Group discussion skills

Useful sub-skills for students
There are a number of different sub-skills which students will need to be able to successfully and effectively participate in a group discussion. Students need to develop the ability to:

Analyze
This skill can be developed by giving students the topic individually and asking them to brainstorm or mind-map all of the possible sub-topics they could speak about. The students can then swap their notes and assess or analyse the relevance of each of the sub-topics their partner has included. Together, the students then draw up a fresh list or mind-map and discuss how the sub-topics might be linked together, along with examples or reasons for any arguments they might have.

Persuade
This skill comes in useful when students need to make decisions on how to do something (e.g. which candidate should get a job). A fun activity to develop this skill is to give groups of students this topic and ask them to decide on the profile of the perfect candidate, creating a list of 7 adjectives. The students are then re-grouped and asked to persuade the other members of the group that their selection is the best while compiling a second, negotiated list. The group members who retain the most from their original lists are the winners. Note down useful phrases that you hear the students using while doing this task and discuss these at the end for future reference.

Control emotions
This can be practised by giving the students a fairly controversial topic, such as ‘Friends are more important than family’ and asking the students to decide whether they agree, disagree or have no opinion, making notes on their main arguments to support their viewpoint. Divide the students into groups ensuring that there is a mix of views within each group. Explain that for this discussion, the aim is to keep their voices low and try to control their emotions as far as possible. Monitor and give feedback on these areas.

Support
One of the most important things for this skill is for students to learn when it is and isn’t appropriate to interrupt and how to do it. Very often students will talk over each other in an effort to get their point across and forget to listen.

To practise this, you can get your students to make a list in small groups of when it is and isn’t appropriate to interrupt other speakers. They should include things like ‘not appropriate during the middle of a point, if the speaker has not said very much previously, or when you are feeling angry and liable to say something you’ll regret’. It is appropriate when the speaker has been dominating the discussion for too long, what the speaker is saying is completely irrelevant to the topic, or you don’t understand the point he / she has made’.

You can then give them or elicit a list of phrases which they might use to interrupt politely (e.g. ‘Can I just add something here?’, ‘Sorry I’d just like to clarify something,’ etc.) The students then write five of these on slips of paper (one per slip) and have a group discussion on a given topic. The aim is to use all of the language on their slips. When they have used a phrase, they put the slip in the middle of the table. The other students in the group judge whether the interruption was appropriate / polite. If not, they take the slip back and try again.
**Use functional language**

Depending on the types of group discussions that you plan to do with your class, it is useful to draw up a list of useful functional language for the students to refer to. This could include phrases for functions such as ‘Giving reasons’, ‘Giving your opinion’, ‘Agreeing and disagreeing’, etc. You can either make up the list yourself and distribute it or get the students to do this. For each group discussion, you can then refer them to the appropriate section of the list and give them a few moments to consider the language before beginning the discussion.