

Хоменко Л.М.

Сумський Національний Аграрний Університет, Україна

Debate lessons improve communication skills

Communication skills are vital for all young people, both to succeed in their education and in later life. It is not just a case of ensuring that all young people are functionally literate. Today we live in an information-rich society with increasing numbers of media sources, the growth of the internet and the emergence of social media. Young people nowadays not only need to have the skills needed to understand the information being presented, they need to have the skills to research through different sources, critically analyze the information presented and form their own conclusions and arguments as a result. Debate can be a powerful tool. Debate is an excellent activity for language learning because it engages students in a variety of cognitive and linguistic ways. The countries that use English as a foreign language need effective activities which propel students to practice skills of the language properly inside as well as outside classrooms. Debating is a practice that inspires learners to open their mouth, get into discussion, defend their own positions, place counter arguments and also conduct research on related issues. While debating in English, the debaters get involved into a challenging and thrilling activity; moreover, they find themselves well-conversant in the aforesaid language.

This paper presents the rationale behind using debate in EFL classes, some fun strategies and proposes a few modules of debating which, if practiced properly, will make students confident users of English language in academic, social and professional settings. The paper also examines utilities of the modules and exhibits how students while practicing debate can improve their English language as well as presentation skills. The modules can be practiced in EFL classes, English language centers, debating clubs or other formal and informal settings where teaching-learning of English language is concerned.

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.

When debating is used in EFL classes, all four skills of English language (e.g. listening, speaking, reading, and writing) are practiced. Moreover, debaters need to master pronunciation of words, stress, vocabulary, brainstorming, script writing, logic building, argumentation and refutation.

1. **Listening** Through practicing debate, students can improve their listening skills. By using listening aids like radio, CD player and PC, learners will listen to audio clips e.g. conversation, speech, debate, talk shows and reports. They will watch video clips of debate sessions, speeches of famous speakers, talk shows, round table discussions, reports, and news. They will also watch selected English movies in the classroom which will be followed by group discussion. Teachers will give feedback on the discussion. In the feedback, teachers should focus on sounds, pronunciation, accent as well as use of words, technical words and jargons. In this case, teachers can use their notes on students' difficulty in pronouncing particular sounds and words.

2. **Speaking.** Debating can be used brilliantly to boost up students' speaking in English. Practices can be organized in various ways. Use of debate, speech and conversation in EFL classes will first of all drive out students' fear about English language. Moreover, regular practice of debate, speech and conversation will improve

their fluency, pronunciation and vocabulary. They will also be familiar with jargons and technical terms as debating covers a variety of areas and issues. Thus while practicing debate, speech and conversation in the class, students will practice many skills, learn many new words and collect information about many areas which all together will enrich their spoken English and ultimately make them confident speakers.

3. Reading Debating requires knowledge of many interrelated disciplines and areas, which entails extensive study of current issues, as well as social, economic and political theories and concepts. Studies into these disciplines enrich students' level of knowledge, enhance their reading habit and develop their vocabulary. If debate topics are announced earlier, students can collect information and discuss in groups. Teachers also introduce them to different sources of information e.g. local and international newspapers, magazines, books and websites. Students can collect information and make wall-magazines based on different issues and occasions. Through these practices, students prepare themselves for taking part in debating.

4. Writing Practice of debating develops learners' writing skills too. While writing debate scripts, students practice writing composition in an organized way. If students get debate topics one or two days earlier, they usually collect information and write the whole script. Debate-scripts are like argumentative essays. Thus they learn writing argumentative paragraphs and essays. Furthermore, students practice limiting topics and making them controversial enough for arguments and counter-arguments. When students make the final debate-script, they retain only the main points, not the details. In this way, they master limiting topics, writing topic sentences and also making outlines. To sum up, debating entices students to write composition in English.

Good forms of debate incorporate a high level interaction among students where they present and support arguments, question or rebut arguments and finally make an appeal or summary. The modules discussed below can be used to practice debate in EFL classes.

Module 1 Practice: Teacher will provide students with controversial topics. Next class every student will bring five points for and five points against their respective topics. Teacher will pick one student to place his points to the class. The teacher will then pick another student and ask him whether he agrees with his classmate's points. The second student will explain with logic, data and information why he agrees or disagrees with his classmate.

Utility: This practice will break ice and students will feel motivated to speak in English. Teachers can introduce this activity in the first class. It will remove students' shyness and motivate them to speak in English. Teacher will note down learners' areas of improvement and give feedback.

Module 2 Practice: Students will choose from a pool of topics (selected by teacher), take 5 minutes to brainstorm and make brief outlines. Then they will speak extemporaneous.

Utility: Through this practice, students will learn to speak extemporaneously. They will also acquire the techniques to brainstorm on a topic which will improve both speaking and writing skills.

Module 3 Practice: Teacher will form debate teams each with 3-5 students and select topics for them. Team positions to the topics will be given through lottery. Topics and positions should be provided just 30-45 minutes before the debate sessions start. Teacher will act as moderator while other students will play the role of audience.

Utility: Students will learn to work in a group to research, discuss and build cases together. They will also apprehend how to divide the points among themselves and follow team strategies. Through practicing debating, students will learn the skills of English language and the art of interpersonal relationship.

Module 4 Practice: Teacher will introduce a topic to the class and invite students to place their respective opinions. Students will speak for or against the topic. Teacher will play the role of moderator.

Utility: Participating in open discussions will help students express themselves in academic, social and professional settings in future. The activity will also encourage them to read extensively about current issues.

Module 5 Practice: Teacher will arrange a roundtable discussion with 10-12 students. Student-discussants will be given topic a few days earlier so they can collect adequate information. Teacher will be the moderator. He will control the conversation and pass floor to students. Other students will play the roles of journalists and audiences. At the end of the session, they'll ask questions to the discussants.

Utility: In this activity, students will play the role of several professionals. This may be more effective with senior or outgoing students who will be exposed to various jobs in near future. Students will go through extensive reading in order to use data and information in their speeches. They will also learn to support, contradict and extend others' views. The students playing the roles of journalists will learn the strategies of listening with attention and taking notes. Moreover, they will learn how to make effective and strategic questions.

Module 6 Practice: Students can practice fun debate on interesting topics. This kind of debate will be entertaining as well as informative. Fun debate sessions may be organized on many issues and occasions which are basically extemporary in nature.

Utility: Fun debates will give debaters some relaxation as they are always busy with debating on serious topics that require deep thinking and comprehensive knowledge. Moreover, fun debate will bring more students to debating.

Module 7 Practice: Teacher will write a few topics on the board and ask students to limit in order to make them controversial or debatable. Students will then be asked to write topic sentences and to make short outlines which will work as debate-script outlines.

Utility: Students will learn limiting topics, making outlines and writing topic sentences which are very effective strategies for both speaking and writing.

Module 8 Practice: Teacher will select topics, form teams and decide positions of teams on the topics. Students will write short compositions in support of their respective positions. They will use necessary logic, data and information to make a wall magazine; they'll also use necessary photos, pictures, cartoons and graphs to make the wall magazine more eye-catching and communicative. Teacher will be the editor of the magazine.

Utility: Making a wall magazine will be an effective effort to learn reading and writing skills. Students will learn both reading and writing skills. While gathering information, students will do research on various issues. In addition, they will practice the strategies for writing composition and creative writing. EFL writing classes or writing centers may organize such projects.

Module 9 Practice: Teacher and students will watch video clips of debate sessions. After the clips are played, teacher will explain strategic points of the speeches and ask students questions.

Utility: Students' listening in English will be improved. While watching speeches of good debaters, students will learn strategies for case building, arguing, summing up and delivery.

The following fun strategies can be used to engage students and vary the debate structure by involving the entire class in different ways:

- **Three-Card strategy** -- This technique can be used as a pre-debate strategy to help students gather information about topics they might not know a lot about. It can also be used after students observe two groups in a debate, when the debatable question is put up for full classroom discussion. This strategy provides opportunities for all students to participate in discussions that might otherwise be monopolized by students who are frequent participators. In this strategy, the teacher provides each student with two or three cards on which are printed the words "Comment or Question." When a student wishes to make a point as part of the discussion, he or she raises one of the cards; after making a

comment or asking a question pertinent to the discussion, the student turns in the card. This strategy encourages participants to think before jumping in; those who are usually frequent participants in classroom discussions must weigh whether the point they wish to make is valuable enough to turn in a card. When a student has used all the cards, he or she cannot participate again in the discussion until all students have used all their cards.

- **Participation Countdown strategy** -- Similar to the technique above, the countdown strategy helps students monitor their participation, so they do not monopolize the discussion. In this strategy, students raise a hand when they have something to say. The second time they have something to say, they must raise their hand with one finger pointing up (to indicate they have already participated once). When they raise their hand a third time, they do so with two fingers pointing up (to indicate they have participated twice before). After a student has participated three times, he or she cannot share again as long as any other student has something to add to the discussion.

• **Fishbowl strategy** -- This strategy helps focus the attention of students not immediately involved in the current classroom debate; or it can be used to put the most skilled and confident debaters center stage, as they model proper debate form and etiquette. As the debaters sit center-stage (in the "fishbowl"), other students observe the action from outside the fishbowl. To actively involve observers, appoint them to judge the debate; have each observer keep a running tally of new points introduced by each side as the debate progresses. Note: If you plan to use debates in the future, it might be a good idea to videotape the final student debates your current students present. Those videos can be used to help this year's students evaluate their participation, and students in the videos can serve as the "fishbowl" group when you introduce the debate structure to future students.

• **Think-Pair-Share Debate strategy** -- This strategy can be used during the information gathering part of a debate or as a stand-alone strategy. Students

start the activity by gathering information on their own. Give students about 10 minutes to think and make notes. Next, pair each student with another student; give the pair about 10 minutes to share their ideas, combine their notes, and think more deeply about the topic. Then pair those students with another pair; give them about 10 minutes to share their thoughts and gather more notes... Eventually, the entire class will come together to share information they have gathered about the topic. Then students will be ready to knowledgeably debate the issue at hand.

• **Four Corners Debate strategy** -- In this active debate strategy, students take one of four positions on an issue. They either strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree.

Controversy role-plays (Example)

Level Intermediate–Advanced

Time 30–40 minutes

Focus Brainstorming ideas, arguing your side, listening closely to other people's arguments and learning to counter them

Material Class sets of cards for a two-role role-play

Procedure

1 Introduce a topic such as 'the life cycle of a butterfly'. On the board sketch the various stages of a butterfly's life: egg, caterpillar, chrysalis, and butterfly.

2 Elicit or teach important associated nouns (*leaf, cocoon, etc.*) and verbs (*lay, hatch, etc.*). Check understanding and write up these words as you go along.

3 Form an even number of groups of four or five people. Some groups will prepare according to Role A and an equal number of groups will prepare according to Role B. Say that in a minute they will all be caterpillars.

4 Hand out the role cards. Put a red spot in a corner of all the A cards and a green spot in a corner of all the B cards.

EXAMPLE CARDS

Role A

You are a caterpillar. You love being a caterpillar. You do not want to change into a chrysalis or become a butterfly. In your group, think of all the reasons you can why:

- it is good to be a caterpillar (e.g. *You can eat as much as you like, You don't have to worry about your figure.*)
- you think it would be terrible to be a butterfly (e.g. *People might catch you and pin you on a board.*)

Role B

You are a caterpillar. You hate being a caterpillar. You are longing to turn into a chrysalis and then become a butterfly. In your group, think of all the reasons you can why:

- it is terrible being a caterpillar (e.g. *When you walk too far, you get blisters on all your many feet.*)
- it would be wonderful to be a butterfly (e.g. *You could fly up and look through people's windows.*)

Tell the class their ideas can be as crazy and as funny as they like. Add that every student in every group needs to write down all the ideas produced by their group.

6 Start the group work. Mingle and help out with vocabulary and ideas.

7 When everyone has several ideas noted down, ask them to notice the colour of the spot on their role card.

8 Students leave their groups (taking their notes with them) and sit opposite someone from a group whose card had a different colour on it (i.e. red sits opposite green and vice versa).

9 Say something like this: *Imagine you are green caterpillars each sitting on a leaf in the sunshine. You have your head down munching away. All of a sudden you notice there is another caterpillar on the same leaf munching its way towards you. You stop, say Hello, and start talking about how you feel about being a caterpillar. Munch, munch, go!*

10 Allow time for the caterpillars to talk to each other.

11 Students, *in note form*, write down the reasons given by the other caterpillar.

12 Tell them they now need to think how they can counter each reason or argument in their next conversation with another caterpillar of the same opinion as the first one they talked to.

13 Ask red-spot caterpillars to stay seated and green-spot ones to move a couple of desks away so that new green/red pairs are formed.

14 Ask the new pairs to have conversations that are longer and better than they had the first time.

Variations

The same basic procedure can be used with any two-part role-play that has a built-in difference of opinion:

- two pet birds in a cage (or lions in a zoo): one wants to stay; one wants to escape
- two tigers: one wants to become a vegetarian; the other does not
- two siblings: one wants to leave home; the other wants to live with Mum and Dad 'forever'

- two siblings who share a room: one likes music (or likes everything in its place, or wants to be rich and famous); one likes silence (or hates putting things away, or wants to live an ordinary life)
- two siblings: one wants to work for a living; the other wants to live on the dole forever
- two porpoises find a human in danger of drowning: one wants to save the human; the other does not
- the president/prime minister of a country and a top adviser are considering whether to have a space exploration programme or not: one is in favour; one is not
- two scientists who have accidentally discovered the secret of eternal life and eternal youth: one wants to publicise the information; the other believes it is a horrible discovery and thinks they should never tell their secret to anyone

For all young people debating activities are good preparation for further study. The research element of debate in particular helps students to develop library research skills, self-managed study and time management. It also introduces students to more in-depth analysis of a particular topic that is often difficult to introduce within the curriculum.

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