

## Focusing on Debate to Develop Language Skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Courses in College

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journal or publication title	Active Learning and Critical Thinking: Survey on 22 years of Teaching at Miyazaki International College
page range	121-132
year	2017
URL	<a href="http://id.nii.ac.jp/1106/00000525/">http://id.nii.ac.jp/1106/00000525/</a>

# **Focusing on Debate to Develop Language Skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Courses in College**

**Julie Sagliano**

## **Introduction**

English as Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in adjunct courses at the college level are faced with many varied tasks that include teaching academic language fluency, helping students to deal with and comprehend content, and promoting students' critical thinking. I have found that college debate in the EFL classroom can promote the joint goals of developing academic linguistic fluency and critical thinking skills while learning content concepts. While acknowledging the benefits of debate for enhancing critical thinking, I will focus on debate's value in developing academic language skills. I will provide a detailed step-by-step program for EFL teachers who wish to incorporate debate in an adjunct or pre-academic content-based course. In particular, I will outline the build-up activities necessary for a debate, a modified debate format for EFL students, the actual steps in debate preparation, and the unfolding of the event itself. An analysis of the outcome and student feedback from a series of debates done in two introductory philosophy adjunct courses as well as techniques that have worked successfully with Japanese intermediate EFL students will be given throughout the paper.

The program to be outlined is seen from the perspective of the EFL teacher. The ideas in this debate program have been developed over the several years I have worked with EAP pre-university students and have been refined in both adjunct and credit-bearing English language courses. The examples given are from three introductory philosophy adjunct classes taught at a four-year liberal arts college in Japan where Japanese students are offered content-discipline courses taught primarily in English. The students were at the intermediate EFL level. The focus of these adjunct courses and also of the debates themselves was the issue of animal rights. Before explaining the steps in the debate program, I wish to briefly state the reasons for using debate in an academic setting.

## **Rationale**

One advantage of using debate is that it provides a means for fostering critical thinking skills. To its practitioners, debate has considerable merit. According to Richards, debate stresses critical thinking skills and analysis (Richards & Rickett, 1995). Goodnight states:

Debaters have an opportunity to investigate and analyze problems facing . . . the world today . . . Debate is a great way to develop your critical thinking skills. . . [Students]. . . must know how to find the best evidence. They must evaluate. . . They must think about the consequences of each argument and evaluate its worth (Goodnight, 1993, p. 3).

Another advantage of debate is that it is the ideal process for teaching and using the four skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening in an integrative fashion. Students must analyze, synthesize and evaluate ideas related to a debate topic and present these ideas both in written and spoken form. Therefore, in addition

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to the ability to think logically, linguistic skills are necessary for debaters (Richards & Rickett, 1995). In fact, all four language skills must be worked on and developed in order to make a debate successful. A survey of the main academic language skills used in debate will confirm this assertion. Reading skills are needed for researching the debate topic; composition skills are necessary for writing opening and closing statements. Presentation skills, listening comprehension strategies, note taking, and discussion skills, such as giving opinions, agreeing, disagreeing, questioning and answering are all critical for the actual debate. A debate also requires organizational skills, team-work, and the ability to think on one's feet. Many of these skills require the production of prepared and spontaneous language. The development of these skills should be a goal in any English for Academic Purposes (EAP) or EFL college course. The step-by-step debate program that follows exemplifies how this development can be fostered.

### **Step One: Debate Build-up Activities: Reading and writing**

In the beginning of the course, students must employ reading and writing skills to obtain a sufficient background in the debate topic and to be able to do further research in the library.

First, introduce the students to pre-reading, previewing, prediction, skimming, timed-readings, guessing vocabulary in context, comprehension, paraphrasing and summarizing techniques. These skills should be reinforced and practiced. If the EFL and the content teachers in an adjunct course use a team-teaching approach, they can both give students a great deal of individual help. In other words, if the students are orally summarizing a reading passage in small groups, the EFL teacher can help the students to understand vocabulary, to find main ideas, and to check grammatical accuracy. Simultaneously, the content partner can assist the students in clarifying meaning and analyzing and evaluating content. In this way, language skills are learned concurrently with the content of the course and the critical thinking skills necessary for the debates. Although the teacher addresses these reading skills throughout the term, there should be intensive reading and skill-building for approximately ten hours of class time about four weeks prior to the debate.

### **Step Two: Debate Build-up Activities: Oral Presentations (Prepared and Impromptu).**

Students now need language skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening skills), presentation skills (verbal and nonverbal), and the ability to think on their feet.

At this time students are not only building the content knowledge of the debate topic through reading and writing activities, but they are also concentrating on speaking and listening skills. It is necessary to work on these skills systematically from the beginning of the term. Japanese high school students have little or no experience or practice in speaking or in giving oral presentations. Therefore, introduce and reinforce oral skills often in order to build student confidence and to develop their fluency when speaking in front of a group. These skills are vital in the final debate.

The first day of class is not too early to start. Have a student interview a partner and then introduce the partner to the class. This is one way to get a student to stand up and give a short speech to an audience. Provide students with a choice of simple openers: "I'd like to introduce Takeshi Hamada to the class," or "This is Takeshi Hamada." Then the students must tell three interesting facts that they have found out about their partner during their interview. Offer a choice of prepared closings to the speaker: "Let's welcome Takeshi to the class," or "Please welcome

Takeshi to our class." Thus, from day one, students begin to speak in front of an audience, and also learn the basics of speech organization: having an opening, body and conclusion. Supplying some prepared language gambits and an outline greatly facilitates this task.

### **Step Three: Debate Build-up Activities: Prepared Speeches**

Next, introduce students to the skills necessary in giving prepared and impromptu speeches. These presentation skills incorporate important aspects of a debate, such as summarizing. Summarizing is a valuable skill for the debate preparation and for the debate itself. Be sure to provide a simple guideline for written and verbal summaries, such as the one in Figure 1, to focus student's attention on organizing the presentation. Assign short oral summaries often throughout the course. In our Philosophy and Environmental Issues course, for example, we had students report on an environmental issue in the newspaper each week. They were asked to read an article in either Japanese or English and then summarize it briefly in English.

Before students give their oral presentation summaries, ask them to brainstorm how to give a good speech. After eliciting a list of points from the students and discussing them, start the presentations. After students watch and listen to the oral summaries, ask students to provide more examples of the qualities of a good speech. Expand the list and discuss it further. The instructor may discover that the final list of nine presentation skills that the students make resembles the points found in many speech communication textbooks (Dale & Wolf, 1988). See Figure 2.

In our philosophy course we added one more point to this list. The last point reminded students to be creative and to enjoy the experience by adding a touch of drama, comedy or surprise. We suggested this tenth point to make the presentations more enjoyable and also to appeal to Japanese students. Japanese students are usually hesitant in offering their own opinions in front of a group; however, they are generally very good at role plays. When they take on a part, they lose their inhibitions, and they can express themselves very well.

Emphasize these points in speech communication throughout a series of presentations until the students are both very familiar with the elements of giving a good speech and fairly comfortable in speaking before an audience. To increase motivation and audience involvement and to simultaneously address listening and note taking skills, have the students in the audience prepare several questions to ask the speaker after a talk is finished. Provide students with a list of different types of question openers, such as clarification, repetition, opinion, and confirmation. This activity not only gives the students practice in listening, a skill that is critical in the debate, but also offers them the opportunity to ask different types of questions. After each presentation, ask the students to give written feedback to each presenter, listing at least one good point and one point for improvement.

### **Step Four: Debate Build-up Activities: Impromptu Speeches**

In addition to prepared speeches, introduce students to impromptu speeches since spontaneous language and thinking on one's feet are crucial in a debate (Richards & Rickett, 1995). Also, accustom students to having a time requirement placed on their speeches since all arguments are timed in a debate. Use impromptu speeches often as a warm-up activity to begin classes. Start with topics that are very easy for them to speak on, for example, giving their reactions to field trips or their opinions on a group survey. Then, provide them with a formula to follow in order to make their speech, such as the one in Figure 4, and mandate a three-minute

minimum, four-minute maximum speaking time. After students become familiar with giving these basic types of impromptu speeches, assign impromptu speeches to review content concepts.

#### Sample organization of a newspaper summary

1. Introduction:  
Begin by giving the title, source, and date of the article.  
State the topic of the article (What's it about?)
2. Body:  
Present the main ideas of the article. Explain important vocabulary.  
Give some important details or examples to help explain the main ideas.
3. Conclusion:  
Finally, give your own personal point of view about the article.

Figure 1

#### Sample list of points brainstormed by students

### How to Give a Good Speech:

1. Use note cards with key words.
2. Don't read - look up and make *eye contact* with the audience.
3. Posture: stand straight - don't lean on the desk.
4. Smile! *Relax* and your audience will feel relaxed.
5. Be enthusiastic! If you show *interest* in the topic, the audience will be interested, too.
6. Speak in a loud, *confident* voice.
7. Use *visual aids* and *organizational skills* to make your presentation easy to understand and interesting:  
For example:
  - Write key words on the board.
  - Write a simple outline of the main ideas on the board
  - Use the OHP to present information.
  - Use a visual (picture) if you have one.
8. Use movement: gestures, facial expressions, walk around, *make contact* with the audience.
9. *Practice!* If you prepare for your presentation, all of the above points will be much easier.

Figure 2

#### Sample oral-report peer-feedback sheet

Speaker's name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Topic: \_\_\_\_\_  
Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Write at least one good point about this oral report here:

Write at least one suggestion for improvement here:

Figure 3

### Example of an impromptu speech formula

**Step One:** Choose *one* of these topics:

You can think about the topic for a few minutes before speaking. You may write a brief outline using key words.

1. What are your impressions or opinions of Seagaia?
2. What were your impressions or opinions of Earth Day (an annual environmental event in Miyazaki prefecture)?
3. What were your impressions or opinions of the surveys you did at Miyazaki University?
4. What did you do over Golden Week?
5. Which issue do you feel is the most important in the Green Issues Book (an MIC course text)? Explain.

**Step Two:** Use the following *Impromptu Speech Outline*. Remember we talked about "organization" being an important point in giving a good speech? This simple outline will help you organize your impromptu talk:

#### A. Opening

1. Repeat the question as a statement.
2. Give a statement of purpose.

Example: "I had a wonderful vacation over golden week: I spent time with my family and visited my friends."

#### B. Body

1. Tell us what you did with your family.
2. Tell us what you did with your friends.

#### C. Conclusion.

Rephrase the question, similar to the opening sentence.

Example: "In short, that's what I did over golden week: I had an enjoyable time with my family and friends."

**Step Three:** Keep talking for three minutes. Watch the timer.

Figure 4

### Step Five: Debate Preparation

The preparation for the actual debate requires about 10 hours of class time and approximately 20 hours of homework time. First, introduce students to the format of the debate. Use a modified debate format for ESL students, such as the one adapted from Kayfetz and Stice (1987) in Figure 5. There are four parts to the debate in this format: opening statement, rebuttal, question and answer session, and closing statement. Depending on class size, divide the class into several groups with five students on each team. Each student has a role to play in the debate to insure teamwork and total participation.

When beginning the formal preparation of the debate, emphasize team-work and group effort. Although each person has a specific role to play in the debate, the success of the debate depends on the team working together to produce the final product. In other words, although one person presents the opening statement, the entire group should contribute to its preparation and composition. The opening-

statement person is responsible for presenting the introductory arguments in the best possible way for the group. Emphasizing group cooperation appeals to the Japanese sense of team play which requires that each member share the responsibility equally. In this way, each presentation depends on the group's effort and not on one individual. To facilitate this sense of group, use a team-strategy worksheet to begin the actual debate preparation. The worksheet in Appendix 1 has been adapted from Kayfetz and Slice (1987). Subsequent to team planning meetings, engage each group of students in a series of practice mini-debates, intensive question and answer sessions based on the topic, and library and Internet research over a two-week period.

#### Debate Format

- |    |  |
|----|--|
| 1. | <b>OPENING STATEMENT: <i>Pro</i> (5-7 minutes)</b><br>Pro side gives its proposition and main arguments.<br>Con side listens, takes notes and prepares for rebuttal.             |
| 2. | <b>REBUTTAL: <i>Con</i> (3-5 minutes)</b><br>Con side gives opposing arguments to the pro side's main points.  |
| 3. | <b>OPENING STATEMENT: <i>Con</i> (5-7 minutes)</b><br>Con side gives its proposition and main arguments.<br>Pro Team listens, takes notes and prepares for rebuttal.             |
| 4. | <b>REBUTTAL: <i>Pro</i> (3-5 minutes)</b><br>Pro side gives opposing arguments to the con side's main points.  |
| 5. | <b>QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION: <i>Pro and Con</i> (8 minutes each team)</b><br>challenging questions from pro and con side.   |
| 6. | <b>PREPARATION BREAK for Team Closing Statement (5 minutes)</b><br>Each team prepares its closing statement keeping in mind the challenges and main arguments of the other team. |
| 7. | <b>CLOSING STATEMENT: <i>Con</i> (3-5 minutes)</b><br>The Pro side makes its last appeal.  |
| 8. | <b>CLOSING STATEMENT: <i>Pro</i> (3-5 minutes)</b><br>The Con side makes its last appeal.  |

**Figure 5**

Emphasize to the students that the debate is an opportunity for them to demonstrate what they have learned up to that point in the course. In addition, try to convey the game-like quality of a debate by telling students that it could be a way to use their minds and language to have fun. Separate the students into two teams of five students each and encourage them to develop their strategies in secret. Urge them to be creative in their presentations and to think of at least one element of surprise, drama or comedy to capture the audience's attention. This, again, is to motivate the students to leave their inhibitions behind, to enter the roles of the debate, and to view the debate as a kind of drama with themselves being the actors. This sense of drama appeals to Japanese young people and allows them to open up much more than they normally would in their own cultural context. Since the debate is a very western form of argument that is quite foreign to them, it is helpful if they can see it in a theatrical way. Several very shy students became stars of a debate just because they viewed their roles in this way.

In the philosophy debate, for example, one quiet student who stole the show confided her strategy for success to me. She said that she observed the gestures of her teachers at MIC very carefully whenever they gave a lecture or presentation. She tried to imagine herself in this kind of role and to use the most effective movements and gestures of her teachers. She practiced these movements many times while she rehearsed her speech. She asked a team member for feedback and encouragement. At the same time, she imagined that the audience that she would be addressing was a group of pumpkins. (Her reason for choosing pumpkins might have something to do with the topic of that debate: vegetarianism). By imagining the audience as pumpkins, the spectators became non-threatening to her and she was able to relax, enjoy and act out the role of her favorite teachers.

One final preparation is necessary before the actual debate: reviewing the judging criteria with the students so that they know how to win. The judging criteria reflects language ability in addition to the critical thinking skills of analysis, synthesis and evaluation which are necessary to compose the arguments. There is a sample criteria adapted from Kayfetz and Slice (1987) in Appendix 2.

## **Step Six: The Event**

The product of the debate process, the event itself, is a very important one because the students put a tremendous amount of effort, enthusiasm and creativity into it if they view it as a team competition that they want to win and as a drama that is viewed by their friends and teachers. The sense of competition will heighten as the day of the debate approaches. The students will have the necessary language skills preparation, content knowledge and critical thinking skills; they need to combine them in a final event or product. Here are some hints to maximize student motivation, effort and enjoyment:

1. Ask students to wear formal dress for the debate.
2. Invite other faculty members and students from other classes to be judges.
3. Schedule the debate in the evening to make it an extra-curricular activity and a night out.
4. Hold the debate in a large lecture hall or conference room so that many guests can attend.
5. Invite several other classes to attend or open it up to the student body and faculty.
6. Have students create posters and announcements for the debate and post them a week in advance.
7. Video-tape the debate.
8. Assign students to be the Master of Ceremonies, Camera-person, Set Director, and Timer.
9. Have a post-debate party or get-together for the students.

## **Performance**

On the day of the debates, expect the students to be high with excitement and enthusiasm. Their preparation and effort should be apparent in all of the opening and closing statements and rebuttals. Question and answer sessions should be lively and competitive. Creativity, drama, and a spirit of fun should also appear in many parts of the debate. For example, in the challenging question section of one philosophy debate we held, a group of students made a set of posters depicting a series of hypothetical situations where students had to choose between taking an animal's life



or a human's life and justify their decisions. For the closing statement of another debate, the pro-animal rights team turned down the lights and sang a song to the audience and then encouraged the audience to sing along with them by reading the words on the OHP. At the end of the closing statement for the con-animal rights side, team members passed out barbecued chicken pieces to the judges and the audience, asking them to enjoy some refreshments while the final decisions on judging would be made. If the students are enthusiastic, prepared, and creative, their use of logical arguments in well spoken English during the debate will be highlighted.

## Student-Feedback

After the debates are finished, issue a student evaluation form (Table 6) to elicit student reactions. Student feedback to debate has been very positive in all of my courses. Many students wanted to do another debate as a final examination. On evaluations, almost all students thought that the debate was interesting and useful. Many students singled out the debate as one of the best parts of the course. The students felt that the debate was challenging, that they had met the challenge, and that as a result they had learned a great deal in the process. They had gained confidence in themselves and in their English ability. For example, see the summary below of student evaluative responses to debates presented in two Philosophy and Environmental Issues courses during spring term 1995.

Student evaluation responses to debate

Total number of students enrolled:	20				
Total number of respondents:	20				
SA=strongly agree	A=agree	N=no opinion	D=disagree	SD=strongly disagree	
The first debate was interesting/useful because	SA	A	N	D	SD
	14	5	1	0	0
<b>Sample answers:</b>					
"It was hard but I could have a fun time."					
"Many people saw our debate and we studied together."					
"I had a good experience."					
The second debate was interesting/useful because	SA	A	N	D	SD
	14	3	3	0	0
<b>Sample answers:</b>					
"It was lots of fun."					
"I tried harder and I was excellent."					
"I was excited about it."					

Figure 6

## Conclusion

Debate can be an effective way to motivate students and to engage them in active learning. It addresses all four language skills in an integrated fashion. It stresses critical thinking and the importance of well-articulated English to examine, challenge and judge opposing viewpoints. What has impressed me most about using class debates is the genuine enthusiasm that students demonstrate in expressing themselves fluently in English on high-level academic topics that stimulate their critical thinking skills.

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## Debate team strategy worksheet

Topic:

Proposition:

1. **Your team's** thesis or opinion:

**Your team's** major arguments for the opening statement:

- a.
- b.
- c.
- d.
- e.

2. The **opposing team's** thesis or opinion:

*Predict* the major arguments for the **opposing team's** opening statement:

- a.
- b.
- c.
- d.
- e.

3. *Predict* some points that you may use in your rebuttal:

- a.
- b.
- c.

2. List questions that you think the opposing team will ask about your opening statement. Prepare counter arguments. Jot down your responses to these questions.

Questions

- a.
- b.
- c.
- d.

Responses (counter arguments)

- a.
- b.
- c.
- d.

3. *Predict* which questions you might raise against the opposing team's opening statement.

- a.
- b.
- c.
- d.

4. Closing Statement: Summarize your team's strongest arguments. (You may revise these during the 5-minute break in the debate, but consider a possible strong, persuasive closing now.)

- a.
- b.
- c.

Debate judging form

Please complete this score sheet for both teams. Remember that you are evaluating debating skills, **not** the position being argued.

**Proposition:** To Preserve nature and to prevent animal cruelty/suffering, we must recognize that animals have rights.

Debate #1:

Rate each team on each category listed below using this scale of 1 to 4.

		<b>Weak</b> <b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>Excellent</b> <b>4</b>
Pro	Con	—	—	—	—
—	—				<p><b>A. Opening statement.</b> The team presented the strongest possible arguments to support its position. Good examples were given. The opening statement was clear and well organized.</p>
—	—				<p><b>B. Rebuttal.</b> Opposing arguments were clearly presented to counter the opening statement.</p>
—	—				<p><b>C. Closing.</b> The concluding statement countered the opposing team's arguments and summarized the team's strongest points.</p>
—	—				<p><b>D. Questions:</b> The team's questions were challenging and exposed weaknesses in the opposing team's arguments.</p>
—	—				<p><b>E. Answers:</b> The team's answers to questions demonstrated an understanding of their position. The answers were concise and to the point.</p>
—	—				<p><b>F. Presentation:</b> The team members communicated their position persuasively by combining delivery, gestures, eye contact, and audiovisuals to create an image of confidence and leadership</p>
—	—				<p><b>G. Participation and Teamwork:</b> All members participated and worked together as a team.</p>
—	—				<p><b>Total points</b></p>
Winner:	Pro: _____				Con: _____

