

# Teaching Debate to ESL Students: A Six-Class Unit

## Introduction

Debate is an excellent activity for language learning because it engages students in a variety of cognitive and linguistic ways. The purpose of this paper is to elaborate upon this point by providing a step-by-step guide that will give teachers everything they need to know for conducting debate in an English class.

So, why debate? In addition to providing meaningful listening, speaking and writing practice, debate is also highly effective for developing argumentation skills for persuasive speech and writing. Davidson (1996) wrote that "with practice, many students show obvious progress in their ability to express and defend ideas in debate [and] they often quickly recognize the flaws in each other's arguments." Nisbett (2003) declares: "Debate is an important educational tool for learning analytic thinking skills and for forcing self-conscious reflection on the validity of one's ideas (210)." Fukuda (2003), in a debate study conducted with Japanese students, found that "before the debates only 30.8% of the students were not afraid of expressing their opinions when they were not the same as others'. After the debate this figure rose to 56.7%." He went on to say that "the knowledge or skills which came from the practice in the debates led the students to become more accustomed to expressing opinions." This suggests that, although debate is quite challenging, non-native speakers can develop the debating skills which are described in this paper.

## Six-Class Unit Plan

The following six-class unit can be adapted to suit a variety of teaching contexts. I have been refining it while teaching a weekly 90 minute debate class.

### Class One: Introduction to Debate

#### 1. Basic Terms

Debate: a game in which two opposing teams make speeches to support their arguments and disagree with those of the other team.

Resolution: the opinion about which two teams argue.

Affirmative team: agrees with the resolution.

Negative team: disagrees with the resolution.

Rebuttal: explains why one team disagrees with the other team.

Judges: decide the winner.

#### 2. Opinions and Reasons

A resolution is an opinion about which there can be valid disagreement. The students either agree or disagree with the resolution regardless of what they personally believe. An opinion can be introduced by an opinion indicator:

"I think/believe that smoking should be banned in public places..."

A reason explains why that opinion is held and can be introduced by a reason indicator:

"...because/since secondhand smoke is harmful for nonsmokers."

### 3. Strong Reasons Versus Weak Reasons:

According to LeBeau, Harrington, Lubetsky (2000), a strong reason has the following qualities:

- it logically supports the opinion.
- it is specific and states the idea clearly.
- it is convincing to a majority of people.

To give examples of strong reasons versus weak reasons, the teacher can develop a multiple-choice exercise such as the following:

Smoking should be banned in public places because:

- it is bad.
- it gives people bad breath and makes their teeth yellow.
- secondhand smoke is harmful for nonsmokers.

The students ought to explain why some reasons are strong and others are weak based on the above criteria.

In pairs, have students practice generating reasons for opinions. The resolutions/opinions can be generated by the students (as the four resolutions listed below), the teacher, or taken from the following online debate resource, which offers resolutions, reasons and debating tips.

#### Part 1: With Your Partner, Think of at Least One Strong Reason for Each Resolution

1. Women should quit their job after they get married.

REASON:

2. Love is more important than money.

REASON:

3. It is better to be married than single.

REASON:

4. Writing by hand is better than writing by computer.

REASON:

Part 2: Now Compare Your Reasons with Another Pair and Decide Whose Reasons are Stronger and Why

4. Ways to State Reasons: Review the Following for Linguistic Scaffolding

Comparison: X is \_\_\_\_\_ er than Y. OR: X is more \_\_\_\_\_ than Y.

Cause-and-effect: X causes Y. OR: If you do X, then Y will happen.

5. Generating Resolutions: The Students Generate Their Own Resolutions

Explain that issues about which people are likely to disagree work best for debate. They can be controversial: the death penalty should be banned; or less divisive: love is more important than money.

For homework or in class, the students brainstorm a list of resolutions. Students can get their ideas from topics discussed or read about in class or topics which interest them personally. Then the students hand in their list of resolutions and the teacher selects the most suitable ones which the students later choose from.

### Class Two: Supporting Your Opinion

1. Warm-up

Begin each lesson with a fun practice activity which gets the students generating reasons for opinions. An argumentation exercise like one that I developed called "The Devil's Advocate" (see appendix 1) is useful for this purpose and can be used multiple times simply by changing the resolutions. Another good kind of activity for giving reasons is any prioritization task in which the students rank items on a list, giving reasons for their choices.

2. Giving Support for Your Reasons

Support consists of evidence. The four kinds of evidence, adapted from LeBeau, Harrington, Lubetsky (2000), are:

- Example: from your own experience or from what you heard or read.
- Common Sense: things that you believe everybody knows.
- Expert Opinion: the opinions of experts -- this comes from research.
- Statistics: numbers -- this also comes from research.

Smoking should be banned in all public places.

**Example:** For example / for instance / let me give an example

- Whenever I go to a restaurant or bar and there are people smoking near me, I feel that I am breathing their smoke. This makes me a smoker even though I don't want to be.
- Common Sense: Everyone knows / if...then / it's common knowledge that
- Secondhand smoke is very unhealthy for nonsmokers.

**Statistics:**

Secondhand smoke causes about 250,000 respiratory infections in infants and children every year, resulting in about 15,000 hospitalizations each year.

**Expert Opinion:** According to.../ to quote.../ the book \_\_\_\_\_ says...

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, "secondhand smoke causes approximately 3,000 lung cancer deaths in nonsmokers each year."

**3. Practice**

Have the students practice making examples/common sense support. They can develop these from reasons that they came up with in the prior class (see third activity).

Class Three: Debate Structure

1. Warm-up

Do argumentation exercise

2. Form Teams

Two or three students form a team.

3. Considering Resolutions

Give each team the resolutions culled by the teacher from the ones generated by the students. Instruct students to mark the resolutions which interest them.

4. Selecting Resolutions and Sides

Pair up two teams and have them compare their lists and decide on a resolution for their debate. They then pick sides-affirmative or negative.

5. Formal Debate Structure

Give students the following debate structure, adapted from LeBeau, Harrington, Lubetsky (2000). See appendix 2 for an additional format option which I developed for a less formal, more conversational debate.

- Speech 1: The first affirmative speaker introduces the topic and states the affirmative team's first argument.
- Speech 2: The first negative speaker states their first argument.
- Speech 3: The second affirmative speaker states their second argument.
- Speech 4: The second negative speaker states their second argument.
- Give a 5-10 minute break for each team to prepare their rebuttal speech.
- Speech 5: The negative team states two rebuttals for the affirmative team's two arguments and summarizes their own two reasons.
- Speech 6: The affirmative team states two rebuttals for the negative team's two arguments and summarizes their own two reasons.

## **6. Brainstorming Arguments**

Clarify for the students that each argument consists of a stated reason followed by ample support. Get students to brainstorm reasons for their resolution and then select the best two which will be used for their arguments. The teacher should model brainstorming on the board with a simple resolution to demonstrate how the brainstorming process works.

### 7. Homework

Have the students complete two arguments. Note: it is not acceptable to write the arguments in L1 and then translate into English. Arguments should be written in clear and simple English that can be easily understood by peers.

### Class Four: Predicting and Refuting the Other Team's Arguments

#### 1. Warm-up

Do argumentation exercise (see class two warm up).

#### 2. Predicting the Other Team's Arguments

Each team brainstorms a list of strong reasons that their opponents could use.

### 3. Four Step Rebuttal

STEP 1: "They say ..."

State the argument that you are about to refute so that the judges can follow easily. Take notes during your opponent's speeches so you will be clear about what they argued.

"The other team said that smoking is harmful for nonsmokers."

STEP 2: "But I disagree..." Or "That may be true, but..."

"That may be true, but I think that if nonsmokers want to avoid cigarette smoke, they can walk away from it."

STEP 3: "Because ..."

"Because nonsmokers should look out for their own health."

STEP 4: "Therefore..."

"Therefore it is not the responsibility of smokers to protect nonsmokers."

### 4. Writing Rebuttals

The students compose short rebuttals for the strongest three opposing team's arguments that they predicted.

### 5. Giving Feedback

The teacher meets with each group and reviews their arguments and rebuttals, challenging students to question their reasoning.

## Class Five: Judging and Final Practice

### 1. Warm-up

Do argumentation exercise (see class 2 warm up).

### 2. Judging

The students will be the judges. In the judging form below which I developed, the students must show evidence that they have listened carefully. The teacher can evaluate the judging forms to give students an incentive to put effort into judging. A different type of judging form and guidelines can be found in LeBeau, Harrington, Lubetsky (2000).

## Speech 1: The Affirmative Team's First Argument

Note: the same format is used for speech 1-4

Summarize the REASON here:

Is this reason clear? \_\_\_\_/1 Is this reason strong? \_\_\_\_/1

Summarize the SUPPORT here:

Is the support clear? \_\_\_\_/1 Good examples/common sense: \_\_\_\_/1

Expert opinion/statistics: \_\_\_\_/1

Speech 5: The Negative Team's Rebuttal

Note: the same format is used for speech 5-6 (four rebuttals)

REBUTTAL for the first argument:

They disagree because...

Therefore...

Is this rebuttal clear? \_\_\_\_/1

Did they use a strong because and therefore? \_\_\_\_/1

### 3. Judging Practice

To give the students practice in judging, the teacher performs speeches of a mock debate. Students listen, fill in the form, and then compare results.

### 4. Final Practice

The students practice delivering their argument speeches and doing rebuttals against their own arguments.

Note: if students have no experience or are shaky in public speaking, the teacher could devote an additional class before the debate to provide training in essentials such as: eye contact, pacing, pausing, gesture.

### Class Six: The Debate

During the debate: the students fill in the judging form during the debate and students can consult with a partner for help with clarification after each debate. Following the debate: the students submit the judging forms, the teacher adds up the scores and announces the winners.

Also, the students hand in their argument and rebuttal speeches for which the teacher provides feedback on strong points and things to work on. For an example of a student's debate speech from my class, see appendix 3.

### Conclusion

The six-class unit described in this paper contains an outline, principles and materials for conducting a debate. Because there are few published debate materials for non-native speakers, the teacher needs to develop and adapt materials to suit their situational needs. It is hoped that this article provides teachers who are interested in debate with enough to get started. The rest can be learned through trial and error and sharing with other teachers in order to discover the variety of ways that debate can be creatively applied to teaching English.

### Appendix 1: The Devil's Advocate

You have two minutes to argue one side of each resolution. When you hear "SWITCH," you will have two minutes to argue the opposite side of the resolution.

Then move on to the next one.

All Japanese writing should be in Roman letters.

It is better to be single than married.

Women should stop working when they get married and have babies.

Women should not change their family name when they get married.

### Appendix 2: Format for Interactive Debate

Seating Arrangement: students facing each other. Two or three students per team.

Affirmative team: argument 1

Negative team's rebuttal

Affirmative team's response to rebuttal and open discussion

Negative team: argument 1



Affirmative team's rebuttal

Negative team's response to rebuttal and open discussion

Affirmative team: argument 2

Negative team's rebuttal

Affirmative team's response to rebuttal and open discussion

Negative team: argument 2

Affirmative team's rebuttal

Negative team's response to rebuttal and open discussion

Affirmative team's closing comments

Negative team's closing comments

Appendix 3: A Student's Debate Speech (edited)

Resolution: Personality is more important than looks. (Affirmative argument)

Reason: People never lose interest in looking at a person who has a good personality and living with them always makes us feel pleasant.

Support:

Example

For example, my friendly neighbor in China has twin brothers. The elder brother married a very beautiful girl. But after the first month, he had a quarrel with her because the beautiful wife spent all of her time dressing herself up without doing any housework. And she always went out on dates with many boyfriends. Finally he divorced his beautiful wife last year. But the younger brother who married an ordinary looking girl with a good personality has a very happy married life now and they have a lovely 3 year old baby now.

Common sense

In China it is said, "Don't choose beautiful person to be your wife." Because the beautiful wife spends more time dressing herself up without doing housework or child care than the not beautiful wife. And the beautiful wife always spends a lot of money on clothing and cosmetics.

Expert opinion & Statistics

Psychologists at Yale University investigated 3,519 married men's life spans. According to the report, the men who married a beautiful wife had a shorter life than the men who married an not beautiful wife. The degree of beauty was in direct proportion to the husbands' life-

spans. In the study, there was a scale of 1-20 points: 20 points is the most beautiful wife and 1 point the least beautiful wife. The result was that men who had a wife who scored 1-12 points lived 12 years longer than men whose wife scored 13-20 points.

## **References**

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