

In the Classroom

Debate and the Hokuriku University ESS Club

James A. Matchett
Hokuriku University
matchettja@yahoo.com

“It is difficult for us. That’s why almost all of people coming today have never experience a debate. Some says it is a weak point about debates for Japanese generally. This is a good opportunity.”

President of HESSA

On December 10, 2011 the HESSA (Hokuriku English Speaking Society Association) debate contest was held in Kanazawa. Participating in the event were four teams from three universities: one from Toyama University, one from Hokuriku University and two from Kanazawa University. In October, members of the Hokuriku University ESS (English Speaking Society) club approached me and asked for help in preparing for the contest. At the first meeting later that month, I quickly determined that the members had little experience with debate, so the first order of business would be giving them some fundamentals. When I asked them the topics to be debated, they replied there were three: whether or not nuclear power plants should be banned, whether or not animals should be kept in zoos, and whether real names or anonymous names should be used for social network systems. The following is a description of the process the students and I went through in order to help them get ready for the debate contest. I did not know which style of debate they would be doing, but I decided to prepare them in American Parliamentary Debate (see Appendix 1), the style used in *Discover Debate* and the one I was most familiar with. In point of fact, they actually did Cross-examination Debate (see Appendix 2) in the contest, but I didn’t find this out in time to practice it with students.

Giving Opinions and Supporting with Reasons

For the next meeting I found some information online about zoos and handed it out. The students took sides and we had an informal discussion about the merits and demerits of keeping animals in zoos. Most were against the idea, thinking it inhumane and cruel to confine animals in small spaces, but one member argued it was necessary to keep animals in captivity to do proper research. After the discussion, I gave them some exercises (see Motegi, Suzuki & Hesse, 1999, pp 50-53) designed to state main points and provide reasons to back up their opinions. I then divided the group into two teams to prepare an affirmative and negative constructive speech for the resolution “Nuclear power plants in Japan should be banned”.

The First Constructive Speeches: Signposting, Giving Reasons and Evidence

In the first practice debate, the two teams presented their respective cases on the nuclear power plant resolution. The affirmative team had three points: alternative power, waste disposal, and safety, arguing that alternative power was available, a lot of radioactive waste from power plants must be buried and, in the case

of an accident, such as the recent disaster at Fukushima, radioactive contamination might occur. The negative points were cleanliness, efficiency and necessity. They argued that nuclear power doesn't produce much carbon dioxide, it is economical, and Japan doesn't have enough alternative energy sources to take care of the country's need for power and electricity.

When they had finished presenting their affirmative and negative cases, it was time to work on refutations. I gave the students some exercises (see Lubetsky, LeBeau and Harrison, 2000, pp 62-67) on how they could divide points into two categories; that something is not true or it is not important. Using their arguments, I pointed out the affirmative could argue that it was not really important how efficient nuclear power was if it wasn't safe and peoples' lives were in danger. As for cleanliness, they could say it wasn't really true that nuclear power is clean if dangerous radioactive waste is left over. On the negative side, I showed how they could argue alternative power sources wouldn't be very helpful if Japan didn't have the capacity to produce them. The students began to get the idea of refutation and we decided to try it out in the next practice debate.

The Second Constructive Speech: Refuting and Rebuilding

Still working on the nuclear power topic in the next debate, students presented the constructive speeches and practiced some refutation beginning with the first negative constructive speech and continuing in the second affirmative and negative speeches. I had emphasized that in the second speech, they needed to attack and then rebuild what the opponents had attacked. This they did fairly well considering it was their first try. Finally I gave them some information (Lubetsky, LeBeau and Harrison, 2000, pp 108-109) on rebuttal in which they summarize the main points and show why their side had superior arguments. It was time for them to try out a complete debate, including rebuttal speeches, on the resolution that "Real names should be used for a social network system". They divided themselves into two teams for the debate and prepared for what would be their last practice before the debate contest.

A Full Debate—Sort of

Several difficulties presented themselves in the last practice debate. One was my unfamiliarity with the topic, since I was not, at that time, a member of any social network services (SNS). I was hoping they knew more about the topic than I did, but soon after they started another difficulty surfaced. Students had researched and gotten information in Japanese and then tried to translate into English. Because of their translation difficulties, it became extremely challenging for me to understand what they were trying to say, especially the first affirmative speaker. Even worse, A., the first negative speaker, suddenly developed a severe case of speaker's block and would not say anything, no matter how hard we tried to coax her. I wasn't sure how they would finish the debate, but finally N., the strongest debater present, took over, providing some key points and helping others to explain theirs. Most of the arguments revolved around privacy issues and whether a real or false name would better protect people in an SNS. Thus ended their last practice debate. The next time they would be facing another university team in front of a judge.



The HU ESS club debate team in action

Results

Unfortunately, I was not able to see the contest but I heard about the results afterwards. In the first round, Hokuriku University faced the Kanazawa University "A" team, the topic being "The nuclear power plants should be built additionally"[sic]. They were on the affirmative, meaning they were in support of nuclear power. Since we had practiced this topic, they had some good arguments and were able to win the debate.

The Kanazawa University "B" team, which had defeated Toyama University in the first round, was the next opponent in the championship round. The topic for debate was "When you use SNS, you should be anonymous

[sic].” HU was again the affirmative team, in support of anonymous names for social network services. This time they lost, one of the reasons no doubt being because I was not able to adequately help them prepare this topic.

Reflections

So what had the students gained from this experience? I asked one student, N., to consult with other team members and give me some feedback about how they felt about doing debate. This is his statement, uncorrected.

We participated in English debate contest for the first time. We didn't know how to debate, so we needed to take knowledge of debate. At first, we debated about the theme in Japanese. Secondly, we collected to persuasive opinions in debate and it translated Japanese into English. Finally, we debated about the theme in English. When we started this practice way, we couldn't insist our opinion because we embarrassed to speak to myself opinion. Beside, our opinions lack of persuasiveness. In order to improve such a situation, we increased club activity days for debate practice. After that we were making gradual progress to debate that tried to debate again and again. It was very hard but we realized that we were fascinated with interesting of debate.

The contest day, we didn't shy to speak in front of people. And our team was able to positively insist to persuasive opinions. As a result we won the first match. Through we participated in English debate contest, we got logical thinking and aggressiveness. We think they are important for win to debate. If we also get an opportunity to English debate contest, we want to try to do again.

I give the students a lot of credit for participating and doing something extremely difficult, debating in their non-native language in front of an audience. I was especially proud of A. for accomplishing something she was unable to do in practice; namely, speak in front of a group. From their own statements above, it is clear they were able to overcome shyness and argue aggressively. Moreover, I believe that through this practice they learned several fine points of debate, such as how to support opinions with evidence and refute arguments. Thus, paraphrasing the words of the HESSA president, it was a good opportunity for them.

References

- Lubetsky, Michael, Charles LeBeau & David Harrington (2000) *Discover Debate-Basic Skills for Supporting and Refuting Opinions*. Language Solutions, Inc.
- Motegi, Hideaki, Katsuyoshi Suzuki & Stephen Hesse (1999) *Taking Sides-Critical Thinking for Speech, Discussion and Debate*. Tokyo: Kinseido

Appendix 1: American Parliamentary Debate

First Affirmative Constructive Speech

The speaker introduces the resolution and states the affirmative case with main points, reasons and evidence. Tries to show the present system is not working and there is a need for change.

First Negative Constructive Speech

The speaker refutes the affirmative case and states the negative case with main points, reasons and evidence. Tries to show that the present system is working and there is no need to change.

Second Affirmative Constructive Speech

The speaker answers the negative attacks, rebuilds the affirmative case and refutes the negative's main points. Tries to show that the affirmative plan for change will work better than the present system does.

Second Negative Constructive Speech

The speaker answers the affirmative attacks, rebuilds the negative case and continues to refute the affirmative main points. Tries to show that the affirmative plan for change will make the situation worse than it is now.

Negative Rebuttal Speech

The speaker continues attacking the opponent's case while rebuilding the negative case without introducing any new main points. Summarizes and tries to show why the negative side should win the debate.

Affirmative Rebuttal Speech

The speaker continues attacking the opponent's case while rebuilding the affirmative case without introducing any new main points. Summarizes and tries to show why the affirmative side should win the debate.

Note: Constructive speeches are usually 8 minutes in length and rebuttal speeches are 4 minutes, but that may vary. Also there might be four rebuttal speeches instead of two.

Appendix 2: Cross-examination Debate

This style basically has the same format as American Parliamentary Debate but there are two significant differences. First, the constructive speeches are shorter and when the speaker finishes, the opponent "cross-examines" by asking some pointed questions designed to show some weakness in the case. The HESSA debates had this order:

1. Affirmative Constructive Speech (2 minutes)
2. Negative strategy time (2 minutes) Cross Examination (4 minutes) Strategy time (3 minutes) Negative refutation and Constructive Speech (2 minutes)
3. Affirmative strategy time (2 minutes) Cross Examination (4 minutes) Strategy time (3 minutes) Refutation (2 minutes)
4. Negative strategy time (2 minutes) Cross Examination (2 minutes) Strategy time (3 minutes) Refutation (2 minutes)
5. Affirmative strategy time (2 minutes) Cross Examination (2 minutes)
6. Strategy time (3 minutes)
7. Negative rebuttal (2 minutes)
8. Affirmative rebuttal (2 minutes)