

Teaching Debate Skills to Intermediate and Lower Level EFL Students

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Abstract

Teaching debate skills to East Asian EFL students presents a unique set of challenges. Aside from the fact that debate is a sophisticated form of interactive discourse (which can even challenge many native speakers) debating could be construed as "mission impossible" from a cultural perspective. Because debate is built upon disagreement, it could be seen as imposing an adversarial, individualistic communication style on learners who value more harmonious, non-adversarial types of interaction. Yet, if presented carefully and systematically, debate skills can be effectively taught, leading to enlightening and enriching learning experience. This paper examines the teaching of debate skills to a large, multi-level university EFL class. Activities are described that encourage students to discover, support, and organize their own opinions, as well as refuting and challenging the opinions of others. Suggestions are also offered for providing linguistic and conceptual support.

Introduction

It is becoming more common to introduce debate skills into East Asian university EFL programs, as the value of such courses is increasingly acknowledged. Credited with enhancing both linguistic and critical thinking skills, debate classes are in greater demand than ever before. Yet, many challenges exist in the implementation of such courses, not the least of which is the lack of materials available which are designed to suit the needs of EFL learners. Coupled with this is the issue of teaching situations involving large, multi-level classes. But perhaps the greatest challenges lie in cultural constraints, and in the nature of debate itself, which is an advanced form of discourse, mastery of which is often elusive even for native speakers. This paper will offer a rationale for the teaching of debate, even under challenging circumstances, and will suggest practical approaches for overcoming challenges in order to enable students to formulate opinions, develop reasons and evidence, offer refutations, and ultimately participate in the debate process.

Mission Impossible?

Debate has been described as a highly "*sophisticated form of immediate, interactive communication . . . (which) assumes a high level of discourse skill*" (Lubetsky, LeBeau, Harrington, 2000). It involves a complexity that extends far beyond the level of ordinary conversation, demanding active and critical listening, as well as advanced linguistic

competency and critical thinking. Critical thinking, defined by Day (2003) as "*the evaluation of the worth, accuracy, or authenticity*" of information, is essential to the debate process, yet does not fit easily into the East Asian cultural context. It could be argued that because debate is built upon disagreement and critical thinking, it imposes an adversarial, individualistic style of communication on learners who are more accustomed to a harmonious, group-oriented communication style. However, studies have also shown that, given the tools and the opportunity, East Asian students are open to new and different ways of thinking and communicating (Day, 2003). Other challenges involve EFL practitioners finding themselves with large multi-level debate classes, in which they are forced to search for ways to include all students, ensure success experiences for all students, and tailor the material to student needs and not vice versa. Therefore, the advanced nature of debate skills, the cultural constraints involved in critical thinking, the challenges of large, multi-level classes, and the lack of availability of materials lead some to ask if the teaching of debate in East Asian EFL contexts is indeed *mission impossible*?

Rationale

Despite the above challenges, many still espouse the value of teaching debate. Krieger (2005) acknowledges the usefulness of debate in language learning because it "*engages students in a variety of cognitive and linguistic ways*" (p.1). Aside from the fact that debate greatly enhances speaking ability, it also promotes effective listening, reading, and writing. Prior to engaging in debates, students must research a particular topic, and employ skimming, scanning, and critical reading skills to select evidence that supports their arguments. Engaging in actual debates requires active and critical listening, as each team listens to the opposing team's arguments, and formulates refutations. This also enhances L2 writing, as students take notes, and write persuasive, argumentative speeches. Kreiger (2005) refers to the capacity of debate to foster "*argumentation skills for persuasive speech and writing.*" It follows that debate also has the potential to enhance critical thinking skills including analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, as these are essential components in the formulation of refutations. Nesbett (2003) recognizes the value of debate in enabling "*analytic thinking skills . . . and self-conscious reflection on the validity of one's ideas*" (p. 210) while Davidson (1996) found that "*many students show obvious progress in their ability to express and defend ideas . . . and recognizing the flaws in each others' arguments.*" Debate can even address cultural concerns. In a debate study conducted with Japanese students, Fukuda (2003) discovered a marked increase in the number of students who were comfortable expressing viewpoints that differed from those of others. He attributes this to the fact that "*the knowledge or skills which came from the practice in the debates led the students to become more accustomed to*

expressing opinions."

Teaching Debate

The Debate Metaphor

Because debate, by its very nature, is an abstract concept, it is useful to consider metaphor to aid students' comprehension. To this end, Lubetsky et al. (2000) suggest utilizing a "*debate house metaphor*." They compare debate to a house, with the topic or resolution forming the roof. This is, in turn, supported by pillars or reasons, "*and the entire house rests on a foundation of evidence*." The metaphor is extended to reflect the dynamics of the debate process. A strong debate case, like a well-constructed house, with a firm foundation of reasons and evidence, will withstand attacks. A poorly-constructed debate case, like a poorly constructed house, will collapse if subjected to attack or adverse conditions. Building refutations is likened to attacking the affirmative house and rebuilding a negative house. Thus, the debate pattern follows the pattern: construct, attack, rebuild.

Formulating Opinions

When teaching debate to intermediate and lower level classes, it is essential to employ a step-by-step, or scaffolding approach. Rather than overwhelming students with the complex rhetorical structure of debate speeches, it is best to start with the simple process of formulating and becoming aware of their own opinions. The following is an activity adapted from Lubetsky et al. (2000) which seeks to facilitate the formulation of opinions.

Agree/Disagree Activity

- (1) Before class, the teacher prepares a list of opinions (preferably related to the students' cultural context) as well as "I agree" and "I disagree" signs. The signs are placed on opposite walls of the classroom.
- (2) Students are instructed to stand in the center of the classroom, midway between the two signs.
- (3) As the teacher reads each opinion, students go to the side of the room that reflects their agreement or disagreement with the opinion.
- (4) As the activity progresses, students may be paired off with students from the opposite side of the room, to discuss reasons for agreement and/or disagreement.

In the above activity, topics can range from the trivial "Chocolate tastes better than ice cream" to the controversial "Japan should allow a woman to become emperor." This pairwork activity

is a useful and non-threatening first step in debate participation.

At this stage in the process, it is useful to introduce students to the three different types of opinions as defined by Lubetsky et al. (2000).

- Opinions of value: X is better than Y (Ex. Soccer is more exciting than baseball)
- Opinions of policy: X should do Y (Ex. The university should ban smoking on campus.)
- Opinions of fact: X is/was/will be true (Ex. There is life on other planets).

To check students' comprehension, especially in large classes, it is worthwhile to have each student make a "Value" sign, a "Policy" sign, and a "Fact" sign. Then, as the teacher reads a list of opinions, students hold up the appropriate sign. This "Show me the Sign" activity may be used at many stages of the debate course (especially in large classes) to facilitate whole-class involvement; and to provide immediate feedback to the teacher of general comprehension.

Students should also be provided with linguistic support at each stage of the process. In this case, opinions may be introduced by "opinion indicators" (Krieger, 2005). Examples of opinion indicators include "I think that . . . ," "I feel that . . . ," "I believe that . . . ," etc. The corresponding responses, such as "I agree that . . . ," "I disagree that . . . ," "Me too.," "Not me.," etc. should also be introduced at this point.

Reasons for Opinions

The next step in building a debate case is the construction of the "pillars" or reasons for opinions. Lubetsky et al. (2000) define a good reason as one which logically supports the opinion; is specific and clear; and is convincing to a majority of people. The teacher may then generate a multiple choice activity that requires students to select the best reasons from a list of choices. For example:

Opinion: It is better to eat fish than to eat beef.

- (a) because fish are prettier than cows
- (b) because fish is my favourite food
- (c) because fish is healthier and more nutritious than beef

Utilizing the above criteria, students may be guided to reject choice (a) as it does not logically

support the opinion, and choice (b) as it is not convincing to a majority of people. On the other hand, choice (c) meets all three criteria. Students may then be introduced to different types of reasons, such as comparison, contrast, and cause/effect relationships, after which, they should be prepared to practice brainstorming and giving reasons for opinions in pairs and small groups.

Collecting Evidence

The final step in building a debate case is the laying of the foundation for the entire case. This evidence or support (adapted from Lubetsky et al., 2000) may fall into four categories:

- Example: A subjective or specific illustration from a personal perspective
- Explanation: Elaborating on the reason
- Expert opinion: The opinion of a knowledgeable person, organization. or publication
- Statistic: The use of numbers or data to back up the reason

Presenting the accompanying language enables students to identify each type of evidence as well as to express it in the context of a debate speech later. In the following example, the identifying language is italicized.

Opinion: It is better to have a large car than a small car.

Reason: Large cars are more useful than small cars.

Supports:

1. Because you can fit more things in large cars than in small cars (*explanation*)
2. For example, when my friend goes on vacation, he can fit all his luggage and his family into his large car (*example*).
3. According to the American Automobile Association, large cars can save you money over public transportation costs (*expert opinion*).
4. 7 out of 10 people say they prefer large cars over small cars because they can put many things in them (*statistic*).

To check comprehension of the types of evidence, the "Show me the Sign" activity mentioned above may be used, with "example", "explanation", "statistic", and "expert opinion" signs. Students should then be more prepared to research debate topics using books, newspapers, and/or the internet, searching for evidence that fits the above categories.

Affirmative Speeches

At this stage in the process, students should be ready to practice assembling affirmative speeches and building their debate case. Use of a visual such as the "debate house" planning sheet found in Lubetsky et al. (2000) offers a concrete organizational support for students when planning their speeches. Once the key concepts are in place, a suitable linguistic framework should be offered, enabling students to construct their arguments. An example of a first affirmative constructive speech is provided in Appendix 1.

Refutations

Refutations, because of the critical thinking involved therein, are arguably the most valuable part of the debate experience. Drawing heavily on logical and analytical reasoning skills, refutation requires a reorientation of thought processes, and perspectives. In this way, refutation is an invaluable tool in stimulating creative and evaluative thought, opening the mind in unique ways in the process. It is worth ensuring that students obtain the maximum benefit from this aspect of the debate, and in a way that is culturally appropriate. An activity developed by Kreiger (2005) is especially useful for this purpose. Entitled, "*The Devils' Advocate*", the process is as follows:

- (1) Students are given a resolution on any topic.
- (2) Students have two minutes to argue one side of the resolution.
- (3) When they hear "Switch", students then have two minutes to argue the opposite side of the resolution.
- (4) Repeat steps 1-3 with a variety of topics.

This activity is also useful for preparing students to anticipate and preparing for opposing points of view during an actual debate.

Conceptual and linguistic support should also be offered. The following framework (adapted from Lubetsky et al., 2000) is helpful for students to learn the refutation process. Opposing team's arguments may be categorized as:

(1) Not True

- not true
- not always true
- not necessarily true

(2) Not important

- not relevant
- not significant
- easy to solve.

This is another situation where students may engage in the "Show me the Sign" activity, to maximize involvement, and to check comprehension. For example:

Opinion: Moisturizer X is better than moisturizer Y.

Reason: Moisturizer X costs less than moisturizer Y.

Refutation: That is true, but not important, because cost has nothing to do with the effectiveness of the moisturizer.

Students should also be exposed to the idea of challenging evidence by questioning sources, dates, statistics, and expert opinions, as well as detecting bias.

Debates

Once students have been introduced to the basics of formulating opinions, reasons, and evidence, as well as simple refutations, it is time for them to practice debate. Throughout the process, pairwork and groupwork should be employed to familiarize them with the art of face to face discussion and debate. This in itself, demystifies the process and facilitates greater ease with a more formal debate structure. Informal two-on-two debates should be practiced regularly in class on an ongoing basis.

Negative constructive speeches are longer and more complex than affirmative speeches. However, because they build upon the basic structure of affirmative speeches, they should not pose any major problems. Once students are familiar with the "introduction, affirmative points, conclusion" format of the affirmative speech, the negative speech may be structured in the same way. Lubetsky et al. (2000) suggest the following format for affirmative and negative speeches:

Affirmative

- Introduction
- Affirmative points
- Conclusion

Negative

- Introduction
- Refutations
- Transition
- Negative Points
- Conclusion

A sample negative constructive speech is included in Appendix 2.

Intermediate and lower-level students need considerable support in preparing for their debates. This teacher divided the class of 50 into ten teams of five. Students with more advanced English competency were assigned as team leaders. Each team then drew a resolution from a box and used it to prepare their affirmative constructive speech. At least one 90-minute class period is necessary for this process. When the affirmative speeches were completed, each team then chose its negative topic (i.e. the resolution they were to argue against). Copies of affirmative speeches were then distributed to the corresponding negative team, who in turn, prepared their negative speeches. This also requires at least one 90-minute class period. Advance preparation such as this allows students to become comfortable with their topics, and prepare their arguments in advance, a feature that is key to the success of intermediate and lower-level students when participating in debate.

While a variety of formats may be employed in formal debates, it is this teacher's view that intermediate and lower-level students benefit most from a less formal, more flexible structure. Therefore, teams of 3 to 5 may flexibly utilize the following format:

- (1) First affirmative constructive speech.
- (2) First negative constructive speech
- (3) The affirmative rebuttal
- (4) The negative rebuttal
- (5) Affirmative closing comments
- (6) Negative closing comments

It is important to point out that steps 3 and 4 may be repeated if necessary, and if the debate gains momentum. Judging by the teacher may be counterproductive for intermediate and lower-level students. However, it is beneficial to have the other students complete evaluation forms, stating which team they believe won the debate and why. In this teachers' class, students were evaluated on their performance in the formal debate, but were also given credit for each step of the preparation process, and for their evaluation of other students' debates. A sample student evaluation form is included in Appendix 3.

As regards choice of topics for intermediate and lower level students, Lubetsky et al. (2000) suggest selecting simple topics so as not to overwhelm learners by focusing on both content (issues) and form (debate skills). However, it could also be argued that complex issues that students care about should be introduced, as there is a greater likelihood that students will make an extra effort to communicate strongly-held viewpoints. Regardless, it is paramount to

engage students with stimulating, interesting topics that intrinsically motivate them to express their point of view.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to encourage the teaching of debate skills, even under adverse circumstances and to suggest practical approaches for overcoming challenges such as teaching large multi-level classes, and dealing with cultural constraints. Suggestions were offered to assist students in formulating opinions, developing reasons and evidence, offering refutations, and participating in debates. However, the value of teaching debate to EFL students extends beyond the acquisition of debate competency. Stewart & Pleisch (1998) see debate as "a means for developing language fluency and academic study skills, rather than as an end in itself" (p.1). They also highlight its value in promoting teamwork, cooperation, and critical thinking. This is culturally appropriate especially in collectivist East Asian cultures, and offers an antidote to the confrontational nature of debate. Finally, since debate teaches students to examine and argue both sides of issues, there is enormous potential for instilling tolerance, understanding, and open-mindedness, qualities that contribute to the benefit of society at large. Lubetsky et al. (2000) summarize the value of debate effectively by misquoting Confucius: "*Give your students an issue and you feed them for a day. Teach them debate skills, and you feed them for life.*"

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Appendix 1 - Sample First Affirmative Constructive Speech (Adapted from Lubetsky et al., 2000)

Thank you, Ladies and Gentlemen. Today, we are debating the resolution Smoking should be banned in public places. We, on the affirmative team, strongly support this resolution. We have 3 reasons: public health, consideration, and example.

Our first point is public health. It is common knowledge that smoking is dangerous for non-smokers as well as smokers. For example, Christopher Reeve's wife, Dana, died from lung cancer even though she never smoked cigarettes. This is because of second hand smoking. People in restaurants, shops, and many public places run the risk of meeting the same fate if smoking is permitted.

Our second point is consideration. Many people really dislike the smell of smoke. It is common courtesy to not force people to smell smoke and to deal with the smell on their clothes.

Our third point is example. Children everywhere are very impressionable. It is irresponsible to set a bad example for them by smoking when they are not mature enough to make judgments for themselves.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we have talked about public health, consideration, and example, and have shown that smoking should be banned in public places. For these reasons, we beg to propose.

Appendix 2 - Sample Negative Constructive Speech (Adapted from Lubetsky et al., 2000)

Thank you, Ladies and Gentlemen. Today, we are debating the resolution Smoking should be banned in public places. We, on the negative team, strongly oppose this resolution. First, we will refute the affirmative points. Then we will give the negative points.

Their first point was public health. They said that smoking is dangerous for non-smokers as well as smokers. This is not necessarily true. Many people are exposed to second-hand smoke all their lives, and suffer no ill-effects.

Their second point was consideration. They said that smoking should be banned because many people dislike the smell of smoke. This is easy to solve, as many restaurants and public places offer smoking and non-smoking sections. People who don't like the smell of smoke should sit in the non-smoking areas.

Their third point was example. They said that smoking sets a bad example for children. This is easy to solve if parents take responsibility for teaching their children healthy habits when they are growing up.

We have refuted the affirmative points. We will now give the negative points.

Our first point is free choice. People everywhere should have the right to choose their own behavior, and not be restricted by others.

Our second point is economic impact. Many restaurants, bars, and public places will lose customers if smoking is banned. This will result in many businesses losing money and profits, which will hurt the economy.

Our third point is stress. Many people smoke due to stress and it helps them to reduce their stress so that they don't take it out on their families.

We have talked about free choice, economic impact, and stress, and have shown that smoking should not be banned in public places. For these reasons, we beg to oppose.

Appendix 3 - Student Evaluation Form

Name: _____ Date: _____

Team: _____

Affirmative resolution: _____

Negative resolution: _____

_____ In-class preparation (5 points possible)

- writing speeches
- working with your group

_____ Affirmative Team Performance (6 points possible)

- matter (logical, making sense)
- manner (clear, loud enough, easy to understand)
- method (well organized)

_____ Negative Team Performance (6 points possible)

- matter (logical, making sense)
- manner (clear, loud enough, easy to understand)
- method (well organized)

_____ Audience Judging forms (8 points possible)

_____ Debate 1

_____ Debate 2

_____ Debate 3

_____ Debate 4

_____ Debate 5

_____ Debate 6

_____ Debate 7

_____ Debate 8

_____ Debate 9

_____ Debate 10

