

Debate – The Fight Between Motivation and Critical Thinking

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This paper discusses Debate I and Debate II, a course for students ranging from sophomores to seniors at Keiai University. Debate involves a multitude of English skills, and some of these skills such as critical thinking, spontaneous speech and forming follow-up questions are challenging for students of English as Foreign Language. The reason for this is a result of their secondary education experience, which tends to focus on rote learning rather than these skill areas. Debate encourages and enables students to form their own opinions, reasoning and support their reasons with appropriate research and data. There are a variety of activities that can aid students in developing these skills in the EFL classroom and this paper will discuss some of these activities which are conducted in the Debate I/II courses, in effect motivating students.

Introduction

Why? How? Reason. Support. These are four dreaded words in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) university classroom, especially in Japan. These four words require critical thinking, a skill that many Japanese students do not possess as it is not taught in secondary education. Japanese Freshman Students enter university with very little to no critical thinking skills. Throughout their elementary and secondary education, students have focused on rote memorization and learning to pass tests. As a result, they struggle once they

enter university, as tertiary classes require them to suddenly think critically and express their opinions and ideas. Secondary school English classes focus heavily on reading, writing, and listening, but to the extent of memorization rather than free thinking. Here at Keiai students are able to take courses focusing on specific skills such as writing, listening, speaking, reading, grammar, or general English, however, Debate consolidates all the aforementioned skills. In this way, students are able to improve their English skills in a well-rounded way, while encouraging them to not rely on rote learning but on freedom of thought and expression. This can be challenging as Japanese students have had very little opportunity to develop “intellectual courage, humility and autonomy” (Dunn, 2015, p. 32).

Nesbett (2003, p.210) states that “debate is an important educational tool for learning analytic thinking skills and for forcing self-conscious reflection on the validity of one’s ideas”. Furthermore, debate is a method in which students are able to have opportunities to argue and reason in English (Nur, 2018). Krieger (2005) states that debate is

an excellent activity for language learning because it engages students in a variety of cognitive and linguistic ways. In addition to providing meaningful listening, speaking and writing practice, debate is also highly effective for developing argumentation skills for persuasive speech and writing (p. 25).

Critical thinking is now a widespread expectation in education and Nur (2018) states that critical thinking has four main components which are “the ability to listen and observe, ask questions, question the validity or evidence, and prepare persuasive arguments using evidence”. Dunn (2015) states that critical thinking skills are:

procedures that allow for deeper understanding of information as well as the more complete use of the information presented or gained At its very core, critical thinking is, gaining deeper understanding and perspective through meticulous thought on a subject. (p. 32).

In the 21st century, critical thinking has become a recognized necessary skill set for the workforce. Companies want employees to not only be able to think critically but to also hold skills such as “negotiation, problem-solving and superior communicative competence” (Zare & Othman, 2015, p. 158). Furthermore, Zare and Othman (2015) state that incorporating divisive topics into the classroom, will help maintain coherent judgement, reflection, and also encourage and enable students to think about differing viewpoints that they would not normally consider. Students need to be able to consider both sides of the issue and to critically analyze not only their own thoughts and viewpoints but also those of others. This leads them to think reflectively and decide what to believe or not believe. This is also necessary when undertaking research to support their ideas. All of these are not only important in debate but also transfer across to other subject disciplines and life.

The Course

Debate I class meets once a week for 15 weeks and is taught in the first semester, and Debate II follows in the second semester. The course is open to sophomore, junior and senior students in the Faculty of International Studies. The 2022-2023 academic year saw 37 students enrolled in Debate I, and 34 in Debate II. Both courses focus heavily on critical thinking, stating opinions, and giving support for their reasons. In addition to these, speaking, listening and writing skills are extremely important, and as such, every lesson takes a holistic approach and incorporates activities to cover all of these skills. In Debate I students focus on forming their own opinions on set topics and learning useful vocabulary and phrases, gradually adding slightly more academic language. Toward the end of the semester, they are encouraged to do simple research in order to make their arguments stronger by finding evidence to support their opinions. However, in Debate II, students are required to partake in more extensive research in order to strongly support their arguments and all

writing activities must contain longer sentences and more expansive content.

Reading/Writing

When thinking about debate, one would assume that speaking is the most important skill that students require. However, reading and writing are equally as important. Students need to research and read information for the debate topic at hand and at this time note-taking is an essential skill in order to support their arguments. Reading enables students to not only enhance their reading ability but also to develop their knowledge and vocabulary (Alasmari & Ahmed, 2013).

Following this, students are required to use their critical skills in order to decipher and decide what information is relevant and important and then proceed to write the script drafts of their persuasive arguments in activities such as the opinion papers and also their Constructive Speech in the mini debate. Through extensive writing practice, students become accustomed to writing their thoughts and support in an organized and logical format. Furthermore, it is essential that they are able to write notes when they are listening to the opposing team's constructive speech in order to be able to form refutations for the Cross-examination/Attack.

Speaking

Obviously speaking is an inherent skill required for debate, however, this can be difficult for many Japanese students as they have very little to no speaking exposure throughout their high school learning. Therefore, students can prepare for a debate but only to a certain extent or level. While they must prepare their own team's Constructive Speech, they are unable to prepare for the Attack as they do not know what the opposing team will present as their persuasive arguments. At this point in a debate, students must use spontaneous English skills as they have a very short timeframe in order to prepare and refute the opposing team's arguments. While

extremely challenging for them, this spontaneity helps to develop students' critical thinking and speaking skills respectively (Nur, 2018). Both courses incorporate not only debate but also regular discussions and collaborative activities in class, whereby students must give their own opinions and also listen to others.

Listening

Listening is quite possibly the most difficult and challenging skill for EFL students in debate. Students need to be able to comprehend arguments or statements made by the other team and be able to do this under strict time constraints. Due to these constraints within a debate, if the opposing team cannot understand the arguments put forth due to either their own listening proficiency or the speaker's oral proficiency, it will be difficult to refute claims and ask follow-up questions. One solution is during the Attack, they can ask for clarification from the opposing team.

Listening is also an integral skill that students need to develop in order to comprehend others' opinions and reasoning so that they are able to form meaningful questions and follow-up questions. By listening carefully to others' information and opinions, students are able to identify key points and develop follow-up questions in order to attain more information or even clarification. In addition, asking follow-up questions can be a useful tactic to encourage their opponents to doubt their own arguments and the audience to be swayed too.

Presentation

In Debate I students are required to consolidate their English skills and prepare a three-to-five-minute oral presentation on a topic of their own choice. They are required to research and discuss their opinion on their chosen topic with three clear supporting points, and then put forward the opposite side of their opinion. As it is their first time discussing both sides, they are given a clearly outlined example as scaffolding

(see Appendix A). It is important for students to be able to think of both the Affirmative and Negative arguments in a debate as they are allocated into teams and as they do not have a choice in which team they will represent, they need to be able to think critically about all viewpoints.

Collaborative Problem Solving

While debate has the expectation of persuasive arguments, being able to work as a team is also extremely important. In both Debate I and II, students are able to solve problematic scenarios through collaboration. While the concept is relatively easy, Agreement/disagreement and persuasion also come into play. Activities included:

Life on other planets. In this activity, students brainstorm a list of as many items as possible that they recommend sending into space on a United Nations rocket to teach extra-terrestrial beings about life on earth. Then the group must discuss and through agreement/disagreement and compromise, narrow it down to only five items and give convincing reasons for selecting those items.

End of the World: In this activity it is the end of the world and there is only one safe place on a small deserted island, where people can survive and start to repopulate the world. Students are given a list of ten candidates and their bio information, and after analyzing each person's details, they must discuss and come to a consensus over which five people to save and send to the island. They must justify their choices with reasons and support. This activity is actually quite challenging as none of the candidates are perfect and students must be able to rely on critical thinking and identify potential challenges each person on the list would have in regard to survival and repopulating the earth.

Teamwork and collaboration enable students to not only maintain individual accountability (Amiri, Othman & Jahedi, 2017) but to also gain a better understanding of the topic, and vocabulary and improve their performance and interper-

sonal skills overall. Collaboration requires students to work together and compromise, both important life skills that students will need after graduation.

Opinion Papers

In both semesters, students are given a print with two different topics and they must state their opinion and then write three reasons and support for it. (See one example in Appendix B). There are two topics per print and they are completed every two weeks and submitted. In Debate I, the teacher marks and gives feedback on the prints. In Debate II, it alternates between the teacher marking and peer feedback review using a set feedback rubric. In Debate I, answers and support are usually minimal in both length and content, however, in Debate II students are able to research data connected to the topic and write significantly lengthier and strongly supported arguments. Students who complete both courses are much more confident learners as they can see the progress they have made in their writing and ability to research and clarify statements.

Fishbowl Discussion Activity

In both courses, students must undertake a Fishbowl Activity as part of their overall assessment. This enables them to understand a given topic and research and prepare for a timed discussion the following week. In this activity, the class is divided into four or five groups and students are allocated the role of fish or cat within their group. The fish will be one discussion group and the cats will be the other. The fish will discuss the topic first in a group while the cats observe silently and take notes and give feedback on the Evaluation print supplied by the teacher. The cats will then become the discussion group and the fish will observe, take notes and give feedback. (For example, see Table 1). In Group 1, all fish members will discuss the topic for the set time limit while the cats observe their respective partners. That is, Cat E will observe and listen to only Fish A, Cat F will observe Fish B,

Cat G observes Fish C, and Cat H observes Fish D during the discussion and takes notes. The discussion must last a minimum of 10 minutes and maximum of 12 minutes. Upon completion, the cats will then discuss the topic and their fish partner will observe and take notes during the time limit. Students are reminded that it is okay to disagree but they must do so in a polite manner and support their opposing comments.

Table 1 *Fish and Cats in the Fishbowl Activity*

<i>Fish Group 1</i>		<i>Cats Group 1</i>	
①	A	↔	E
②	B	↔	F
③	C	↔	G
④	D	↔	H

Mini Debate

At the end of both courses, students are divided into nine or ten topic groups (see Appendix C) and each group is divided into two teams, Affirmative and Negative, with each team consisting of two members. In Debate I, students are allocated teams based on similar English proficiency so that they are more comfortable and in order to not hinder motivation. In Debate II, however, teams are mixed proficiency to allow them exposure to differing levels of English and to push them to develop their skills further. As debate is a different format to a discussion, scaffolding is provided in the form of “prefabricated chunks” (Amiri, Othman & Jahedi, 2017), which means they are given a set of important phrases to use in the debate (see Appendix C). This is motivational for less proficient students, especially those who lack confidence. Due to class time constraints and the class meeting only once a week, the flow of the debate is simplified and the flow of the debate can be seen in Appendix C. When assessing the debates, emphasis is placed on content, fluency, and collaboration in preparation in addition to performance, rather than an emphasis on grammar and accuracy.

The mini debate allows students to consolidate all of the skills they have developed throughout the year and be able to not only express their ideas more clearly and succinctly but also be able to defend them. Furthermore, students are able to critically assess and identify flaws in the opposing side's arguments and question them. Students can also feel intense motivation and pride in themselves and each other as they see how far they have developed throughout the course.

Final Exam

In Debate II there is no presentation, however, there is a Final written exam at the end of the semester. This exam requires students to write long answers on given topics within a onehour time limit. This exam consolidates most of the skills that they have learnt and developed throughout the semester/s. It is their final opportunity to showcase their critical thinking, reasoning, clarification, and writing skills, without the speaking component as this is assessed in the mini debates prior. The topics are taken from those covered in the Opinion papers and although there will be students who rely on rote memorization, this could be detrimental to their score as they will need to write a specific minimum word count for each question. Furthermore, they will have no prior knowledge as to which questions from the semester will be on the exam. This will minimize merely memorizing their previous work.

Conclusion

Debate is a subject that hones a variety of skills and leads to not only improved communicative competence, but also enhances students' critical thinking, and skills such as speaking, listening, reading, writing, researching, discussion, question formation, and overall confidence. As debate consists of so many moving parts, it creates an active atmosphere rather than a passive one, and an active student is more motivated and willing to achieve their learning goals and make significant improvements in all areas. Along with the aforemen-

tioned skills, debate results in students actively developing their interpersonal skills and this will continue to benefit them not only throughout their tertiary life but also in the workforce and also their personal lives. Through developing and openly expressing their own opinions, students are able to also develop their own sense of individuality, which in itself is a new concept in a collectivist society such as Japan. This produces a new sense of accomplishment and builds their self-confidence. All of these skill sets will also be beneficial in their personal establishment as global citizens.

References

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Appendix A Debate I Presentation

You will give a short presentation (4-5 minutes) on any topic you like. You must choose a topic that you can easily give your opinion on AND also talk about the opposite side of your opinion. You need to introduce the topic you chose and why you chose it. Tell us your opinion and make sure to SUPPORT it (give 3). If you can find research or statistics it will make your opinion stronger and the audience will start to think your opinion is the only correct one!!!!

For example:

Topic: Everyone should be vegetarian.

Why I chose: I am vegetarian and strongly believe it is morally wrong to eat any kind of animal.

Support 1: It is cruel to kill animals to eat them. The animals are kept in bad conditions and they cry and scream when they are killed. They often take the animals' skin off before they are dead. That must be so painful and it is so cruel.

Support 2: Being vegetarian helps the environment. For example, did you know that to produce 500 grams of beef, it takes over 6,500 litres of water! 500 grams of pork uses about 2,000 litres and 500 grams of chicken uses about 1,770 litres! On the other hand, 500 grams of tofu only uses approximately 1,100.

Support 3: Eating meat is unhealthy. It contains fat and it takes at least 8 hours to digest. The USDA and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN tell us that meat is not a needed part of a healthy diet. In fact, it can increase the risk of cancer in people.

The other side:

Some people and scientists argue that we need meat. Fats found in meat have vitamins A, D, E, K, B12, and also cholesterol that we need for a healthy brain. In history, humans have always eaten meat so it is normal for our bodies and it would be unnatural to stop. We cannot change history so we should continue doing what we are doing enjoying hamburgers! Meat substitutes can be bad for the environment. For example, producing tofu results in more greenhouse gas emissions. If we stop eating meat it will only reduce greenhouse gases by 7%.

Appendix B Debate II Opinion Paper Example

TOPIC: Math is more important than English.

Opinion

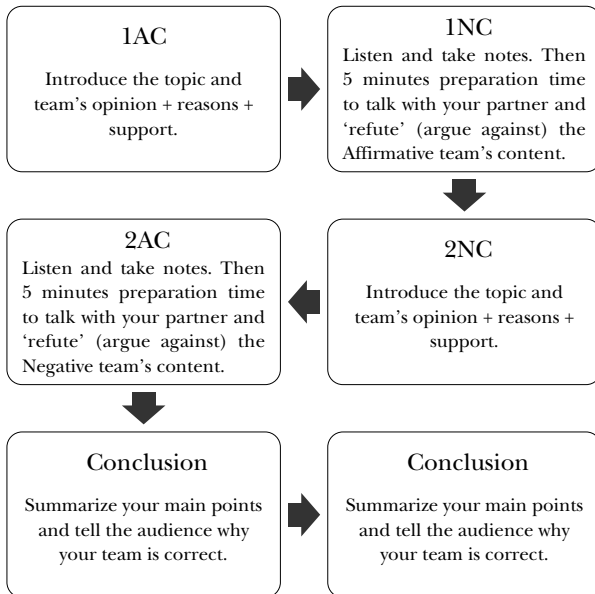
Reason 1 and Support 1

Reason 2 and Support 2

Reason 3 and Support 3

Conclusion

Appendix C Debate I Mini Debate Flow and Information



① Keiai should hire more foreign teachers.		② Driving age in Japan should be 16 years old.	
Affirmative (For)	Negative (Against)	Affirmative (For)	Negative (Against)
③ Smoking should be banned.		④ It is better to be married than single.	
Affirmative (For)	Negative (Against)	Affirmative (For)	Negative (Against)
⑤ Keiai should have more foreign languages.		⑥ Voting should be compulsory.	
Affirmative (For)	Negative (Against)	Affirmative (For)	Negative (Against)
⑦ Every student should have the Covid vaccine.		⑧ We should stop all Covid restrictions now.	
Affirmative (For)	Negative (Against)	Affirmative (For)	Negative (Against)
⑨ Keiai should have a school bus from Inage station.		⑩ All Keiai students should study abroad once.	
Affirmative (For)	Negative (Against)	Affirmative (For)	Negative (Against)

There are some important points to remember when you do a debate:

1. Manner- *You must try to convince/persuade the audience that your team's opinion is correct. Remember to speak in an interesting way. Use eye contact, gestures, good posture, good voice, and humour.*
2. Gestures- Use gestures to look natural.
 - ☞ *Don't use too many*
 - ☞ *Don't play with your pen/paper*
 - ☞ *Don't touch your hair or mask or partner!*
 - ☞ *Don't rest your head on your hands*
3. Eye contact- When speaking you should look at the audience.
 - ☞ *Don't look out the window*
 - ☞ *Don't look at the floor*
 - ☞ *Don't look at your partner*
 - ☞ *Don't look at the other team*
4. Posture- *Look strong and confident (ᄇᄇ is ok!!!!). Stand straight, shoulders back, and head up.*
5. Voice- *Remember to speak clearly, loud enough for everyone to hear, and be lively. Use the microphone if you need to but NO KARAOKE!*
6. Humour- *The audience will enjoy your speech more if you make it fun. Everyone will remember your speech and enjoy it if you make them laugh!*

Useful Phrases (* Prefabricated chunks)

Opinions

I/We think/don't think that _____

I/We believe/don't believe that _____

I/We strongly believe/don't believe that _____

I/We feel/don't feel that _____

I/We strongly feel/don't feel that _____

Refutations (arguing against)

They said that _____

They claimed that _____

They argued that _____

} *but/however _____*

It is not true that _____ / It can't be true that _____ / It is not always true that _____

There is no connection between _____

Their argument is not important.