harkness Discussion Circles need is to experience a wide variety of low stakes exercises that gradually develop the many important sub-skills that will be introduced next.

5. A Rubric for ESL Harkness Discussion Circles

Perhaps the simplest, and most logical step to designing ESL courses that prepare international students for Discussion Circles is to start with the necessary outcomes. In the crucible of those first months of implementation, the rubric that emerged was derived from assessment standards written for integrated mainstream classes that included the following:

1. Student Preparation—students must complete a reading and bring the highlighted, annotated text to class. The student’s notes should exhibit the markings and added comments that elaborate on background information, predict important discussion threads, and elucidate challenging questions with text references.
2. Listening—students demonstrate listening skill by not interrupting, echoing the previous speaker’s idea, not changing the topic until a thread is exhausted.
3. Non-verbal—students look for text references while listening; actively take notes, use gestures, eye contact and facial expressions to intensify verbal responses. Students exhibit posture of attention and wakefulness.
4. Risk taking—students must demonstrate trust in her own understanding of the text to share her ideas, no matter how rough; dare to go deeper in asking and answering challenging questions.
5. Conversational techniques—students direct questions to a variety of classmates by name, or direct the question to the table (opens next turn to anyone who has something to share). Students use a variety of transitions appropriately, and can echo previous speaker’s idea plus make one of the following discussion moves: add a point, or disagree with evidence from text.
6. Critical thinking—student makes good connections to ideas, comments, texts from homework, other assignments, clearly explains why her citations support her interpretation of the text.
7. Text references—student consistently uses text-based evidence—paraphrases, quotations, charts or illustrations with exact page numbers and areas and further, these text references directly relate to the discussion.

The ESL faculty responded with a rubric tailored to ESL students that had six categories: planning for discussion, risk-taking, conversational techniques, non-verbal behavior, critical thinking, and text references (see Appendix). Each category is graded on a four-point scale, with qualitative descriptions of each performance level. This rubric was actually developed with the students in the first cohort to experience Harkness Discussion Circles.

6. Roles in Harkness Discussion Circles

The teacher's role in Harkness tends to be that of an observer, but one that does provide the content that the students read. The teacher seems to follow the typical route of making sure that he/she is NOT the 'sage on the stage,' and not even so much the 'guide on the side,' but rather one 'leading from behind.' Conferencing with students about their performance with the rubric becomes important just like conferencing helps students with writing skills.

There are several roles for students to learn. The first and most noticeable of these roles is the conversation "mapper." This student draws a diagram of the table with the names of each student in their seats, and a dot in the center of the table, to represent questions that are asked "to the table," that is, questions that are not directed to another individual, but rather to anyone who wants to answer (see Figure 2). The result is quite telling in that it records the number of turns that each student took in the discussion. A further coding that the mapper can add when she draws a line from one student to the next is to add a tick on the line (turn) when the student gives a text reference. That way both the number of turns and the number of text references for each participant is recorded (See Appendix, bottom left).

The student's role in general is to carefully read the article, annotate and highlight it, and then to be a participant in the discussion. The student needs to ask questions, state ideas, show evidence from the text that backs up her ideas, agree and/or disagree with classmates, carefully listen to classmates' ideas, and use appropriate turn-taking and topic changing etiquette. The student needs to use the following etiquette at the table (from Collins, 2008):

1. Addresses classmates by name, makes eye contact
2. Disagrees and argues, but does not make personal attacks or insults
3. Listens carefully to peer comments, thinking before responding
4. Does not cut people off
5. Avoids the urge to dominate
6. Avoids the urge to hide and "check out"
7. Is open-minded towards others' ideas
8. Admits when someone makes a good point or when they are wrong
9. Only changes the subject when it's obviously time to and avoids comments that do not relate with the topic being explored at the moment
10. Respects everyone at the table
11. Knows that all students are responsible for the success of the class.

The moderator has the most complex role at the table, and needs to have good comprehension of the material and her classmates’ speaking. The moderator role includes the following tasks (Collins, 2008):

- starts off the discussion by introducing a starting focus, pre-determined with the teacher and other students
- provides an overall summary of where the discussion went at the end
- asks questions and makes comments like everyone else, but tries to speak less than others
- tries to include quiet members in the discussion
- asks those taking too many turns to yield the floor to others
- helps the group recognize when a focus and trajectory of discussion has reached a natural endpoint, and redirects the group to a new focus
- asks students to show evidence for their ideas
- asks students to stop side talk
- helps students to focus if they appear lost
- helps to keep the tone of conversation positive

The note taker’s role is to take official notes of the discussion in the class journal. This student writes down all the points made by the various students during the discussion. This is a very important job because the notes will be available for all to copy or review for class tests or papers. The notes should be written legibly and in complete sentences when possible—if the conversation is going slowly. That said, note takers have to write quickly and use shorthand that classmates will be able to understand later, making a key for any unique shorthand. After writing what was said, the note taker will add who made the comment. The note taker needs to know what material to leave out of the notes (who went to the bathroom) and what to keep in (Collins, 2008).

Another role is that of the observer. The observer’s role is to be able to talk about the qualities of the group and discussion at the end. This is valuable in order to help students reflect upon when students interrupt or dominate, and when or how quieter students could have asserted themselves more. The observer should try to notice what makes the discussion more interesting, what sheds light of comprehension on the text, or what connections might be valuable for follow up. The observer’s role is to fearlessly tell the truth about how the group is doing, and make suggestions that could improve future discussions.

7. ESL Student Response to Harkness Discussion Circles

In order to better understand the experience of non-native speakers in the context of Harkness discussions with native speakers, interviews were conducted with non-native student leaders in the fall of 2008. The prompt used: “What are the challenges for non-native speakers who are participating in Harkness discussions with native speakers?” A very talented writer, the following student was very interested in expressing her frustrations with the discussion format:

1. “I feel that American students look down on my language. For example, I, when I say something in Harkness the American students just interrupt me, or disregard my comment.”
2. “When I start to speak in Harkness, I notice a change in the faces of the American students—like they have bad feelings towards me.”
3. “I am afraid that my language errors could make everyone start laughing at me, so I hate it.”

4. "I think the punishment of a lower participation grade is fair for non-native speakers in mainstream classes. I can't participate at the same level as American students, although what Americans say in discussion is really shallow sometimes, and I realize I have better answers."

These statements reveal the level of anxiety felt by a very talented, but quiet, Asian student. There was no doubt from her reputation that she did the work and went into these discussions prepared for class, but when it came to participating, it was very difficult. These observations are important for mainstream faculty to consider, and bring up some of the problems ESL administrators have in sensitizing mainstream faculty to language issues faced by ESL students. On the flip side, international students bridging into mainstream courses need to be reminded of the "fake-it-till-you-make-it" phase where she feels anxious, but counter-intuitively, needs to project a relaxed persona, and be "thick-skinned" thereby letting perceived criticism roll off her back.

I recently conducted a follow up interview with this same student, who is currently a second year college student at a university in Asia. We reviewed her feelings about the Harkness Discussion Circle experience at Annie Wright three years ago and then I asked her how she views that high school ESL experience now, in the light of her college experience. Here are some of her comments:

1. "To be honest I didn't enjoy it much when we were told to use it for all classes possible. I felt kind of forced by teachers."
2. "But now thinking back upon it, it actually helped me to work on the materials given more deeply and helped me to try to find meanings or patterns or whatever."

Then I asked her if she has experienced anything like the Harkness Discussion Circle since Annie Wright School. Here were her thoughts:

1. "Well...yes, but often it does not work out that well, at least in the classes I was in. It doesn't go that deep enough, really superficial..."
2. "But maybe because I don't have a major yet (no majors for freshmen here) so I take the lowest level of all classes. I heard that classes for majors are much more in-depth."
3. "Yes, and because Annie Wright School is so small, and the teachers are so focused on the students. They show you attention all the time and they try to help, or make students do their work, but in college it's your own work. You need to do it and no one forces you or tries to help you in everything, but I know that some professors really want to make classes more discussion based."

I asked one more question about how teachers and students might view the Harkness Discussion Circle at such an Asian university, and she responded with "they" referring to both professors and students at different times, so I added emphasis for clarity.

1. "Ideally *they* [teachers] want to use the method I think, but another problem is the students. Asian students are not really used to discussions and they tend to be afraid of it."

2. “Or they [students] don't care much about the classes or what they are learning and *they* [teachers] just want to make it easy for them by avoiding it.”
3. “Some students are really engaged and want to learn, but a lot of people don't want to...I think...they just want the easiest way. Or they just need to focus on other things, all the things they need for employment.”

8. Discussion

This anonymous student knows the situation for teachers and students. She recognized that a small school with demanding faculty helped her to engage more with the material. She also recognized her own distaste for the work involved with both engaging the content and the native speakers across the table. In retrospect, this student was in the very first cohort of students to experience the Harkness Method at Annie Wright School, where all students experience both mainstream and ESL classes from day one (there was no intensive EAP option). In this regard, she did not experience a well-designed scope and sequence in her prior EFL program, but only a small, concurrent ESL support to Harkness Discussion Circles. Perhaps if she had experienced a more mature program, she could have had a more comfortable transition to the rigors of mainstream courses.

It is also interesting that this student has observed that university level class discussion can often be superficial, and that there are reasons for both teachers and students to avoid in-depth discussion in class—to take the easiest path. The cloud that most classrooms face is disengagement from meaningful, engrossing interaction with both texts and other students, usually in a teacher-fronted format. On a recent visit from Hawai'i, J.D. Brown observed that when both teachers and students appear to be very comfortable and happy, that perhaps it is time to feel nervous, perhaps it is time to evaluate carefully (Brown, 2011).

9. Conclusion

There are still many obstacles in the paths of ESL faculty and their students on the way towards ESL students communicating successfully in mainstream courses. Hopefully, some of the ideas in this article will help ESL teachers prepare non-native English speaking students for Discussion Circles in mainstream coursework. Also, for teachers preparing EFL students for study abroad in private high schools in ESL contexts, preparing students for taking notes from readings, taking on a variety of roles in discussion, using logical transitions for agreement, adding points, disagreement, pointing to specific passages in texts, listening and taking notes from discussion, and many more skills are clearly necessary. Overall, I believe the school's adoption of Harkness Discussion Circles did challenge our non-native speaking students to get to an even higher level of language proficiency, and in an elite high school setting, this only helped more international students to attain their goals of getting admitted to prestigious American colleges. From my observations, for school administrators to implement more learner-centered forms of instruction in mainstream courses may put more pressure on non-native speakers, but while it sets the bar higher, it also gives all faculty members clear goals for how to support students' success. Perhaps more school administrators will consider adopting stronger means of learner-centered performance that encourage literacy development across the board.

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Appendix

Name _____		ESL Harkness Rubric			Date _____	
Score	Planning for Discussion	Risk-taking	Conversational Techniques	Non-verbal Behavior	Critical Thinking	Text References
0	Did not complete reading; Does not have materials	No participation.	Does not speak.	Arrives late; Falling asleep; Poor posture, no eye contact	No evidence of critical thinking because no comments made.	Seems lost in the text. No markings or highlighting.
1	Brings reading and note paper but seems disorganized. Appears not to have prepared.	Only non-verbal participation.	Can open a new topic by asking a question to the table, but has trouble interrupting or responding in the middle of a discussion.	May arrive on time and seems to actively search for information and take notes, but no eye contact.	Makes limited comments, and connections unclear.	Rarely cites text, can't find the page when trying, or does not know how to refer to a passage
2	Minimally prepared. Completed reading, has some materials.	Comments and questions are made occasionally, and speaker tries to make idea understood, but needs help.	Can also answer simple, concrete questions when called upon directly. Tries to interrupt, possibly unsuccessfully.	Arrives on time; Tired, but attempts to show eye contact, take notes, and follow along in the text.	Makes limited connections between comments and ideas, but they are not original.	Is able to find references that others discuss, but makes no references herself.
3	Has all materials. Completed reading, took notes, Looked up key words; asks carefully prepared questions	Speaker often makes her idea understood, but could share more openly. Asks or answers reasonable but not challenging questions.	Makes confirmation checks, or asks clarification questions. Uses names and relates comment to previous speaker but does not add a point.	Shows good but not great engagement with the materials and group.	Attempts to connect ideas, comments and text; develops new and relevant ideas, does not clearly explain how citation supports her idea	Regularly cites text, page, paragraph and line. Mostly reads text directly - no paraphrasing. Trouble summarizing.
4	Well prepared. Completed and comprehended reading, took notes, Looked up key words, researched key background information, and predicted important discussion threads; has challenging questions and comments with text references.	Demonstrates great trust in her own understanding and shares her ideas, no matter how rough; dares to go deeper in asking and answering challenging questions.	Directs questions to a variety of classmates and the table by name. Uses variety of transitions appropriately. Can echo previous speaker plus add point.	Finds text references, actively takes notes, and uses gestures, eye contact and facial expressions to intensify verbal responses. Posture perfect.	Makes good connections to ideas, comments, texts from homework, other assignments, clearly explains why her citations support her interpretation of the text.	Consistently uses text-based evidence- paraphrases or quotes even charts or illustrations with exact page numbers and areas. Text references directly relate to discussion.

Turns taken _____ Text references _____