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Critical Thinking, Interaction, and Debates

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Readers will learn how and why to use debates with university-level ESOL students. The author will present the rationale for this activity and include sample student comments.

このプレゼンテーションでは、ESOL生への授業の一貫としてDebateを取り入れる理由、及び方法が述べられている。　ビジネスイングリシュ学ぶ日本人学生に、筆者が同じプロジェクトを指導した実例を、作製したハンドアウトと併せて紹介する。

Introduction

> Hello. This is my pleasure that I can debate on this interesting issue with you. [We will argue that] in 1992, you know, actually Japan already accept to import American apples. However, American apples can't clear our plant restrictions. [You should care because] "fire blight" disease is very serious problem for Japan. Japan is an island country so, sometime disease from oversea make big damage to our ecosystem (Business English student, Summer 2002).

Had you visited my Business English class on debate day, you might have heard an opening statement like this. In this paper, I will explain why I chose to have my students debate, how I prepared the students, and how I (and they) evaluated their performance.

Long Transactional Turns

Brown and Yule (1983) classify communication into two groups: interactional and transactional (p. 11-13). Communication is interactional when the primary purpose is the establishment and maintenance of social relationships, and transactional when its primary purpose is the transmission of information. Of course, there may be important information embedded in a conversation that is mainly interactional or vice versa as in a university lecture whose primary purpose is transactional when professors attempt to build relationships with students.

Brown and Yule (1983) also categorize conversations by length. Utterances of one to two sentences, the brevity of which

renders structure unimportant, are short turns and strings of utterances lasting up to one hour, in which structure is important, are long turns (p. 16). Examples of speech typically done in long turns include lectures, descriptions, explanations, and anecdotes.

The debate is also a model of the transactional long turn in that it requires students to use a structure through which to transmit complex information needed by the opposing team. I chose the debate primarily to create an opportunity for students to improve their skills in understanding and delivering long, transactional turns, which Brown and Yule (1983) say is a more pressing need for international students (p. 24).

Communicative Stress

Brown and Yule (1983) also found that students performed better when communicative stress was low (p. 34). They defined low communicative stress as occasions when students were speaking to peers; students were in a familiar environment; speakers and listeners were at the same level; speakers were transmitting information listeners needed so the speaker was in control and motivated to communicate the information; speakers had control of the vocabulary and information; and the task provided a structure (Brown and Yule, 1983, p. 34). The debate activity meets these criteria as explained below.

Are students speaking to their peers? Yes.

In addition to the fact that students must make long, transactional turns and receive adequate models, practice, and receive adequate feedback (from each of their peers and the instructor), students are speaking to peers. Primarily students are speaking to the opposing side and secondarily to the audience while the instructor sits off to the side and only observes.

Are students in a familiar environment? Yes.

The debate is done at the end of the term in the classroom with classmates and an instructor they know.

Are speakers and listeners at the same level? Yes.

Speakers are transmitting information that listeners need so the speaker is in control and motivated to communicate the information. Participants in the debate must listen for information they can use to defend their positions. Participants must also think of questions to ask during the discussion period. Meanwhile, observers must listen, evaluate, and think of questions to ask at the end.

Do speakers have control of the vocabulary and information? Yes.

Students choose vocabulary and the topic according to their interests but within the constraints of the course content.

Does the task provide a structure? Yes.

Students must use the provided debate structure and enforce their classmates' use of it. The audience evaluates the debaters; one audience member also times each section of the debate and alerts the debaters as deadlines approach and when time has run out. They also use the provided linguistic structures as needed.

Critical Thinking

As the debate teaches students how to make long transactional turns, it also teaches them critical thinking, a valuable piece of understanding North American culture. Culture is embedded into language, so students who have the opportunity to practice the rhetorical patterns and thinking skills increase their understanding of the culture and their ability to thrive in it (Paige, 1993, p. 3, 7). The students studying in English Language Programs at the University of Washington live with American families for up to one year and some do three-month internships in Seattle area businesses, so, providing opportunities for students to practice critical thinking skills in a safe place improves their chances for successful experiences.

Students need basic thinking skills to develop and invent ideas so they can understand assumptions and make credible, concise, and convincing American-style presentations (Presseisen, 1985, p. 45). Furthermore, the half life of information in any given field is approximately 6 years so students need to be able to problem solve and think critically to assimilate new information readily (McTighe & Schollenberger, 1985, p. 3). Being able to do this requires critical thinking: the ability to analyze arguments, generate insight into meanings and interpretations, and to develop cohesive and logical reasoning (Presseisen, 1985, p. 43).

Bloom's Taxonomy divides thinking skills into six categories. The first categories he calls knowledge. This is the ability to recall specifics and universals, to understand methods and to understand processes, patterns, structures, and settings. The second is comprehension, or the ability to know what is being communicated and to make use of such material without relating it to other material or seeing its fullest implications. Application, the third, is the ability to use abstractions and to apply, solve, experiment, prove, and predict. The fourth, analysis, is the ability to clarify communication, to understand how it is organized, to connect, relate, differentiate, classify, arrange, check, group, distinguish, organize, categorize, detect, compare, and infer the message. Synthesis, the fifth, is the ability to produce, propose, design, plan, combine, formulate, compose, hypothesize, and construct. And the final category is evaluation, the ability to appraise, judge, criticize, and decide (Bloom, 1956, p. 201-207). The debate preparation worksheets lead students through all six categories systematically.

Preparing and Evaluating Students

The worksheets explain the rationale behind the activity and the debate format, and provide linguistic structures. Before I have the students choose topics and prepare for the debate, I have them do some practice debates on topics ranging from whether all language teachers should retire at age 30 to all American high school students should study Japanese to men are better than women followed by a debriefing. The goal is to get students thinking about what makes a good debate: research or lively discussion. From there, I lead them through the research, worksheets and practice debates (for information on how to prepare students and the worksheets visit <http://faculty.washington.edu/sensei/debates>).

On debate day, I evaluate students on items ranging from clarity of ideas, use of support, organization, eye contact, volume, to overall quality on a Likert scale from 5 (exceeds expectations) to 3 (meets expectations) to 1 (fails to meet expectations). Meanwhile audience members are also evaluating the debaters on items ranging from which team supported its position more

effectively to which team rebutted its opponents' arguments more effectively to which group had the more difficult case to argue. Consequently, debaters receive feedback not only from the instructor, but also from each of their classmates.

Conclusion

Having my students do this activity proved successful and beneficial. Not only did the students enjoy it because they studied a topic of their choosing in depth, but they also felt more confident with long transactional turns and critical thinking. Moreover, the students discovered that preparing to debate and debating in English was easier than they thought it would be.

In the four years that I have used this activity my students have had intermediate to advanced English skills. The activity can easily be adjusted for lower or higher level students by restricting or expanding debate topics and research sources.

Thank you for listening (Business English student, Summer 2002).

References

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