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Moving Forward in Debate: Helping Students Advance beyond the Basics

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[Abstract]

Debate is a popular and useful activity in EFL classrooms. It can be included as an activity alongside others, or it can be taught as a course in itself. Debate activities foster not only speaking and listening skills, but also teamwork, research, organizing, and critical thinking skills. However, much of the teaching material directed at EFL learners focuses on the process and format of debate speeches so that students' attention centers on the mechanics of debate. On the other hand, material written for native speakers or competitive debaters is too advanced for most EFL students still struggling to master the basic speeches. The purpose of this paper is to offer some suggestions for ways to assist students who are becoming accustomed to debating and are ready to start advancing. These suggestions fall under the following categories: teamwork, staying organized, using a variety of refutations, anticipating the other side's case, holistic reasoning, developing a strategy, and finishing strong.

I. Background & Introduction

Debate is not new to the EFL classroom, but it seems to be getting more attention in recent years as a useful activity for promoting both language and critical thinking skills. Debate can be used in EFL classes at levels ranging from junior high school to high school to university (Baker, 2009; Manning & Nakamura, 2006; Krieger, 2005). In the case of Japan, debate was explicitly included in the course description for Oral Communication C in the high school curriculum guidelines that were implemented in 1993 (Inoue, 1998).

In 1995, debate was first included as a module within the English Discussion classes at Hokusei Gakuen University based on Le (1995). Due to the popularity and effectiveness of this module, beginning in the 2003 curriculum, an English Debate class was first offered to fourth-year English majors as an elective. Beginning in 2015, that class was made available to third-year students as well. The primary text for this class has been the textbook *Discover Debate* (Lubetsky, LeBeau, & Harrington, 2000).

Key words : Debate, EFL, classroom

While this textbook is a fine tool for introducing the basic format and procedure of debate, students still struggle. They struggle first to gain competence with the procedure and the functions of the speeches: the points, the refutations, the defenses, and the rebuttals. They struggle with the special words and expressions, and they struggle with the parts of the speeches: the introduction, signposts, transitions, body, and conclusion. Nevertheless, through practice, eventually they do gain competence. They grow comfortable with the format and can follow the procedure as it becomes a familiar pattern. Unfortunately, the pattern can become too familiar and the debates run the danger of becoming stale and clichéd. There comes a point when students are ready for more than format, procedure and a script to follow. There comes a time when they can start thinking about strategy and different ways of making their cases stronger and of attacking the opposing team.

As Stewart and Pleisch (1998) observed, however, much of the information available for both teachers and students of EFL classroom debate focuses on style, procedure, and format. Unsurprisingly then, much of the class time is spent learning the forms, procedures and language of debate rather than focusing on the reasoning and thinking skills that are the real goals of debate (Hansen, 2007).

On the other hand, materials available for high school and college level debaters in their native language, not EFL learners, is excessively dense, detailed, and beyond reach in terms of both language skills and debating experience and ability. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to help bridge the gap between materials that teach beginning EFL debaters the forms and procedures of debate and those materials that are more appropriate for competitive debaters by offering some suggestions and recommendations to help beginning debaters start developing into better debaters

II. Teamwork

Unless students are engaged in a one-on-one Lincoln-Douglas style format, they will be working on a team. Working on a team is a good chance to develop leadership skills, open-mindedness, teamwork, and cooperation (Goodnight, 1993). One point to be considered is the responsibility for the various speeches of the debate. Since the earlier speeches of the debate tend to be more prepared and less subject to changes in response to the opposing team, students with weaker language skills will have an easier time speaking early in the debate and those with stronger language skills can take the later speeches (Le, 1995). In general, the team leader should be the student who is most familiar with the topic and has the better language and debate skills (Gillespie, n.d.).

During the debate, it is important for team members to show support for their partners. Team members should appear engaged with what their partner is saying and respond with non-verbal actions such as nodding in agreement (Gillespie, n.d.). Many student debaters are understandably nervous about their own up-coming speeches, become absorbed with preparation of their own speeches, and appear to neglect or ignore their own partners when

they are speaking. While it is important to continue flowing the debate and to take notes, non-speaking members still need to show support for their partners. When students are practicing debate, especially in the early stages, teachers may even choose to allow team members to assist their partners verbally when it appears they are struggling.

III. Staying organized

One of the most difficult aspects of debate is staying organized. The fluid nature of debate means that students must constantly be revising their cases in response to the opposing team. Doing this in a language other than one's own native language makes it that much more potentially confusing. Therefore, students should be encouraged to use no more than three points to support their case (The 9 Principles, 2002). These points "should be clearly stated, explained, and illustrated" (Harvey-Smith, 2011, p. 47). In addition to using signposts, as explained in Lubetsky, LeBeau, & Harrington (2000), points, refutations, and responses should be numbered and presented in outline form (Gillespie, n.d.): "I have three points," "We have one response," "Their second point was..."

Perhaps the most valuable tool in staying organized is the skill of flowing a debate; the process of taking notes during the debate. Students often become overwhelmed keeping track of information in a debate. One way for students to practice flowing is the Single Point Debate. In this exercise, students practice the complete debate, but each team makes and defends only one point. The point of this exercise, of course, is not to make the strongest case but to become accustomed to following one point from beginning to end.

Another way to simplify a debate is to separate the reasons, refutations, and defenses into separate speeches. The first affirmative is already like this as it consists of only the affirmative points. Before giving the first negative constructive and subsequent speeches that combine refutations, reasons, and defenses, students can give them in separate speeches:

1. Affirmative reasons
2. Negative reasons
3. Affirmative refutations
4. Negative refutations
5. Affirmative defense
6. Negative defense

Finally, Cheshier (2000) has a list of 25 tips to improve flowing. Below are six that may be most helpful for EFL debaters.

- Use different pieces of paper (or cards) for different points instead of trying to keep the whole debate on one sheet of paper.
- Use different colors for points, refutations, responses, etc.
- Spread the information out on the flowsheet.
- Write down as much as possible.

- Develop your own abbreviations and shorthand.
- Don't talk to your partner while your opponent is talking.

IV. Using a Variety of Refutations

Lubetsky, LeBeau, & Harrington (2000) introduce six types of refutation: not true, not always true, not necessarily true, not relevant, not significant, and easy to solve. Students need to be encouraged to use a variety of refutations when preparing and practicing debate. They should particularly be encouraged to avoid over-reliance on "That's true, but..." type refutations and to find a real weakness with the opposing team's points.

Two additional techniques are introduced in Lubetsky (1997). One is demonstrating that a point is in disagreement with other points. If one team says that exercise is good because it helps people lose weight and work up an appetite, we can see that working up an appetite is not helpful for losing weight. The second technique is called "flipping" and is used to show that the opposing team's point actually supports one's own case more strongly. For example, if the affirmative team is arguing that cats are better pets than dogs because cats don't need to be walked every day, the negative team can respond that spending time with one's pet is part of the appeal of owning a pet. Being able to take one's dog for a walk, then, is actually a good thing.

Students will probably need a lot of practice before becoming comfortable with and skilled at making refutations. Isolating the practice of making refutations can be done in a method similar to tennis debate. Have two teams decide on a resolution and come up with their points. Then, the two teams sit across from each other and one member of the affirmative team states the team's first point. A member of the negative team then refutes that point as quickly as possible. Then a member of the negative gives the first point for the negative team, and a member of the affirmative team refutes that point as quickly as possible. The two teams continue until all of the points have been refuted. The students should be encouraged to use a variety of refutations or possibly a different type of refutation each time.

V. Anticipating the Other Side's Case

While students in the EFL classroom are still developing their basic debate skills, they should be given plenty of time to prepare since this will make the debate itself go more smoothly. During this time, students should be encouraged to think of not only their own reasons and supports but to anticipate the opposing team's reasons as well. If team members can see and understand the resolution from both sides, they will be able to anticipate what reasons the opposing team may use. This will enable them to prepare possible refutations in advance (Snider & Schnurer, 2002; The 9 Principles, 2002).

VI. Holistic Reasoning

As noted above, much of the material designed for introducing debate into the EFL classroom focuses on the format of debate. Furthermore, much of that material centers on point-by-point reasoning, that is, how teams construct cases around individual points and how they refute the individual points of the opposing team. Lubetsky (1997) introduces another kind of reasoning called “holistic reasoning” (p. 56).

In holistic reasoning, the points are connected within a logical framework so that they work as a complete system. To do this, students need to consider key questions about the issues and values related to the case. For example, if debating a resolution on the need for school uniforms in high school, students might consider questions about the purpose of high school, the need for rules, and the role of education in society. The answers to these questions will help them construct a case that addresses these questions. Point-by-point reasoning and holistic reasoning can exist in the same debate and even in the same speeches (Lubetsky, 1997).

Another way to tie points together is to think of telling a story (The 12 Best, n.d.). Students can and should use examples from real life and experiences that illustrate their points and tie them together around a central value. Browne & Keeley (1998) discuss the importance of value assumptions and value conflicts in analyzing arguments. Debate cases may revolve around a value conflict, for example *loyalty* vs *honesty*. Should a sister tell her parents that her brother was caught cheating on a test at school? The value of *loyalty* would suggest “no,” while the value of *honesty* would suggest “yes.” If students can identify the key value (s) connected to the case, they can use that to tell their “story” and connect their points in a holistic manner.

VII. Developing a Strategy

A great deal has been written about debate strategy, but much of this is targeted at high school and college debaters who already have experience with debate. For the beginning EFL classroom debaters, too much strategy would be overwhelming, so what follows are some basic guidelines to get them started thinking about strategy in addition to the ideas related to holistic reasoning explained above.

The affirmative team, in addition to stating the resolution, has the opportunity to define any unclear terms. For the resolution, “All students should study English at school,” the vague terms are *all students* and *school*. Therefore, the affirmative could clarify that *all students* refers to *elementary school students in Japan*, and *school* refers to *elementary school grades 4 and 5*. This is a significant opportunity for the affirmative team and should not be ignored.

When debating a proposition of policy, the affirmative team should clearly establish a need for a change in the status quo since that is one of the requirements for such a proposition. The suggested change should be a practical and realistic one (Ericson, Murphy, & Zeuschner,

1987; Goodnight, 1994). While the affirmative team should show a need for a change and the benefits of such a change, it is not necessary to propose a particular plan, which they would then need to defend (Gillespie, n.d.).

The negative team has a number of options to consider when thinking about strategy. They may use straight refutation of each of the affirmative points, show the disadvantages of the affirmative change, point out the impracticality of making such a change, show that the affirmative's proposal will create new or worse problems, defend the status quo, offer an alternative solution, or a combination of these options (Ericson, Murphy, & Zeuschner, 1987; Goodnight, 1994).

There is much more to say about strategy, of course, and the interested reader may wish to consult Ericson, Murphy, & Zeuschner (1987) and Goodnight (1994) as good starting points to a deeper understanding of strategy.

VIII. Finishing Strong

The final two speeches of the debate, the rebuttals, are critical to winning a debate, yet they seem to confuse beginning EFL debaters. First, the rebuttal speeches are generally shorter than the constructive speeches, therefore the speakers must use their time well to explain to the judges explicitly why they have won the debate and the other side has lost (Lubetsky, 1997). In the rebuttal speeches, speakers must summarize only what was introduced in the constructive arguments—the reasons, refutations and responses—and are not allowed to introduce any new reasons, points, or arguments (Ericson, Murphy, & Zeuschner, 1987). Speakers should take this chance to emphasize the important strengths of their own argument and the weaknesses of the opposing side (The 9 Principles, 2002). Additionally, instead of simply repeating what has already been said in the constructive speeches, rebuttal speeches should demonstrate why each case is stronger than the opposition (American Parliamentary Debate Association, 2013). Finally, if the opposing team has not refuted, or dropped, any points, or if they offered vague points, reasons or definitions during the debate, the rebuttal speeches should point this out.

IX. Conclusion

Basic academic debate can contribute greatly to the EFL classroom. With adjustments, it can be used at a variety of levels to develop speaking and listening skills, notetaking skills, research skills, and brainstorming skills. It engenders teamwork, leadership and creativity. As Davidson (1996) has pointed out, it also develops critical thinking skills. Because students are debating assigned positions, they need not be embarrassed about defending their own personal opinions and this can help them overcome a reluctance to give their opinion in front of others (Matchett, 2012). Finally, many students find that participating in debate is fun and rewarding.

The recommendations in this paper are intended to help students who are learning the basic debate format and structure. This by itself is challenging, but eventually many students are ready to move beyond structure and start thinking about improving. While they may never reach the level of the advanced competitive debater, they can certainly benefit from these recommendations to improve and enjoy their classroom debates even more.

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