

# Learning to Debate: Ingredients for the Japanese Expression Classroom

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## The Importance of Learning to Debate for Japanese College Students

In the Japanese Expression (JEX) classroom, debate is one approach which helps students become accustomed to thinking critically. Generally, Japanese students do not have enough opportunity to learn the ways of logical thinking throughout twelve years of Japanese education. For the most part, the lecture format has been used unilaterally by teachers without giving students a chance to discuss or debate in the classroom. Recently teachers are reconsidering the use of lecture style in both compulsory and higher education, including college education.

Since the establishment of Miyazaki International College (MIC), I have introduced debate in the first year JEX classroom. There are two main reasons why I have done so. First, students will be able to make progress in how to think logically through debate. In this sense, learning debate might be one shortcut to acquire critical thinking which is one of the academic goals at MIC. The second reason is that learning to debate in Japanese would also be beneficial to support understanding of what they are taught in content and ESL classes. This directly means that learning the way to debate in both languages will help them to understand critical thinking more than learning to debate in English or in Japanese only.

I know that many first-year students have tried to practice debate matches in both languages although the propositions of these debates have been different. Learning to debate in two languages can have a synergistic effect on promoting critical thinking and linguistic fluency. In addition, students learn many English and Japanese terms which are used in debate in the process of learning what debate is in both language classes. There seems to be a difference in both classes in terms of academic goals. English teachers have emphasized the importance of language education through debate (Sagliano, 1996); however, I have stressed learning the logic of debate through Japanese language education in order to make them familiar with the way to debate. In this sense, my class aims mainly at acquiring the proficiency of building up a logical frame of reference by proving points with evidence. Accordingly, students have spent much time in gathering material written in Japanese as evidence to be used in debate.

## Learning to Debate: Introducing First-Year Students to the Process

In learning to debate, first-year students display typical Japanese habits--they are shy, and they do not speak loudly. Initially they need to learn both the process of debate, and the meaning of technical terms. Below, I outline the steps that I have developed for use in the JEX class.

1. What is debate?
2. Learning the definition of "debate" and the significance of debate.
3. Learning how to debate using an "Introduction to Easy Debate" written by Michihiro Matsumoto (1992).

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4. Selecting a proposition to debate. Students select the propositions that they will deal with through group discussion.
5. Dividing all students into several groups to make a team of five students. Each group member proceeds to learn to debate cooperating with one another.
6. Searching for material and evidence at the library and on the Internet.
7. Creating affirmative and negative arguments based on the following process:

The Affirmative	The Negative
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Defining terms relating to the proposition.</li> <li>• Analysis of the status quo.</li> <li>• Urgent need for change.</li> <li>• Reasoning showing evidence.</li> <li>• Showing plan and its workability if the proposition is accepted.</li> <li>• The summary of constructive speech.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Propose counter-definitions if negative side is dissatisfied with affirmative's definition.</li> <li>• Insisting that the status quo has more merits than the affirmative proposition by refuting the analysis of the status quo presented by affirmative side. It can also be said that merits of status quo will disappear if affirmative proposition is adopted.</li> <li>• Crush the need for change. Focusing point will be also whether or not need for change is urgent.</li> <li>• Attacking the plan presented by affirmative side. Focusing point will be whether or not the plan will be practical and proving that the plan will not be workable even if proposition is adopted.</li> </ul>

8. **Exercising Question and Answer**  
Exercising Q and A, both affirmative and negative sides point out each other's weak points. This kind of exercise is very effective in deepening the student's ability to reason.
9. **Exercising for rebuttal speech**  
Each student on both sides has to have a rebuttal speech.
10. **Trial debate match**  
Each group has a trial debate before doing their official debate. Five or six trials are done in class.
11. **Official debate match**  
Every team participates in the official debate match at the end of each semester. This is held in a tournament. Japanese faculty members are invited to be judges of the debate match.

During the semester, one proposition is prepared for debate. Students engage in progressive library research on their topic, and gather materials to develop and deepen their positions. Moreover, finding evidence is useful not only to support their assertion in debate but for writing an article or a report for the class. As they learn how important a piece of evidence is and how to quote a piece of adequate evidence, this will be beneficial for their other studies, too.

## The Importance of Reasoning in Debate

I have shown students the role of both affirmative and negative sides, for instance, the way to make constructive speeches, present data as evidence, ask

questions and answer them and have a rebuttal speech. The most important feature of debate is learning how to develop an argument. To structure arguments, the relationship among claim, data and warrant should be recognized by students in order to practice reasoning in debate. Students will not make an assertion without having any data or evidence when they try the trial debate. Almost all of them never fail to ask the opponent members to show a piece of evidence or prove what they mentioned if the opponent members assert something without having any data or evidence.

## Trying to Debate: Expressions of Students' Experiences

At the beginning of learning how to debate, some students don't want to put themselves in either affirmative or negative positions because he or she has already a firm opinion against the proposition, and they don't like to say the opposite opinion. For example, in discussing the proposition about whether or not the atomic bomb should have been dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima, one female student said that she could not argue on the affirmative side. Because she was born near Hiroshima, she has been taught how terrible the A-bomb is. An academic debate, in principle, aims at practicing how to say opinions from two different positions. In other words, students are required to prepare to debate from both affirmative and negative sides. The final selection for debating one side or the other is made by the teacher just before the debate begins. In JEX, after they decide the proposition, they begin to debate. I would like to show in more depth how they have proceeded to debate, using their experience with the topic of "Gun Control".

1. All students had a free discussion on Gun Control. They didn't discuss much because none of them had much knowledge about Gun Control. Moreover, they were very shy to speak, even in Japanese.
2. Each student prepared a brief presentation to analyze the status quo position on Gun Control. Almost all of them could explain about how the gun issue has picked up in the U.S. since the Brady Law went into effect in February 1994.
3. In two groups, students discussed whether or not Gun Control is effective to decrease the number of crimes by guns. After the discussion, some students pointed out that the opinions opposed to Gun Control are more disadvantageous than those for it, as is often the case with students. But they also tried to find out more reasons why the status quo should be maintained, in other words, gun control laws aren't necessary.
4. They spent considerable time in thinking about reasons for both sides. They prepared definitions of keywords, main arguments, plans, etc. Below, I display some speech fragments to show how a typical debate in the JEX class unfolded.

**Claim A:** *Guns should be controlled in the United States.*

**Data:** *There are over three hundred million guns and over forty thousand of people are killed by guns every year in the U.S.*

**Warrant:** *There is no way to decrease crimes caused by guns except by the gun control.*

**Claim B:** *Gun Control can't prevent possible felons from committing crimes with guns.*

**Data:** *There are over three hundred million guns and almost all of the possible felons have guns in the U.S.*

**Warrant:** *It is impossible for us to think that possible felons come to police to register the guns they possess. Therefore gun control cannot always decrease the*

*number of crimes caused by possible felons even if guns are thoroughly controlled.*

The following are the summary notes made by another student of claims advanced during the practice debate session.

Affirmative Side	Negative Side
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gun Control is effective to decrease the number of crimes.</li> <li>• The Brady Law has prevented about 40 thousand possible criminals from buying guns.</li> <li>• New federal laws relating to Brady Law should be necessary to decrease more crimes by guns.</li> <li>• Gun Control doesn't forbid people to posses guns for the purpose of self-defense.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is impossible to control the over 300 million guns which already exist in the United States.</li> <li>• A gun doesn't kill a person. A person who has a gun kills another person.</li> <li>• We deny the existence of Brady Law. But we don't think that Gun Control can eliminate all kinds of evil relating to crimes by guns.</li> <li>• Gun Control law can't control guns possible criminals and felons possess and it is easy for them to get guns by being ignorant of laws.</li> <li>• The best way to decrease the number of crimes by guns is not to control guns. Education, to teach children how horrible guns are, is more important nationwide.</li> </ul>

5. In class, groups of five students work together to prepare their position. They share with one another from the beginning of preparation to formal debate, much as they do in learning to debate in English classes (Sagliano, 1996). Therefore, teamwork and cooperation are required for every group member. One of the goals of my class is to foster a spirit of cooperation. There were four groups in my two classes last year. In one group, a student couldn't agree with another member's view. He seemed to have worked independently during group learning. Therefore, it was very difficult for this group to function as a team. All members of this group talked about how they could solve this difficulty, and they concluded that he would take charge of the summary part of the debate. He was satisfied with this solution, and this team won at the official debate match. This shows how teamwork led them to victory.

### **Closing Comments : Why Debate in Japanese?**

At the end of each semester, students debate in front of an audience. This is a good opportunity for them to show how much they have learned about the process of debate. Almost all students speak loudly and clearly as compared with the very beginning when they begin to learn to debate. In particular, question and answer and rebuttal speeches seem to be better than before. The result of their debate is based on what they have learned and prepared throughout a semester.

Thus, the JEX class helps students improve not only proficiency of Japanese expression, such as speaking and writing, but also develops logical and critical thinking through learning to debate. I am sure that my students, as another final goal, have tried to link their experience of debating in Japanese to both English and content classes at MIC. This seems to help students understand more deeply what they learn in English.

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