

How Difficult is Debate?

Proficiency-Based Lesson Modifications in ESL Debate

Andrew Tyner

Abstract

In this paper, I consider modifications to the presentation of vocabulary as well as to activity structures and timing in the context of ESL Debate lessons. I examine my classroom practices in relation to the modifications, the underlying rationale for these practices, and relevant literature that informs my consideration. I find that a focus on the meta-language of debate is of less practical value than a focus on the practice of debate itself, with a focus on vocabulary shifted toward this practice and the effective communication and receipt of ideas within a debate. I also find that dividing a debate into smaller, shorter, and more immediately manageable pieces is an effective way to introduce and get initial practice with the components of a debate. I suggest future avenues of research including quantitative and qualitative analysis of the results of the modifications considered here. Ultimately, I find that my lesson modifications appear to have been successful and I suggest that they be continued or expanded.

Keywords: *Debate, ESL, Vocabulary, Lesson structure, Activity timing*

Introduction

How difficult is Debate? It is a question often asked by students to their peers and teachers, particularly if Debate is a required subject. The answer varies, but virtually all would agree that the acts of preparing and participating in a debate carry significant challenges: detailed research, synthesis of information, careful listening and note taking, and quick thinking to construct an effective rebuttal, just to name a few. These are all worthy challenges—skills which one likely will rely heavily upon throughout their academic career and beyond.

However, as beneficial as a course in debate may be, it is not a challenge all would elect to face. If Debate is an elective course, then the matter is more or less settled, and only those who wish to take on the challenges of debate need do so. If the course is mandatory, the matter is quite different. Both student and instructor are faced with a potentially difficult task, to have a meaningful, useful, and, moreover, a comprehensible Debate class regardless of English proficiency.

Here, I shall focus on the task of the instructor. Amongst other courses, I teach Debate

at Rikkyo University in Tokyo, Japan. Debate, as taught in this context, has the dual purpose of teaching the fundamental skills of debate while also building English skills. At Rikkyo University, Debate is a required course. Because Debate is required, students with a broad range of English proficiency must, necessarily, take part. Thus, a course which may pose a significant, though meaningful, challenge to many students equally poses a challenge to instructors as they endeavor to help students of widely varying English proficiency levels get the most out of the course.

Through my experience teaching Debate at Rikkyo University, as well as other courses incorporating debate elements elsewhere, I have developed some lesson modifications and teaching methodologies upon which I would now like to reflect, with an aim toward better understanding of what methods work best and what might be further refined. Specifically, I shall consider methods of presentation of vocabulary in relation to the core principles of debate. I shall also consider lesson structure and activity timing with a focus on in-lesson manifestations of these modifications and the rationale that informs them. I shall also explore relevant academic literature to further consider the strengths, or potential weaknesses, of my methodology.

Discussion

Vocabulary

What words must one understand to participate in a debate? In other words, what vocabulary is essential? I would argue that beyond the necessary vocabulary to explain one's ideas and understand the ideas of others, very little is needed. A student must understand how to structure an argument, how to construct a rebuttal, and so forth, but calling an argument an argument is not what makes it effective. If a student with relatively lower English proficiency level finishes a Debate course with a strong command of formal vocabulary associated with debate/debate meta-language, at the cost of their ability to effectively engage in a debate, I would argue that this scenario would represent a serious failure on the part of the instructor and their course design.

It is easy to think that a class for students of relatively lower proficiency in English must be simplified. However, as has been noted numerous times¹, "ESL students, despite their limited proficiency in the target language, are interactionally competent" (Lee, 2017, p. 673). This is to say that it is very important to remember that a student's limited English proficiency in no way represents an inability to understand, form, and express complex ideas in general. Rather, their challenge lies in elevating their communicative ability in English to meet the level of their ideas. From this viewpoint, the primary challenge posed to the instructor in terms of vocabulary

1 In support of the quoted statement, the cited article by Lee (2017) notes "Cheng 2013; Hauser 2013; Hellermann and Pekarek Doenier 2010" (p. 673). It should also be noted that while "interactionally competent" (Lee, 2017, p. 673) is meant in reference, specifically, to discussions, it may be equally applicable and valid in the context of debate, particularly as a debate has much the same interaction as a discussion, albeit far more formalized.

is one of focus. The focus should be on vocabulary that allows students to accomplish debate-related tasks, to effectively engage in debate. This is exactly what I have tried to do in my Debate lessons.

To give a specific instance from my class, take the concept of “an argument” as an example. One might suggest that the words: argument, proposition, position statement, and academic sources may be a partial, minimal collection of vocabulary. While I think these words are important, and I teach them starting in the very first lesson of the semester and use them in subsequent lessons², when it comes to actually constructing one’s argument, it would be just as effective to think of concepts such as the opinion that your group agrees or disagrees with, your team’s main opinion, your information, and so forth, as opposed to a proposition, position statement, supporting evidence, and other more formal terminology.

When presenting meta-linguistic vocabulary, I often present it side-by-side with more standard English equivalents³. I never insist that formal terminology be used when students are constructing the components of their debates or discussing debates with their classmates. If a student can effectively engage in a debate, formalized meta-language about the debate is of secondary concern.

Adding further support to the above view of vocabulary in relation to lesson design, prioritizing competency in debate methodology and practice, interestingly though perhaps counterintuitively, carries with it the potential to strengthen overall vocabulary⁴ and English communicative ability. A 2023 study by Yoshihiro Kobayashi found that, amongst students having studied “the debate speech format” (p. 2), upon listening to a speech in English, they were “as capable of grasping the contents of the speech as those who read the script...[and in spite of more grammatical errors, they] less frequently borrow[ed] expressions directly from the original text” (p. 2) and, it should be noted, these students did not omit content in their summaries in contradiction to “previous research” having indicated such omissions (p. 19).

Having explained my position on the presentation and use of formalized vocabulary in the Debate classroom, one might say that, from the outset, an instructor must prioritize their vocabulary goals. If the teaching of set vocabulary is a primary goal, then it should be treated accordingly. On the other hand, if it is more vital that students attain competency in the acts of preparing for and carrying out a debate, then a focus prioritizing methodology and practice over formalized terminology is more sensible. It is this latter goal that I would advocate and which

2 Formal terminology is often presented alongside a more familiar term, for example, “position statement” (your team’s main opinion). For some classes that have limited vocabulary proficiency in general, formal debate terminology is often presented with L1, Japanese, translations and/or explanations, particularly in lessons that introduce new vocabulary or structural/procedural concepts. This supplemental translation is gradually withdrawn as students internalize the new terms and practices. However, a thorough consideration of L1 use in instruction is outside the scope of this paper.

3 As noted previously, in some cases this is accompanied by a Japanese translation as a means to first approach the concepts being dealt with. Moving forward, the translations are gradually removed from slides and other lesson materials as the use of the new vocabulary becomes established.

4 Meaning communicative vocabulary, not meta-language

I have pursued in my classes.

Timing and Lesson Structure

As anyone who has engaged in a formalized debate is likely to agree, timing can be one of the most difficult factors. Whether presenting complex ideas within a time limit, finding time to ask all necessary questions during cross-examination, or constructing a thorough rebuttal within the allotted time, time, almost as much as the opposing team, may feel like one's opponent in a debate. For this reason, it might come as a surprise that reducing allotted time for activities, rather than increasing it, may serve to make the lesson content more accessible. It is exactly this sort of reduced time that I have tried in my Debate classes.

More specifically, I have divided the structure of a debate into relatively smaller segments⁵. In most lessons⁶, we focus either on one part of a debate, say for instance, rebuttal, or a part of a part, so to speak, as in the case of a single reason well supported with evidence that forms part of a team's argument. Initially, this must sound like the opposite of the reduced activity time that I noted previously. In a way, it is. Certainly, the class moves very deliberately through each stage of the debate process. However, on a more moment-to-moment level, activity time is often reduced.

I have certainly implemented reduced preparation time for some activities. However, this reduced time for preparation must be coupled with an activity the focus of which is appropriately narrow. Consider the difference between a complete mock debate and practicing a single debate component. For students new to the practice of debate, to engage, say, in a full mock debate may be overwhelming, as students may become overly focused on one part or another of the debate preparation at the cost of the whole, or they may become frustrated by a component they have not yet mastered. A student engaged in a full mock debate has more time to work with, so to speak, when compared with a student focused on a single debate component, but that time may be at risk of being spent in a less meaningful way. Many of the difficulties mentioned a moment ago can be avoided if we focus on a single component of a debate at a time. In the end, students get equivalent practice, but in segments.

Dividing a debate into its component parts and focusing on each part in multiple brief segments has two specific benefits: building mastery of skills and increasing student confidence. First, the class can focus on mastery of specific skills as each task has a definite, achievable goal involving the use of particular skills, for instance, constructing a rebuttal for a single point as opposed to a complete rebuttal as might be presented by a team during debate. This allows for greater focus on what, specifically, constitutes a successful rebuttal in terms of content and structure. Focusing on a single part of a debate allows more time for self-reflection,

5 It should be noted of this approach of breaking a difficult task into more manageable pieces, aside from being, generally, a popular concept, the textbook used in Rikkyo University's Debate courses, *Up for Debate* (Mishima & Sturges, 2023), is structured along similar lines, particularly in the opening chapters that generally focus on one part of a debate per chapter.

6 Aside from those centered on full debates.

student-to-student feedback, teacher-to-student feedback, and for the implementation of that feedback. The second benefit is that students can build their confidence as they can achieve a clearly defined goal as opposed to completing a more open-ended task, like a complete mock debate, the outcome of which could be perceived, subjectively, as failure if a given student/team is the losing party in the debate. Certainly, all students must build toward engaging in complete debates and toward the understanding that losing in a debate does not constitute failure. However, to try to engage in a complete debate before understanding how to do so successfully, is of limited benefit, at best.

Reduced time per activity, in the context of a lesson centered on multiple, brief, skill-focused tasks, allows for quick but significant victories. It builds confidence. It allows for detailed understanding of each component of a debate. Successfully completing part of a debate, with a thorough understanding of what constitutes that success, is immeasurably more valuable than a victory in a mock debate if that victory is not accompanied by a thorough, meaningful understanding of how it was achieved.

To step back for a moment, one might suggest that regardless of one's view of activity timing, the goal of any debate-related activity is student mastery of the core principles of debate. What, specifically, might we identify as core principles of debate? Naturally, many of these will vary between iterations of Debate courses designed to meet the various needs of students at different universities. Hansen identifies the "demands of teaching debate" as "debate structure and rhetoric, content and background research, and language" (2007, p. 67). I agree with this assessment.

Language was discussed in the previous section. Debate structure is approached, as noted above, through a step-by-step segmented approach focused on incremental mastery of debate components. This leaves research and rhetoric, either topic being worthy of examination on its own. However, as we come to the end of the present consideration, we might simply note that like debate structure, the careful crafting of one's arguments through effective rhetoric supported by substantial, thorough research is not something that can be accomplished overly quickly.

Indeed, taking time with each step of the debate preparation process allows for avoidance of student difficulties with content comprehension as may be the case if the focus on debate methodology is largely structural, focused on getting to a complete debate too quickly. For instance, Kadomatsu & Oshita note student difficulty with comprehension of some content-related aspects of debate, despite apparent student proficiency with debate structures and methodology⁷ (2023, p. 35). In other words, while learning debate methodology is of great importance, taking time with each step of the process, including how students gather and interact with information, allows not only more time for comprehension but also confirmation of

7 This is not meant as criticism of the case noted by Kadomatsu and Oshita. Rather, it is illustrative of the point that structure and methodology may be mastered while content-related difficulties persist.

that understanding, and, as with skill mastery discussed above, to review and reinforce any skills or points of content understanding that may be lacking. Certainly, it would be possible to review these points after quickly proceeding through a larger number of debates but, importantly, any feedback about content would no longer be actionable.

Conclusion

What are the results of the above lesson modifications? A quantitative analysis of the effect of the noted changes on student performance would require the collection and analysis of relevant data and would fall outside the scope of the present consideration of teaching practices. However, as each change has been made to specifically address potential shortcomings of an unmodified lesson and to make the course goals more readily achievable, one might suggest that the changes are sound and well-reasoned. Further, as the modifications are in line with established theory and practice, the basis for the modifications appears sound. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, as all modifications are focused on what might be described as lesson accessibility (meaning students' potential ability to effectively engage with the course, its practices, and materials) there is no concern that the alterations have any negative quantitative or qualitative effect on course content.

At the outset of this paper I noted a common question, "How difficult is Debate?" Through the preceding consideration of lesson modifications, we might say that while Debate carries multiple distinct challenges, the potential for many, if not all, of these challenges to stand as a genuine hindrance to learning may be, at least to some significant degree, mitigated.

Looking forward, one might suggest that future avenues of consideration may include the expansion or refinement of the noted modifications with the aim, perhaps, of a redesigned course, or courses, aimed at each proficiency level. This would need to be approached with caution so that the desire to make the course accessible would not conflict with requisite academic rigor. This is to say that modifications that make a lesson more accessible for one proficiency level may make the course less meaningful to students of a higher proficiency level.

An additional future consideration might be the application of some of the noted lesson modifications to other courses. This is a very sensible and actionable consideration, as the difficulties posed by a Debate course are generally not unique to Debate. Demands for argumentation, sound research methodology, logic, and rhetoric recur throughout one's education and, indeed, life.

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