Teaching debate to low-level learners

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Debates are often assumed to be for advanced learners. This article however, discusses how students with little prior experience of debates can be guided to successfully debate topics of interest to them. Specifically, this article addresses 1) promoting learner ownership of the debate and 2) quickly and effectively developing learners' abilities to formulate and argue their opinions in real time.

しばしば、討論は上級学習者に適していると言われている。本研究では、学生への動機付けとして興味ある題材を使用し、討論の経験が皆無に等しい彼らに対する指導方法を考察する。得に以下の２点に焦点を絞って提言する。１）討論の主導権を握る方法を掴ませる。２）即座に討論できるよう迅速で効果的な方法を発達させる。

Introducing "street debate"

For many, the word "debate" calls to mind images of people in suits behind podiums, arguing in separate timeslots to convince the audience that the other side is wrong. Such a situation would indeed be a type of debate, but I propose a much broader view of the activity; namely, that a debate is any event wherein people disagree with each other and exchange multiple reasons to support their positions in the attempt to persuade each other or onlookers of the legitimacy of their thinking. By this definition, everyday people around the world debate on a regular basis. When two children argue about whose turn it is to take out the trash, (as long as they both give reasons to support their positions) they are debating. When a Japanese boss tries to convince her foreign employee that *natto* (fermented soy beans) is good because it is healthy, and the employee tries to convince her that healthy does not always mean good, they are debating.

Thus, the most common type of debate is informal and impromptu; what I refer to as "street debate." Unlike formal debates, street debates may center on mundane, everyday issues. Another difference between formal and street debate is that, in street debates, participants have little or no time to formulate

their arguments. Also, participants in street debates lack the luxury of separate timeslots in which to argue their positions and therefore must negotiate turn taking while simultaneously thinking of what to say next.

This article describes a mini-curriculum designed to teach street debate to large classes of unmotivated, low proficiency university students. The activities focus on street debate as opposed to formal debate for three main reasons: First, because street debates may concern virtually any topic, low level learners have greater flexibility in finding issues that are both interesting and debatable given their limited experience and language skills. Second, street debate is a skill that is not only useful in academic settings, but also in various informal situations. A learner might, for example, street debate an inconsequential topic as a means of continuing a conversation and developing relations with a new acquaintance. Finally, learning street debate decreases dependence on written aides and long periods of preparation by developing learners' ability to speak, listen and reason fluently with nothing but their wits and experience to assist them. This is a necessary skill for many occupations and, in general, for presenting oneself as an intelligent and assertive person.

This said, it is important to note that at various points this mini-curriculum does employ elements from formal debate such as judges, separated timeslots, and notes to help learners build their ability to street debate. Thus, though I have contrasted formal and street debate for the sake of helping the reader understand the concept of street debate, the two types of debate are no more opposed to each other than the game of cricket is opposed to baseball. Rather, street debate is similar in many ways to formal debate but with less emphasis on constructing sound, factually supported arguments and more emphasis on quickly and fluently communicating basic opinions and reasons. In fact, I have designed this mini-curriculum in part as a stepping stone for learners on the way to more formal debates.

The following discussion consists of two parts. The first summarizes the insights from theory and research which have informed the design of my activities, while the second describes the activities themselves.

Insights from theory and research

Learner autonomy

Ushioda (2003) discusses several benefits of promoting learner autonomy in the language classroom, the most important of which is the idea that learners' tend to know better than teachers what it is that motivates them. Thus, while not allowing students to determine the types of activities we do, I do allow them to decide the debate topics to be used as well as lead them to generate virtually *all* of the meaningful content in the course.

Oral fluency

Increasing learners' oral fluency is a major goal of the activities I have designed. One of the foremost characteristics of oral fluency is, "the ability to talk at length with few pauses" or "the ability to fill time with talk" (Fillmore, 2000, p. 50). My activities develop learners' fluency by 1) focusing on meaning rather than form, 2) limiting the time students have to complete a task, 3) raising

students' consciousness of the number of messages they are able to exchange during a task, and 4) giving learners communication strategies for fluid turn taking.

Cooperative learning

My activities are cooperatively structured for three main reasons: First, working in groups has the potential to generate a greater amount of quality input for acquisition than working in a traditional teacher-fronted class format (Willis, 1996). Second, working cooperatively can also assist learners in developing an explicit understanding of the language or what Krashen refers to as the "monitor" (Krashen, 1985). Kobayashi (2003) supports this second conjecture by providing evidence that students working in groups are able to solve target language problems that, when alone, they are not aware of or do not know how to address. Finally, a cooperative classroom structure decreases pressure on the individual while simultaneously increasing students' motivation to assist each other by making rewards contingent upon group performances (Dörnyei, 1997).

Competition and extrinsic motivators

I group competition and extrinsic motivation together because competitive classroom frameworks tend to emphasize extrinsic rewards (winning, getting higher grades than one's peers, etc.).

There has been much caution against reliance on competition and extrinsic rewards in education since a study by Deci in 1971 and several follow-up studies (summarized in Deci and Ryan, 2002) found that extrinsic rewards actually decreased motivation to do tasks that subjects would have otherwise done out of personal interest. These studies, however, do not address the effects of extrinsic rewards when given for tasks that the performers would *not* normally do on their own initiative. Brown (2001) states that, in the latter case, judiciously employing extrinsic rewards as "short-term reminders of progress may help students to perceive their development" (p. 58). I hypothesize that as learners become more aware of their progress through extrinsic rewards, they gradually recognize the intrinsic value of the activities they are doing. This is the main reason why I choose to employ extrinsic rewards in my debate activities, using "Hughes money" which can be entered into a drawing for an inexpensive prize at end of the semester. Of course, the type of extrinsic rewards one uses should vary according to teaching context, and, as Deci and Ryan indicate, extrinsic rewards are generally counterproductive in contexts where learners are already intrinsically motivated.

With regard to competition, I agree with Dörnyei's 1997 study on cooperative learning that a purely competitive classroom structure is likely to decrease learner motivation and the quality of task performance. However, I have found that competition, if encouraged between groups rather than individuals, actually amplifies the benefits of cooperative learning by increasing group members' willingness to work together: Even if members of a group do not like each other, they are often willing to put aside their differences and cooperate if they know they are working in competition against other groups. Thus, my activities share both cooperative and competitive elements.

Spiral curricula

Bruner (1960) describes the concept of a spiral curriculum wherein core ideas are revisited and built upon further at intervals as one progresses through each lesson. When compared with the traditional linear curriculum, the advantage of a spiral curriculum is that learners are less likely to forget what they worked on previously and more likely to integrate the knowledge and skills they learn with those covered beforehand (Maybin, 2007).

With the benefits of spiral structuring in mind, I have designed my activities so that they introduce basic content and procedures at the beginning and then build on that content and add complexity to those procedures as learners progress. This recycling and modification occurs both within each activity as well as across multiple activities as a combined whole.

Activities

The following describes one auxiliary activity and five main activities that I have used to successfully teach street debate. Each of the main activities requires 30 to 50 minutes to complete.

Talk to Three People (T3)

"Talk to Three People" (henceforth T3) is a simple auxiliary communication activity I employ within more complex activities to familiarize learners with a form or function necessary for an upcoming activity. In T3, students get one or two minutes to stand up and go use the key language pattern with three other students, sitting down when they are finished (or when the time is up). I usually allow students to talk with whoever they want, but sometimes I set limitations (e.g. they cannot talk with members of the same sex). It is very important to do T3 *immediately* after presenting a language item, as it gives students a chance to use and succeed with it right away, before they have a chance to forget it.

Expressing opinions and finding debate topics

The purpose of this activity is to 1) have students express their opinions on various topics, 2) find issues upon which students disagree, and 3) involve students in transforming disagreements into debate topics.

Before class, I create a list of categories of things from learners' daily experience (modes of transportation, university subjects, types of media, vacationing places, etc.). To begin the activity, I post this list on the board and have the following conversation with a volunteer:

> Me: I think [preferred thing within a category of my choice] is the best [that category]. How about you?
>
> Volunteer: I think so too. / I don't think so. I think [preferred thing within the category I used] is the best [that category].
>
> Afterward, students do T3 using this pattern, where the first person to speak chooses the category to be discussed.

For the main activity, I divide the class into teams A, B, C, and D and divide the board into four corresponding

sections. Students do the same thing they did during T3 with the following modifications: 1) whenever they disagree with someone, they go to their team's section of the board and record their disagreement in the form, "[my preferred thing] vs. [other person's preferred thing]"; 2) they may not speak with members of their own team; and 3) they may use categories other than the ones I posted if they wish. Students have two minutes to do the activity. The emphasis is on talking and disagreeing with as many different people as possible. The team with the most disagreements on the board when the time is up wins and each of its members receives Hughes money.

When the competition is finished, I have teams look at the disagreements they listed in their respective sections and ask them, if they had to use two of those disagreements as debate topics which two they would choose. Teams get one minute to make their decision and then one of their members must come up and circle the two topics they decided upon.

At this point we have eight circled topics or less (some teams may have written and circled the same disagreement). I now take a class vote, having students raise their hands to indicate which of the circled topics they would most like to debate. In the case that there is a tie, or most students fail to raise their hands for any of the topics, I take a vote on which topics students *least* want to debate and allow individuals to raise their hands as many times as they want. The top four topics will be our official debate topics for the rest of these activities.

Brainstorming reasons

Students must now develop their ability to generate reasons to support their opinions. The following activity aims to 1) have students formulate reasons to support positions within the four topics chosen in the previous activity, 2) encourage the peer exchange of language and information useful for arguing those positions, and 3) create a reserve of reasons which may be accessed by students when they have difficulty thinking of what to say during later activities.

Before beginning the activity, I post four large sheets of paper on the board. At the top of each sheet is written one of our four official debate topics. Down from the "vs." in each topic, runs a dotted line cutting each sheet in half; one half for one position and one half for the other.

Next, I designate one of the topics and do rock, paper, scissors with a volunteer. The winner decides which position within that topic he or she will take, while the loser takes the opposing position. We then perform the target pattern for this activity. If the topic is Okinawa vs. Hokkaido as a vacationing place, our dialogue might go as follows:

> Me: I think Hokkaido is better than Okinawa because we can snowboard there.
>
> Volunteer: I don't think so. Okinawa is better than Hokkaido because it has nice beaches.

Next, students do T3 using the above *opinion-plus-reason* pattern for the designated topic. After doing T3 for all four topics, I ask students if it was easy for them to think of their reasons quickly. "No," they say. Thus, I propose that we brainstorm reasons together and through this process improve our ability to quickly make and give reasons.

To begin, I divide the class into four teams and number the students within each team. The number one student on each team gets a different colored marker. I explain that we are going to have a reason writing relay. First, the number ones will run up to the board and write a reason supporting a position of their choice under any one of the topics posted on the board. When they finish writing one reason, they will run back and hand their markers to the number twos on their teams, and the twos will run up, write another reason supporting a position within a topic of their choice, and so on until the time (two minutes) is up. Points will be determined by multiplying the number of reasons a team has written by the number of topics that team wrote reasons for. Before beginning the race, I give teams one minute to discuss their brainstorming game plans, encouraging the exchange of useful language and information between students.

When the minute is up, I start the reason relay. Upon finishing, we read through all of the reasons as a class. If a reason is particularly persuasive, I count it as two reasons. If the same reason is written twice under a position I disqualify the latter of the two. I do NOT disqualify reasons for grammar or spelling errors as long as I can understand them. If there are mistakes, I simply correct them and move on.

To calculate each team's score, I count up the reasons written by each team and multiply that number by the number of topics those reasons addressed (four at max). The team with the highest score receives Hughes money.

This activity turns the large sheets of paper on the board into a bank of 100 percent student-generated reasons. The bank will be used as a resource in the next activity and beyond.

Triangle debates

This activity gives learners an opportunity to test out their reason-building skills in a real-time, one-on-one debate. It aims to 1) promote the transfer of reason building skills from the group to the individual, 2) build speaking and listening fluency, and 3) build learner confidence by making students conscious of just how much they can say in only 30 seconds.

Before this activity, I post the previously created reason bank and have students do T3 in the same way we did it during the last activity for each of the four topics. During T3, I leave it up to students to decide whether they will formulate their reasons on their own or resort to taking reasons from the bank on the board.

After T3, I divide students into groups of three, and distribute cardboard plaques to the members of each group. One member gets a red plaque, one a green plaque, and one a plaque with "Judge" written on it. Next I distribute piles of "mini-money" (5x3cm versions of regular Hughes money) to the Judges in each group.

After demonstrating with two volunteers how the activity is done, we begin round one. First, I designate the debate topic by rolling a large die with different topics written on its sides and two sides marked "FREE" (if "FREE" comes up, the students with red plaques may choose the topic themselves). Red students take the position on the left within the designated topic, while Green students take the position on the right (thus for the topic, *Cars vs. Bicycles*, Red will always be *Cars* and Green will always be *Bicycles*). Red starts and gets 30 seconds to argue his or her position using the forms covered in the previous T3 sessions. For every reason Red gives, the judge pays Red one mini-dollar.

When the time is up, Green has 30 seconds to argue his or her position. The judge also provides assistance to speakers when they run out of things to say. Speakers are allowed to look at the reason bank on the board if they must (but they soon discover that reading reasons off the board tends to take longer than just thinking of reasons on their own).

When round one ends, students pass their plaques to group members on their left, and round two begins. After three rounds have finished and each group member has taken on each of the three roles once, members count their mini-money. The members with the most in their group receive full-sized Hughes money. Students now do three more rounds with the goal of getting more mini-money this time than the first time.

Simultaneous triangle debates

This activity has three aims: 1) promote the use of communication strategies in order to manage turn taking during a street debate, 2) promote the creation and recognition of quality reasons rather than simply encouraging quantity, and 3) further increase speaking and listening fluency.

Simultaneous triangle debates are done in the same way as the original triangle debates just described with the following differences:

1) Green and Red no longer receive separate 30-second slots in which to argue their positions but, instead, now share one minute in which they must negotiate turn taking to make their points heard.
2) Before beginning these debates, I teach learners how to use "Yeah, but…" and "Wait!" to control turn taking and have students try out these strategies in a T3 session.
3) Judges give one mini-dollar for average reasons, but give *two* for reasons that are exceptionally persuasive.
4) When "FREE" is rolled, Red may choose *any* topic to debate; Red does not have to choose from the four on the board. (This is because some students may, by this time, become tired of debating the original topics.)
5) I tell groups that after finishing three rounds of the activity, we will do three more rounds with the reason bank taken off the board. This early warning is important, as it gives learners, who hitherto relied heavily on the reason bank, a chance to wean themselves off of it during the first three rounds of debating.

Tag-team debates

This is the final debate activity. The purpose of tag-team debates is to give students an opportunity to use all of the language and skills they have developed up to this point to street debate in front of the entire class and to judge others' street debates.

To warm up, I have students debate one of our four topics with a partner and then debate another one of those topics with a different partner (one minute per debate session).

Afterwards, I divide students into teams of four and distribute a small stack of mini-money to the members of each team. Next, I assign a letter to each group (A, B, C, etc.) and have group members number themselves from 1 to 4.

To decide which two teams will debate first, I use a set of alphabet cards with only the letters assigned to teams included. I have two letters drawn from the deck. The team with the first letter drawn is the Green team. The team with the second letter drawn is the Red team. Both teams stand in the front of the class facing the audience; the Green team on the right and the Red team on the left. The first team to arrive at the front of the class gets ten seconds to designate a topic to debate and choose the position they will argue. If they fail to declare a topic and position, their opponents decide.

I now give teams 30 seconds to discuss their game plans for the debate (e.g. what reasons they will give to support their position and who will be giving which reason). When the time is up, I decide the member from each team who will start the debate using a set of four cards numbered 1 through 4. Teams share two minutes in which to argue their positions while the rest of the class listens. Although the members who had their number drawn must begin the debate, any other member of their team can step forth and take their place at any time during those two minutes. If they so choose, members can jump in one after another saying one reason and then having their place taken by a different member. However, participants who step forth *must do so on their own volition,* and the student speaking cannot step down until this happens (hence the title "Tag-team Debates").

When the time is up, the two teams get a round of applause. Next, I give Hughes money to all team members who took the floor during the debate. Then, groups in the audience get 30 seconds to come to a consensus on which team won the debate. I make sure to emphasize that debate manners are *as* important as the quality of the reasons given (for example, did speakers let their opponents speak when asked to wait?). When the 30 seconds is up, I carry a wide shallow box divided into a red half and a green half around the room. Each member of every group puts one mini-dollar into the side of the box with the color of the team his or her group decided was the winner. Again, group members must agree to all put their money in one or the other side (this discourages favoritism and random voting). Because my box is wide and shallow, I can usually tell at a glance which team received the most mini-money. All members of the winning team receive Hughes money. After, this both teams get one more round of applause, and the next two debate teams are selected. The tag-team debates continue until all of the groups have debated in front of the class.

When we finish, I congratulate everyone on their achievements going from exchanging simple opinions with friends to all-out street debates in front of a live audience.

Summary

This article first introduced the concept and importance of learning how to "street debate" or argue one's position on a topic in the same timeslot as one's opponent with little or no preparation beforehand. The discussion then covered the concepts and theory informing the design of activities for teaching street debate, including learner autonomy,

oral fluency development, cooperative learning, extrinsic motivators, and the benefits of a spiral curriculum. After this, the article described in detail six activities which take learners from giving simple opinions on familiar topics to public street debates in which they support their positions with multiple reasons while using communication strategies to negotiate turn taking and do all of this with only their experience in the prior activities as preparation.

Because the activities discussed lead learners to generate nearly all of the meaningful course content by themselves, the activities are relatively flexible and can be adapted with few changes for use with more advanced learners. Also, although the target language items and patterns demonstrated in the activities are quite basic, one could easily replace these items with more advanced language. Likewise, educators may change the type of extrinsic rewards used to better fit their contexts (e.g. into grade points or extra credit). In any case, I hope this article has served to provide readers with useful ideas on how they might develop or improve their own debate activities and curricula.

Leander Hughes is an assistant professor of English at the Saitama University Center for English Education Development. His research interests include learner autonomy, communicative task effectiveness, teaching English for academic purposes, and computer assisted language learning.

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