

Evaluating Debate in an EFL College Class

Deanne GATH and Chie SUGIMOTO

Introduction

It is often said that debate is one of the very good educational teaching methods. Nowadays, debate has been introduced in various educational occasions such as speaking training and leadership training and is also a good way to hold group research and discussion at schools and companies. Tottori College's new department, 'Department of Intercultural Communication', was made in 2000. This department aims to develop students who can understand cultural differences and can be good intercultural communicators. The curriculum for this department included the class 'debate' for the second-year students as a new class. That is why we set two goals for this class. One is to make the students gain English speaking skills through debate and to give them opportunities to speak out their opinion with confidence. Through learning and experiencing debate, we assumed the students could develop useful English speaking and listening skills and could become self confident about speaking English in public. Secondly, by studying and researching various topics or themes to debate, the students can develop an attitude of different cultural understanding. Debate requires thought from different viewpoints. Or some topics might require cultural comparisons.

We thought that the nature of debate will help the students broaden their viewpoints by understanding different cultures and values. Also, by debating in English, the students can learn 'English language culture'. Speaking logically is one of the symbolic characteristics of English language. This nature of English speech is very different from Japanese speech. Therefore we can say that English debate class has a lot of possibilities for cultural understanding. We predicted that the students could achieve these two goals by enjoying debate.

This paper will explain how we tried to achieve these goals and evaluate the class and students achievement. Gath was in charge of all classes and wrote the class procedure, evaluation and overall evaluation from the perspective of English language training in this paper. Sugimoto occasionally visited the class to see how the students worked and wrote about the students achievement from the perspective of cultural understanding.

Class schedule-procedure and evaluation

The following is a class schedule including the topics the students debated in each class. In addition, I explained the objective of each class and the method used to introduce new information and language, which are necessary to progress in

debating skills. Finally, I briefly evaluated each class.

10/10 What is debate? What skills can we learn through debate?

Debate Topic: "The American attack on Afghanistan should cease"

10/17 Debate Topic: "School uniforms should be abolished"

10/24 Group discussion, research & analysis.

"Euthanasia should be legalized"

10/24 Debate Topic: "Euthanasia should be legalized"

11/7 Group discussion, research & analysis.

"Vegetarianism is healthy"

11/21 Warm-up debate: "It is more advantageous being an only child"

Group discussion, research & analysis.

"It is more advantageous being a woman"

11/28 Debate Topic: "It is more advantageous being a woman"

12/05 Group discussion, research & analysis.

"Arranged marriages are more successful than love marriages"

12/12 Debate Topic: "Arranged marriages are more successful than love marriages"

1/16 Group discussion, research & analysis.

"The death penalty should be abolished"

1/23 Debate Topic: "The death penalty should be abolished"

1/30 Group discussion, research & analysis.

Examination Debate Topic: Plastic surgery for cosmetic reasons is good"

Topic: The American attack on Afghanistan should cease.

Objective: To begin a debate class, students must understand precisely what debate is, what valuable skills can be gained through debate, what the

basic procedure of debate is, and how to prepare for a debate. The objective of the opening class was to focus on these four points. In doing so, the students should learn the fundamental knowledge necessary to hold a debate.

Procedure: Debate is often simply and loosely described as, an organized argument. However it is better defined as a regulated discussion of a proposition by two matched sides. Firstly, students discussed the difference between an *argument*, when both sides are angry and they don't listen to each other, a *discussion*, when both sides have an opinion, but their opinion may change – they listen carefully to each other, and a *debate*, when both sides have an opinion and their opinion doesn't change. Both sides take a logical approach; they listen to each other and respond carefully point by point. Secondly, in order for students to regard debate as meaningful, it was necessary to explain the skills obtainable through studying debate. These include, leadership skills, investigation and analysis skills, critical thinking skills, open mindedness, the skill of thinking on your feet, speaking skills, organization skills, critical listening skills, self-confidence, and teamwork and cooperation skills. These skills are valuable to everyone in their daily lives. Speaking and open-mindedness were skills particularly relevant to these students' field of study and were the basic objective of this debate class. Predominantly, the students had never seen a debate, let alone participated in one, so the procedure and format was completely foreign to them. Our debate was not structured for any political debate purpose nor for any academic competition, therefore the procedure and format could be adjusted to suit the students' ability and to ease the stress of speaking for a decided length

of time in their second language. The following is a standard debate format.

First Affirmative Constructive	8 minutes
First Negative Constructive	8 minutes
Second Affirmative Constructive	8 minutes
Second Negative Constructive	8 minutes
First Negative Rebuttal	4 minutes
First Affirmative Rebuttal	4 minutes
Second Negative Rebuttal	4 minutes
Second Affirmative Rebuttal	4 minutes

For the majority of our debates we roughly followed this format. However rather than setting a time limit for each person a total time limit was set for the duration of the debate. In addition, attention was not paid to the usual 2~4 members per team format, but rather the number of students was divided in half to form the affirmative and negative teams. (NB; Uneven numbered teams are unavoidable in a classroom situation where weekly numbers cannot be predicted.)

The procedure for our debate class was to be simple in order for the students to have clear understanding as to what was required of them. We followed this five-step plan.

1. Decide on a proposition.
2. Team discussion – what relevant and important points should be focused on?
3. Research & analysis.
4. Re-group – logically plan team’s argument.
5. Debate.

Generally, this five-step method was followed in order to reach our goal of holding a debate.

Finally, to expose students to the idea of debate and to conclude the first lesson an impromptu debate without rules or regulation was necessary. The question, “What is an issue in the current news that has a difference of public opinion?” was put to the students. The resounding issue was the

war against terrorism in Afghanistan. Resolved: The American attack on Afghanistan should cease. Without research or preparation time, an informal debate on the resolved issue was held in Japanese, to first and foremost discover the enjoyment of debate.

Evaluation: Students were mostly unaware of the circumstances surrounding the war on Afghanistan. They were given no research time therefore there wasn’t the long duration on this proposition necessary for a debate. Poor knowledge of the proposition creates a poor debate. In addition, students were unfamiliar with the whole idea of debate. If they had seen a debate in action, their starting point would have been smoother. Culturally Japanese students are unaccustomed to giving their opinion forcefully and without hesitation, especially in their mother tongue. Their words and phrases were mostly softened so as not to offend the opposition.



Topic: School uniforms should be abolished.

Objective: Create an understanding of what constitutes a debatable proposition. Gain knowledge of words and phrases for beginning debaters.

Procedure: Every debate begins with a resolution.

A resolution is a proposition that is offered for consideration. For example, resolved: School uniforms should be abolished. The proposition should be clear and defined, without vague terms. In the resolution, "School uniforms should be abolished", we need to establish what *school uniforms* means. Does it mean high school uniforms? Or all school uniforms? If there are any vague areas the two teams may understand the resolution differently. For example, one team may talk about elementary school uniforms while the other team talks about high school uniforms. This creates a poor debate, since the teams are talking about different topics. To overcome this the affirmative team always carries the burden of defining the resolution.

Generally a proposition arises from a problem area. The affirmative team's role is to offer a solution to the problem. The negative team's role is to defend the present situation and prove that it does not need to change. If a proposition is not controversial, it is not debatable. That is, there must be a difference of opinion or a conflict of interest about the proposition.

After defining what debatable propositions are, we proceeded with the debate regarding the resolved: School uniforms should be abolished.

New words & phrases:

Words: agree, opinion, express, subject, decide, evaluate, form

1. *When you want to state your opinion:*

In my opinion _____.

I think (feel) that _____.

I believe _____.

It seems to me that _____.

2. *When you want someone to repeat or explain:*

I don't understand what you mean.

Would you explain that please?

I didn't understand your point.

Could you give me an example?

What do you mean by _____.

3. *When you want to disagree with someone:*

That's not the point.

Don't you think that _____?

4. *When you want to persuade someone:*

You must admit that _____.

Do you really believe that _____?

Evaluation: Since the topic was simple and relevant to these students, it was much easier to hold the debate in English. For a topic of this sort, very little specialized vocabulary is necessary. When students feel confident about their own knowledge of a topic they are better at stating their opinion with conviction. However, these students were inexperienced at giving their opinion in English, therefore prior teaching of new words and phrases was essential.

Topic: Euthanasia should be legalized.

Objective: Most people, particularly of this age bracket (18~21) or younger, only have superficial knowledge of problems facing the world today. The objective was for students to deal with a topic that they had never considered before. Also, the aim was for students to look at an international problem from a variety of angles and to obtain information on the issue through research and team discussion.

Procedure: The question, "What is a controversial topic that you would like to pursue in our debate class?" was put to the students. Resolved: Euthanasia should be legalized. Group discussion, research and analysis occupied the entire class time.

Evaluation: It was necessary to reinforce the skills one can learn through debate, especially the skills relevant to that particular lesson; open mindedness, investigation and analysis skills and teamwork and cooperation skills. It is also important to allow the students the right to decide on a debate topic of interest and importance to them. Sufficient group discussion and research time is necessary for students to gain knowledge on the topic, to decide on a clear team attack plan and to present a case with confidence and conviction.

Topic: Euthanasia should be legalized.

Objective: Learn about “tennis debate” and put it into practice.

Procedure: There are a variety of debating styles. One debating style suitable for beginner debater level is called “tennis debating”. In tennis debate the two teams, affirmative and negative, decide on a simple topic (our topic was not simple, but it was the students’ choice). The two teams sit opposite each other. The affirmative team (any person) begins with their first point. The negative team refutes the point, then the affirmative team responds to their rebuttal. This continues until there is nothing more to mention about that particular point. Then the negative team says their first point. The affirmative team refutes the point made, and the negative team responds to the affirmative team’s rebuttal. The debate continues in this style until it is over. Nobody has to speak; anyone who wants to speak may speak.

Before we proceeded with the tennis debate, students required time to re-group. It was important to exchange information and facts researched at an individual level and solidify their team’s ‘plan of attack’.

New words & phrases: affirm, negate, topic, respond, explain, reason, continue

Evaluation: Medical phrases and advanced vocabulary were necessary for a specialized topic such as this. Therefore, the use of Japanese was unavoidable in order for the teams to understand each other. Students were eager and demonstrated their ability to research. Their contribution in team discussion had improved as had their speaking skills; more aggressive at giving one’s opinion.



Topic: Vegetarianism is healthy.

Objective: Teach new words and phrases. Discuss and define the topic at hand. Have group discussion and preparation for forthcoming debate.

Procedure: Students studying another language often feel more comfortable when they are equipped with a dictionary. However, in a debate there is no time to refer to a dictionary. If a person struggles to think of the word in the language the debate is held in, they must define it. For example, if one could not recall the word ‘library’ they could simply define it as; a place where books are kept. The debate is more likely to continue smoothly by doing so, rather than wasting valuable time looking up a dictionary. To reinforce

the method of defining a word, we played the definition game.

Definition Game : Form teams. Each team chooses any ten words and writes definitions. Each team reads one definition. The first team to guess the word gets a point. The team that wrote the definition also gets a point. If no one understands the definition, no one gets a point.

The remaining class time was used for group discussion and preparation.

New words & phrases: abolish, propose, oppose, vague, public, protect, endangered

Evaluation: Once students realized that it is acceptable to define a word when one struggles to recall the word, they became less hesitant to offer their opinion in English. They also recognized that defining a word is not only acceptable in debate but also in daily conversation. They experienced a new sense of confidence to 'speak out' in their second language. Group discussion time was utilized more wisely.

Topic: Vegetarianism is healthy.

Objective: Explain different ways of responding. Revise some more 'fighting' words. Hold a debate on the topic at hand.

Procedure: Suppose the topic is "Birds are better pets than cats". There are three common ways of responding to the opposing team. If you were on the negative team, first, you can say that the reason is not true. For example, if the other team says, "Birds are quieter than cats," you can respond "No, they aren't. Birds are much noisier than cats. For example....." Second, you can say that the reason is not important. For example, if

the other team says, "Birds are smaller than cats," you can respond, "So what? Big and small pets are both OK." Third, you can say the reason is true, but you have a better reason. For example, if the other team says, "Birds can let you know if there is a thief in the house, but cats can't," you can respond, "Yes, but cats catch mice and birds don't. In our country, mice are a bigger problem than thieves."

New words and phrases: definite (100% will happen), probably (80~90% will happen), possible (can happen, 1~100%), indefinite (maybe will happen, maybe will not happen), improbable (can happen, but it would be a surprise), impossible (cannot happen).

Evaluation: With new knowledge on how to respond to the opposing team, students were much sharper in their response. This topic was well researched, as their information and facts were plentiful. A notable increase in speaking confidence and much less likely to soften words and phrases.

Topic: It is more advantageous being a woman

Objective: Hold an impromptu debate of a proposition similar to the forthcoming one. Revise comparisons and conditional sentences. Have group discussion, research and analysis.

Procedure: To challenge students' 'thinking on one's feet' skills, an impromptu debate was held. Resolved: It is more advantageous being an only child. It was followed by evaluation at an individual and group level in order to understand their strengths and weaknesses. Comparisons with adjectives/adverbs, contrasts and conditional sentences/questions are all useful grammatical struc-

tures for debate. At college level, students are familiar with these structures, so simple revision is all that is required. The remaining time was used for group discussion.

New words & phrases: clarify, diagram, capital, free, examination, environment, option

Evaluation: The verdict was clear by the end of the debate that there are more advantages to being raised with other siblings, however both affirmative and negative teams showed remarkable improvements in all areas of their debating. Students' ability to simplify their English in order for the other team to understand had improved; therefore the necessity to use Japanese did not exist. Group discussion and planning for forthcoming debate was strategic. First, students brainstormed for all ideas relevant to their viewpoint of the resolution. Then, they depicted what points were important. Next, they expanded on each point, then they predicted what points the opposition might raise, and finally planned their response. Time was not wasted as they had lost the tendency to stray from what was important.

Topic: It is more advantageous being a woman.

Objective: Find momentum in a debate.

Procedure: Begin by re-grouping. Commence with a debate, held in the standard style.

Evaluation: There is a tendency for the same students, with confidence and knowledge, to predominantly do all the talking. Students who are more opinionated speak out and leave the other students wanting to say something but not having the tenacity to do so. This causes some students

to advance in their speaking skills and others to remain at a plateau. In order to avoid this, a simple rule to ensure each student the opportunity to speak is necessary. It was decided that each student must offer at least one point to prove their case during the debate, including evidence, reasoning and examples. This rule, together with the students' acquired experience and confidence, created a debate with much momentum. Each student was involved; students had a responsibility to their team.

Topic: Arranged marriages are more successful than love marriages.

Objective: Learn how to make a point clearly. Have group discussion, research and analysis.

Procedure: In a debate, you must present reasons to prove your case. For example, if you are on the affirmative team, and your case is, "Arranged marriages are more successful than love marriages." Your reasons may be:

A: Patience is more practical than love

B: Less problems with in-laws

C: Choice of conditions for future partner

Each of these reasons is called a point. Points are necessary in debate and they must be made clearly. When you make a point you should follow four steps:

Step 1: Give your point a signpost. (A name for you point.)

Step 2: Explain the point. (Why is the point true? Present examples.)

Step 3: Connect the point to the case.

Step 4: Impact your point. (Give a famous quotation, a funny story or joke, a popular expression, or an emotional example to help the judge and opposition to remem-

ber your point.

New words & phrases: prove, judge, quote, intelligent, connect, emotional, save

Evaluation: A point made beyond doubt in a debate, compared to a point made with vague areas and no significance to the case, will certainly win you the debate. Each student prepared their point/s by following the first three steps, however they struggled to impact their point.

Topic: Arranged marriages are more successful than love marriages.

Objective: Concentrate on making a good point.

Procedure: Re-group. Hold a debate in the standard format. Evaluate the debate from all levels previously studied.

Evaluation: Love and feelings are undoubtedly difficult to express in a foreign language. This proved true for the following topic. Resolved: Arranged marriages are more successful than love marriages. Expressions of emotion should be taught prior to a debate on this kind of topic. Fighting expressions such as, "I disagree with....." Or "That's true, but I have a better reason." were intentionally used. The duration of this debate clearly showed the students' interest in the topic.

Topic: The death penalty should be abolished.

Objective: Constructive group work.

Procedure: Emphasize the five steps one should take when preparing for a debate:

1. Through research, find the points and evi-

dence you need in books, magazines, reports, studies, and other authoritative sources.

2. Make separate note cards for each main issue, argument or topic.

3. Make notes on the opposition's most likely arguments and have the counter-arguments and evidence you need to refute them.

4. Compare research notes with your team. Work closely together in completing the research your team needs to build a convincing case.

5. As the final preparatory step, decide which are the main issues and select the best evidence to support your arguments in your constructive speech and to refute your opponents in your rebuttal speech.

New words & phrases: pay attention, improve, comfortable, useless, spend, coordinated, classical

Evaluation: Logical steps to follow when preparing for a debate should form a logical case. Often, not knowing where to start will waste a lot of time and leave one very unprepared. When these particular students were aware of what they needed to do, they did it with precision.

Topic: The death penalty should be abolished.

Objective: Let students take the lead. Evaluate how much of what has been taught in class time is actually put into practice.

Procedure: Re-group. Hold a debate of competitive standard.

Evaluation: There wasn't the same continuity as when there was a mediator (teacher) there to guide each team. Although students have pro-

gressed in so many areas related to debate, they still lack the confidence to hold a debate without someone to direct them.

Topic: Plastic surgery for cosmetic reasons is good.

Objective: Evaluate closely students' teamwork, research and analysis skills necessary for their individual final grade.

Procedure: Revise all of the major points previously taught and highlight what will be evaluated in the final examination debate.

Evaluation: Students worked constructively, however no notable advancements from the previous teamwork session.

Overall Language Evaluation

From a language perspective, these Japanese college students proved their ability to speak about a variety of topics in their second language. Furthermore, they spoke about difficult topics, which require specialized words and phrases. Those who had logically prepared their speech in English prior to the debate had appropriate vocabulary at hand and did not waste unnecessary time looking up the dictionary. Gradually, phrases such as, We must....., We should not....., We cannot....., It is necessary to....., We have to....., It should be..... etc, became commonly and appropriately used. Such phrases as these, confirm that the speaker believes what they are saying to be true without exception. This type of language is imperative in debate. Indecisive words such as, maybe....., possibly....., probably....., perhaps...., were mostly avoided. Rather, expressions such as, "We

think that.....", "We believe that.....", "It is fact that.....", "It is true that.....", "We feel that.....", are decisive and therefore clear and comprehensible for the opposition. Students consistently used these expressions in our final few debates.

High-level words were difficult for the opposition to understand, therefore, the usage of Japanese interpretations were unavoidable for continuity of the debate. Prepositions were commonly omitted in the students' speech, however this did not affect the comprehension of the opposition and therefore is irrelevant. Occasionally, students failed to use definitions when they could not recall a particular word. To do so, does require prior teaching and practice and will be useful for students' conversational skills.

In order to have a successful classroom debate, particularly in one's second language, the following points should be noted:

- Prior knowledge of public speaking skills. (Gives students' confidence in their delivery.)
- Teaching and practice of useful debating words and phrases. (Decisive words, fighting words, definitions, comparisons, conditional sentences etc.)
- Comprehension of the topic. (Unified brainstorming about the proposition decided on.)
- Specify the requirements for research.
- Research the topic. (Be equipped with facts and evidence.)
- Thorough team discussion and careful planning. (Members understand their role during the debate.)
- Predict the opposition's argument. (Prepare one's rebuttal.)
- Research the related and necessary vocabulary.
- Write one's speech prior to the debate. Practice it.

- Use simple words and phrases. (Common to all members.)
- Use direct statements that are not ambiguous. (For example, “Our first point is.....”, “We believe that” etc.)
- Listen carefully. Take notes. (Not every statement, quotation, statistic, or idea in a debate is worth the trouble of refutation.)
- Allow the usage of mother tongue when comprehension is questionable. (This creates continuity during the debate.)

Evaluation on overall cultural understanding

It is clear from the interesting and various topics students had debated, that this debate class gave them a great opportunity to understand cultural differences. The method of allowing the choice of topic to debate was effective. Students could really be attached to the theme and have the right attitude to research enthusiastically. In fact, they seemed to work very hard to collect information to affirm their side’s opinion and make the debate deep and academic.

The topics varied from very familiar, daily-life-rooted themes for the students (such as ‘school uniforms’ and ‘women are more advantageous’) to international or ethical issues which could include many different viewpoints and values politically or culturally (such as Afghanistan attack, euthanasia and the death penalty). Through researching and discussing these topics in groups and making their own speech, the students could understand many cultural differences. When they debated ‘death penalty’, the Japanese unique idea of ‘Bachi’ (retribution) was referred to. Another student pointed out the difference of ‘the notion of death’ between Japan and Western countries

where death penalty has been abolished. The topic ‘Arranged marriages are more successful than love marriages’ was a very interesting one. When they debated this topic, the students became interested in how young couples in foreign countries can meet first and whether there are arranged marriages in other countries. Also, because this class had some adult students (in their 30’s, 40’s and 60’s) the discussion involved some generation difference of values. Thus, this debate class made a great contribution for the students cultural understanding.

Furthermore, the students mastered the English way of speech such as labeling and numbering the opinion, putting the clear and precise point first and explaining later, then asking questions and rebuking without hesitation and so on. Recently, international communication has become more common and important. Japanese will need to speak out more logically and clearly in our present international society. I hope this class’s experience can be useful for the students in their future.

Conclusion

Generally, debate is something foreign to people of this age (18~21) who are of a culture where directness is impolite. Commonly, English-speaking countries value directness, and one who gives their opinion is respected. In this debate class students learnt not only language skills, but cultural differences too. Thus, the objective of this class was reached. Students gained confidence in their speaking skills, and learnt how to be cooperative in a team situation. They gained effective research and analysis skills; they listened carefully and were forced to think on their feet. Students considered issues they had never considered before

and looked at them from a different viewpoint to their own. They learned to organize their information; keep what was important and disregard what was not. Aristotle once pointed out that the ability to see what is similar among dissimilar things is a mark of a genius. Most importantly, by trying to outwit the opposition, students had fun. Considering the numerous skills gained through studying debate, this class was an effective way for these students to use and gain foreign language knowledge while being open-minded towards a variety of international issues. These skills are not only valuable to the students during class time but also

in every choice they will make throughout their lives, because every genuine choice involves a genuine debate.

References

- Dunbar, Robert E. *How to Debate*. Franklin Watts, 1990
- Ericson, Jon M. and Murphy, James J. *The Debater's Guide*. Southern Illinois University Press, 1987.
- Goodnight, Lynn *Getting Started in Debate*. Illinois: National Textbook Company, 1996.

