

## *Using Debate in the EFL/ESL Classroom*

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### **Abstract**

This paper discusses debate as a tool for language learning in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom. It defines the procedure of an academic debate, demonstrates the usefulness of debate, examines common problems with conducting debate in a classroom setting, and provides guidance on overcoming those problems. The basis for this paper is a debate curriculum taught over one term to second year students in a high level academic high school in Japan.

Key Words: Classroom Debate  
EFL  
Critical Thinking

## 1. Introduction

Debate is often used in students' native language courses to enhance their communicative critical thinking skills. While there are numerous definitions of critical thinking, some of its core tenants are: the ability to listen and observe, ask questions, question the validity of evidence, and prepare persuasive arguments using evidence.<sup>1,2</sup> Debate in a foreign language, however, is rare due to the time required and the skill level necessary to debate competently. There are numerous lesson plans available for simple debates/discussions in the English classroom, however few, if any of these debates resemble a true academic debate. While all communication activities in the English classroom are welcome, academic debate helps to build advanced skills and, as such, should be practiced more often.

## 2. Benefits of debate in the EFL classroom

English debate provides students with a chance to communicate using academic English in a structured manner. Rather than simply absorbing information, debate requires students to actively apply information in a meaningful way.<sup>3</sup> The key element of a debate is the back and forth between teams. It is impossible to completely prepare for a debate and, as such, students must use English spontaneously. This spontaneous use of English helps to build both oral communication and critical thinking skills.<sup>4</sup> Debate is also holistic as it provides students with a chance to practice all language skills. Reading and writing are practiced in the preparation stage and speaking and listening are practiced in the demonstration stage. By using these skills simultaneously, students are able to make full use of their English ability. Furthermore, it has been argued that specifically in the context of EFL where learners lack adequate opportunities to use English in a meaningful way, debate provides them with the opportunity to argue and reason in English.<sup>5</sup>

## 3. Academic Debate Procedure

For the sake of this paper, an academic debate will be defined as a competition between two teams, each arguing for a different side of a given resolution about a social issue. It consists of the following phases:

- 1) Constructive Speech – The main speech in which a team outlines their arguments. Students have time to research and write their speeches beforehand.
- 2) Cross Examination – A period of question and answers in which a team seeks clarification about the content of the opposing team's speech or seeks more information about data, sources, etc.
- 3) Attack – A period in which teams make attack statements about the weak points in the opposing team's speech.
- 4) Rebuttal – A period in which teams respond to attacks.
- 5) Summary – A period in which teams review the content of the debate and give their final statements.

## 4. Common Problems

### 1) Listening comprehension

Possibly the largest obstacle students face when conducting debate in English is listening comprehension. In order to debate properly, students must be able to listen and understand the statements made by the other team during their speech, cross examination, attack, and rebuttal phases. Most students, however, have difficulty effectively picking up key words from their opponents.

The first reason is the nature of most listening practice that they have experienced. A vast majority of listening activities done in the EFL/ESL classroom are targeted towards everyday conversation with simple themes. As such, when students are faced with spoken academic English, they are unable to grasp key details as the style of English is so different.

The second reason is the students own vocabulary level. In an academic debate, specifically one themed around a social issue, there are many difficult terms and phrases that many students have yet to come across in their studies. These terms are often essential for discussing the topic at hand and, as such, it is difficult for students to carry on a debate without a general knowledge of them.

The third reason is the speaking ability of the opposing team. Even if the listener has a generally high level of comprehension, if the speaker is unable to properly pronounce certain words or if the speaker makes grammatical mistakes, the listener is unable to take in what is being said.

## 2) Developing meaningful questions

During cross examination, many students are unable to develop meaningful questions. This partly stems from their problems with listening comprehension. If students are unable to completely understand their opponents' speech, they tend to focus most of their questions on clarifying what was already said instead of asking for more information. A larger issue, however, is students' inability to form questions in general. Even outside of the context of debate, most students have trouble asking questions in English.

## 3) Working within a time limit

The last major obstacle to students conducting debate in English is the inherent time constraint that students face. Students generally agonize over choosing the right words or phrases while they are speaking. As such, they often spend too much time consulting dictionaries and trying to translate their ideas from Japanese to English. Of course this is natural; however it hurts their performance during a debate.

## 5. Possible Solutions

### 1) Pre-teach terms and phrases related to both the topic and debate in general

If all students are given a general pool of terms and phrases to pull from, they will each have equal footing when it comes to conducting debate. As stated previously, debate often requires using specialized terms that many students have yet to learn. If they are taught these terms ahead of time, we can easily solve this problem.

### 2) Provide ample time for practice and give feedback

It is not enough to simply teach students how to do each step of debate. They must also be given time to practice the skills they learn. By letting students practice in a controlled environment with low stakes, they can become more comfortable with debating in English and speaking in academic English.

Practicing often, also allows students to slowly build their skills. If students initially have trouble performing within the given time limit, they should be allowed longer time limits in practice rounds that become shorter over time (for instance providing them with 4 minutes for cross examination during the first practice, 3 minutes during the second practice, 2 minutes during

the third, and so on).

Finally, if students receive feedback during each practice session about what they did well and what they could improve, they have chances to fix common mistakes before their final debate performance.

### 3) Provide students with samples and easy to follow formats

Students should be provided with samples for each stage of a debate. By looking at sample scripts or even watching a demonstration of a debate, students can pick up certain words, phrases, and tactics that they can adapt to their own debate performance. Additionally, if students are provided with a format for each section of a debate, we can eliminate the problems students face with structuring their statements. While this does make debates somewhat predictable, it also serves to level the playing field for students with lower levels of English.

## 6. Conclusion

Using debate to reinforce and practice English skills is particularly useful for students in their mid to late teens. It not only provides them with a chance to consolidate their English skills, but also a chance to develop new ones such as improvisation and critical thinking in English. If students continue to practice debate, we could see a marked improvement in their overall communicative ability.

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この論文では、EFL（外国語としての英語）のためのツールとしての議論が議論されています。この論文は、議論の有用性を実証し、学問的な議論の手順を定義し、教室で議論を行う際の一般的な問題を検討し、可能な解決策を提示する。このペーパーの基礎は、日本の高等学校の高等学校の1学期から2学年の学生に対して討議される討論カリキュラムです。