Basic Concepts for Teaching and Learning Debate

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Contents

I. Introduction

　　The word "debate" has a variety of meanings depending on the context.　The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2002) defines debate as 1) a formal discussion of an issue at a public meeting or in a parliament; and 2) an argument or discussion expressing different opinions.　When high school teachers have their students do "debate" it usually means "to freely express your opinion." When we see "debate" between politicians and pundits on daytime TV it very often means "a heated argument or shouting match." This paper will be concerned with a much more specific notion of "debate," one that we can consider as academic or parliamentary debate.

　　This kind of debate is a skill that can be taught at a surprisingly wide variety of language levels.　Debate can develop research ability, critical thinking skills, and public speaking skills (Ehnenger & Brockriede, 1978).　These skills can transfer to other academic activities such as small group discussion, writing academic papers, and giving presentations.　In order to encourage the teaching of this type of debate in a wide variety of language teaching contexts, this paper will describe the most important basic concepts of academic debate and show how they can be adapted to a wide variety of teaching/learning situations.

Key words: Debate, Discussion, Parliamentary, Communication

II.　What is academic debate?

Basically, an academic debate consists of two teams (affirmative and negative) debating a resolution/proposition (Goodnight, 1993).　The teams alternate giving speeches.　The speeches have time limits, as do the intervals.　The teams address their speeches to an audience and judges.　There is also a debate Chair and time keeper.　At the conclusion of the debate, the judges adjudicate the debate and declare a winner.　In short, an academic debate is a rule-governed affair that follows a regulated process of presenting logical arguments in the form of a competition.

III.　Resolution/Proposition

The debate focuses on a resolution, alternatively referred to as a proposition.　There are three basic types of resolutions: fact, value, and policy (Lubetsyky, 1997; Ericson et al., 1987). In debating a resolution of fact, the teams seek to prove the truth or falsity of the statement, such as, "The death penalty is an effective deterrent to crime" or "The defendant is guilty of murder." Because propositions of fact deal with past events, are limited to certain types of factual evidence, and are limited to a yes-no answer, they are rarely used in classroom debate-although they are, obviously, most commonly found in courtroom "debate" (Ericson et al., 1987).　Key words for this type of proposition are *is* or *was*.

Propositions of value seek to show that something is better or more desirable than something else, such as "Reading the book is better than watching the movie" or "Living in the country is better than living in the city." A problem with propositions of value is their subjective nature.　While they can produce lively and entertaining debates, criteria for what is most desirable in general must be established (Ericson et al., 1987).　Key words for this type of proposition are *better*, *more*, and adjectives of comparison.

Propositions of policy are the most common type of proposition (Le, 1995).　Propositions of value always deal with an action that brings about a change in the *status quo*, such as "The city should ban smoking on sidewalks" or "English should be taught in elementary schools." In this type of debate, the affirmative team will argue in favor of the proposed change, while the negative will argue in favor of the *status quo* or an alternative change.　The keyword for this type of proposition is *should*.

IV.　Teams: Affirmative & Negative

As we have already noted, a debate involves two teams, an affirmative team and a negative team.　The number of members on a team can vary from one to as many as four or five.　Likewise, the number of speeches allotted to each team can vary depending on the format, which will be discussed below.　However, for the sake of simplicity, we will look closely at a format used in the textbook *Discover Debate* (Lubetsky et al., 2000).

In this format, each team consists of three speakers.　Each speaker is given responsibility for one speech.　The debate begins with the First Affirmative Constructive Speech (1AC). This is followed by the First Negative Constructive speech (1NC).　The debate then returns to the Second Affirmative (2AC) and Second Negative Constructive (2NC) speeches respectively.　The debate then concludes with the Negative Rebuttal (NR) followed by the Affirmative Rebuttal (AR).

Each member of both teams is given responsibility for one of the speeches, although of course the team members work together in preparing the debate and deciding how to respond to the opposing team's arguments and attacks.　Each speech has a time limit that is strictly enforced by the Chair/time keeper.　There can also be an interval between speeches to allow each team to modify their prepared speeches after listening to the opposing team's speech.

In the First Affirmative Constructive speech (1AC) the affirmative has the opportunity to make the case by clarifying the proposition and defining any vague terms (Lubetsky, 1997). Also in the 1AC, the affirmative team will build the base of their argument by presenting their points, reasons, and evidence in favor of the proposition.

The First Negative Constructive speech (1NC) begins by refuting the affirmative points. Following this, the 1NC then builds the negative case in a similar manner to the 1AC.　In this first stage of the debate, both teams are laying the groundwork for their arguments: their main points, reasons, and the evidence that will support the case.

In the Second Constructive speeches, both teams continue to attack the opposing team's arguments by refuting the reasons and challenging the evidence presented.　They also defend against attacks and strengthen their own position with additional reasons and evidence. This is also a good opportunity to engage in holistic reasoning, which will be described below.

This three-part debate concludes with the Negative Rebuttal followed by the Affirmative Rebuttal.　Notice that in this format the negative team begins the rebuttals, while the affirmative team goes first in presenting the constructive speeches.　In the rebuttals, both teams summarize and analyze the arguments that have been presented in the debate, attempting to demonstrate that their own team has presented the stronger case.　During the rebuttals, the teams do not introduce any new reasons or evidence.

Ⅴ．Organization of Speeches

For new debaters, debating speeches can be difficult for two reasons.　First, they will need to deal with language problems.　The lower the level of the students, the bigger a problem this will be.　Beginning students, then, should be presented with a concrete template they can complete with the necessary expressions specific to their topic.　As students become more advanced, they can have more freedom in how they organize their speeches.

The second issue for beginning debaters will be how to organize the ideas and arguments of their speeches.　Again, a template or pattern can be helpful to get them started.

Lubetsky et al. (2000) discuss the 1AC in terms of macro and micro organization.　At the

macro level, the 1AC consists of an introduction, the points, and a conclusion. The number of points a team wishes to base their case on can vary, but a general rule of thumb is three to five. An argument with fewer than three points will tend to be weak. An argument with more than five points will be overly complicated and difficult for the audience and judges to follow.

VI. First Affirmative Constructive Speech: Building the Case

Now let's look at the micro organization of each of these parts of the 1AC. The introduction should contain a greeting, announce the resolution, state the team's position, and give the number of reasons/points and their names (signposts). For example:

> Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. Today we are debating the resolution, "School uniforms should be abolished." We, on the affirmative team, strongly support this resolution. We have three reasons: individuality, responsibility, and cost.

Next, the speaker introduces and explains each of the points. In order to keep this manageable for beginning debaters, it is useful to first give each point a name. This is known as a signpost (Lubetsky, 1997; Lubetsky et al., 2000). Ideally, a signpost should be one word, but if necessary can be a two or three-word phrase. Shorter is better as it is easier for the audience and judges to keep in mind.

Following the signpost is the reason or explanation of the point. Beginning debaters may need some practice learning to find the strongest reasons. Strong reasons should be obviously relevant to the case, concrete, and easy to understand. If possible, the reasons should be related to each other or to a general unifying theme, but this is not necessary.

Finally, the speaker should provide some evidence to support the reason. Evidence can come in the form of expert opinion, results of a research study, statistics, personal anecdote, testimonial, case examples, and analogies (Browne & Keeley, 2004). Evidence should be concrete, specific, and supportive of the reason. It is also important for the source of the evidence to be identified. For example, the speaker should give the title, date and publishing information of a book, newspaper article, government survey, or research report. Likewise, if expert opinion is used, the expert must be identified so as to allow evaluation of his/her authority in the field in question.

A simple conclusion ends the speech. The speaker should summarize or paraphrase the case by reminding the audience of the signposts that were discussed and thank the listeners for their attention. An outline of a basic 1AC, then, would look like the following:

> Introduction
> > Greeting

      Resolution
      Position
      Number of points
      Signposts

Point ♯ 1
      Signpost
      Reason
      Supporting Evidence

Point ♯ 2>
      Signpost
      Reason
      Supporting Evidence

Conclusion
      Summary of points
      Thank listeners

VII. First Negative Constructive Speech: Refutations

The First Negative Constructive speech is very similar to the 1AC with the addition of the first refutations of the debate. Before building their own case, the negative team should refute the affirmative team's arguments.

According to *NTC's Dictionary of Debate* (1990), a refutation is defined as, "The process of exposing flaws in opponents' arguments" (p. 152). We can divide refutations into two categories, although there does not need to be a strict division in the speeches themselves.

One way to refute an argument is to show that the reasoning is flawed. Lubetsky (1997) points out six common refutations. We can show that an opponent's point is not true, not relevant, or not important. Further, we can demonstrate that a point or problem is solvable. For example, if the affirmative team makes the point that school uniforms do not allow for individual expression, the negative team can claim that there are other modes of self-expression such as hair style or accessories. We can also refute a reason by showing that a point contradicts another point. For example, if the affirmative team claims that joining tours to foreign countries provides many chances to meet people from foreign countries, the negative team can point out that people traveling in tour groups have fewer chances to meet local people in foreign countries. Finally, we can "flip" a point or show that the opposing team's point actually supports our own position. For example, if the affirmative team makes the point "cost" and argues that school uniforms are too expensive, the negative team can show that "cost" supports their position since without school uniforms students would

compete with each other to wear fashionable and expensive clothes to school.

A second way to refute an argument is to point out weaknesses in the evidence. As we noted earlier, it is important to cite the source of evidence. If this is not done, the refuting team should point this out. Other possible weaknesses in evidence may be an outdated source, an expert with bias or questionable qualifications, and flawed research methodology. We might also point out that a case example, personal experience or testimonial is an isolated incident and may not be representative of all experience. Finally, there is the possibility that statistics are flawed or being misused.

Using these two methods of refuting the affirmative team's case, attacking the reasons and the evidence, the negative team begins the process of attempting to weaken the opposing team's argument. Then, following the same procedure as the 1AC, they build their own case against the proposition, showing why they are against the proposed change in the *status quo* and possibly offering an alternative solution.

VIII. Second Constructive Speeches

We have now established the basic techniques for building and attacking arguments in the debate. The First Constructive speeches can be prepared, for the most part, in advance. The exception being the refutations of the 1NC; however, the negative team should be able to anticipate at least in part what the affirmative points will be. In fact, in the preparation stages, both teams should be devoting considerable effort toward anticipating both the opposing team's points and the attacks that will be made on their own arguments. This will allow them to prepare defenses, or refutations of the refutations.

It is in the Second Constructive speeches where the exchange of strengthening, attacking, and defending the arguments becomes less structured. Both teams will find themselves reacting more to what the other team is doing, so it will not be possible to prepare these speeches in advance, at least not to the extent that the First Constructive speeches are.

We should also note here that beginning debaters learning to debate in this manner will have a tendency to become so immersed in point-by-point reasoning that they will lose sight of the bigger picture, the themes and storylines that can be used to pull an argument together. It is useful to introduce the idea of holistic reasoning here, which should balance the sometimes myopic focus of point-by-point reasoning.

IX. Holistic Reasoning

When beginning debaters start with learning the micro- and macro-organization of the constructive speeches, they have a tendency to become overly-focused on the point-by-point reasoning of the debate. Because of this, it is advisable to introduce holistic reasoning fairly early. Lubetsky (1997) describes holistic reasoning as connecting the points of the argument into a logical system. When debaters engage in holistic reasoning, they indicate a deeper

understanding of the resolution.   For example, when we consider the death penalty, we could ask what the purpose of criminal punishment is.   Is it deterrence or is it retribution?   The answer to this question will be key in understanding the wider implications of the resolution, "The death penalty should be abolished."

Two concepts related to holistic reasoning and useful in its development are descriptive assumptions and value assumptions.   Browne and Keeley (2004) describe these as assumptions about how the world *is* and how the world *should be*. If we maintain the descriptive assumption that criminals are responsible for their actions and choose a life of crime freely, we will be more likely to agree with holistic reasoning that concludes that criminals should be punished.   If however, we hold that criminal behavior is largely a result of social and economic circumstances, we will be more likely to agree that criminals should be rehabilitated.

Value assumptions relate to how we believe the world should be.   Values, such as loyalty and honesty are not mutually exclusive, but in particular circumstances one will be more highly valued than another.   For example, if one saw a person shoplifting in a store we might believe that alerting the shopkeeper would be the proper course of action (honesty).   But what if that person happened to be a close friend (loyalty)?   In this particular circumstance, the two values, honesty and loyalty, come into conflict.

In the context of the debate, it may lend strength to the case if the argument can be framed in this fashion.   Let us suppose we are debating whether a wildlife refuge in Alaska should be drilled for oil.   The value conflict here would be between economic development and environmental protection.   The affirmative team would make a much stronger case if it could unify its points in such a way as to demonstrate that in these circumstances the economic benefits and national security obtained through energy independence outweigh any possible environmental damage.

As Lubetsky (1997) notes, in general, point-by-point reasoning occurs earlier in the debate and holistic reasoning later.   For beginning debaters it might be a good idea to suggest that holistic reasoning begin in the Second Constructive speeches and continue in the rebuttals.

X. Rebuttals

The rebuttals are the final speeches of the debate.   In the rebuttal speeches, both teams summarize and analyze the debate and show why they have won the debate (Lubetsky, 1997). Holistic reasoning, especially, will play an important role in the rebuttal speeches.   Rebuttals can be the most confusing and difficult speeches of the debate, so it might be a good idea for the strongest speaker on each team to take on this responsibility.   The rebuttal speakers should take care to ignore trivial and unimportant points and focus on presenting a clear analysis of the debate. (Ericson et al., 1987).   The clearest rebuttal speech may well win the debate.

XI. Taking Notes and Flowing the Debate

Debates can be very complicated affairs. Each team not only constructs its own argument, but also attempts to demolish the opposing team's argument while defending its own from incoming attacks. In order to debate effectively, it is vital that each team stay organized throughout the debate. In fact, it is important for anyone attempting to follow a debate closely, particularly judges, to take notes.

Taking notes of the arguments made in a debate is known as "flowing" (Hanson, 1990). Special sheets of paper, known as flowsheets, are often used. A flowsheet has a number of columns corresponding to the number of speeches in the debate. Each column is headed by the name of the speech, such as 1AC, 1NC, 2AC, 2NC, NR, AR. As the debate proceeds, the debaters, judges, and anyone else following the debate closely, write down the points and refutations in the appropriate column. If the affirmative team makes a point in the 1AC, and the negative team refutes that point in the 1NC, arrows can be drawn across the columns to track the status of that point.

XII. Judging the Debate

So far we have been looking at what the two debate teams do during the debate. However, there is a third party that must also be considered, the judges. In a classroom situation, students can act as judges. This will keep them engaged in the debate and will heighten their awareness of what they are doing in their own debates.

When adjudicating a debate, judges have the obvious responsibility of evaluating the strength of the arguments presented by both teams. Additionally, judges must also act as critics by evaluating the performance of each speaker (Patterson & Zarefsky, 1983).

When evaluating the content and logic of the speeches, judges should consider the strength of the reasons and their relevance to the case. They should also look for signposts for each point and concrete supporting evidence. They must also look at the refutations and consider whether each point of the opposing team has been refuted. Likewise, the judges should check whether each refutation has been defended. It should be clear that flowing the debate is just as critical for the judges as it is for the debate teams.

When evaluating the performance of each speaker, judges should consider the presentation skills of eye contact, gestures, posture, voice inflection, and enthusiasm. Probably the most important characteristic of effective public speaking is naturalness. Effective public speakers will appear relaxed, confident, and interested in their topic.

During classroom debates, student judges are provided with a flowsheet and a judging form (Appendix 1. Adapted from Lubetsky et al. 2000). While listening to each debate speech, judges should flow the debate. During the intervals between speeches, they can write points and comments for each speech. At the end of the debate they should consider the debate as a whole when they decide the winner.

XIII. Modifying for Difficulty and Student Ability

Although debate can be a challenging and complex activity, it should not be reserved only for advanced students. Even students at a very low level can reap the benefits of debate. By manipulating the variables of time, speaking aids, and format we can make debate available to the widest range of language ability.

As noted earlier, each speech of a debate has a time limit. There may also be an interval between each speech to allow the debaters to make changes in their prepared speeches in response to the opposing team. Advanced debaters will be given little or no time between speeches, thus forcing them to speak more extemporaneously. To make the task easier, students can be given more time between speeches, say 3-5 minutes. In the extreme case, students could exchange their written First Constructive speeches and prepare refutations as homework.

Another way to manipulate the difficulty of debate is by allowing students speaking aids. First, a basic debate speech can be prepared in outline or template form similar to a cloze test. Before or during the debate, students can fill in the blanks and then read from the form. Note cards and fully prepared transcripts are also possible. Normally, students deliver their speeches individually. To make the debate easier, teammates can be allowed to give assistance while the debate is in progress. One of the difficulties with debate is the need to think and speak at the same time. By separating the two, by having one person doing the speaking while the other team members act as shadow helpers, debating becomes more manageable.

Finally, we can alter the format of the debate to make it simpler or more complex. One idea is to have students deliver First Constructive speeches only since the Second Constructive and Rebuttals are the more difficult speeches. Another possibility is to exchange written speeches beforehand and prepare refutations as homework. Also common is the Cross Examination format, which replaces the Second Constructive speeches with a question and answer period (Le, 1995). Other possibilities include manipulating team size and the number of speeches in order to divide responsibilities among more students.

In conclusion, having more students work together with advanced preparation and speaking aids makes debate accessible even to students with modest language abilities.

XIV. Conclusion

What do students take away from debate? One of the great advantages of debate is the fact that it is a contest. Many students feel freer to engage in sharp discussions when in the context of a debate. They are on a team debating an assigned position on an established resolution, and they are supposed to win. Students who would normally try to avoid conflict and confrontation are now expected to engage, refute, criticize, and rebut the opposing team. The rules and regulations of debate serve as boundary markers of an arena in which students

experience a sense of freedom.   Most students enjoy this.

Debaters develop skills in critical thinking, public speaking, and research.   These academic skills carry over into other areas.   After debating, students become more active in small-group and class discussions.   Critical thinking and research abilities show up in academic written work in content-area classes.   Debaters are more confident and well-organized when giving academic presentations.   Debating is one of the most effective activities available for training both linguistic and intellectual abilities, and it is accessible to students of wide ranging abilities.

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Appendix 1

Judging Form

Resolution _____

_____

Part I Speaker Points: Rate speeches on a scale of 1-10
(1-2 Poor; 3-4 Fair; 5-6 Average; 7-8 Above Average; 9-10 Excellent)

Affirmative:			Negative:		
Speeches: 1AC	1NC	2AC	2NC	NR	AR
Content:					
Style:					
Total:					

Part II General Comments: Give feedback on each of the speeches.

1st AC Speech:
1st NC Speech:
2nd AC Speech:
2nd NC Speech:
Negative Rebuttal:
Affirmative Rebuttal:

Part III Decision: In my judgment, the winner of this debate is:

☐ The Affirmative Team   ☐ The Negative Team

I believe they have won this debate because _____

_____

_____

_____

(Adapted from Lubetsky et al. 2000)

[Abstract]

Basic Concepts for Teaching and Learning Debate

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　　Recently, the teaching of debate in high schools and universities seems to be increasing in popularity.　While this can be seen as a positive development, there appears to be some confusion as to what actually constitutes a debate.　Some of those professing to be teaching debate are in fact doing little more than inviting students to express their opinions freely or to engage in group discussions.　Academic debate, on the other hand, is a specific, rule-governed activity of some complexity.　In order to encourage the teaching of academic debate, this paper describes the basic concepts involved in academic, or parliamentary, debate.　It is believed that this kind of debate is a skill that can be taught at a surprisingly wide variety of language levels, and it can develop research ability, critical thinking skills, and public speaking skills.