

Debate to Bring Students Together

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While the use of debate in ESL classes is recognized as a positive and beneficial practice, it does not necessarily appeal to all teachers. I myself did not have any particular educational background in spoken debate in Britain, where it is something largely equated with parliament and the hallowed environment of the Oxford and Cambridge Unions, rather than its more widespread role in education in the U.S. However, what I did experience in education, including the examination system, was a strong focus on critical type essays, which mirror debates in many ways.

So, what can debate bring to the Japanese educational environment, particularly at tertiary level? In this article, I discuss this and focus on one particular situation, which the editor of this journal, James Venema, and myself, experienced. In the Spring 2012 semester, we carried out debate classes independently at our respective universities, with the aim of a final debate to bring teams of students from our classes together.

Teaching Situations and Benefits of Debate

To briefly explain our differing situations, while James teaches at a private women's university, I teach at a co-educational public university of education. Readers are likely to see a potential mismatch between the latter, with its more uniformly higher level students and the former, which like many private universities is affected by changing Japanese demographics causing a lowering in competition to enter and where students are more varied in ability level. However, this points to the first of the benefits which I would like to highlight of such a debate course, motivation. James believes strongly that the ultimate goal of facing students from a higher-ranked university can be something challenging and empowering which can raise the abilities and confidence of students.

Two more benefits which I would like to point to are, firstly, the activation of students' oral and intellectual abilities. There has now been a long history and development of communicative classes, albeit they have far from replaced more traditional modes in Japan. However, classes often remain teacher-centered, with teachers sometimes taking too much control leaving students in a passive and subordinate role, both educationally and when it comes to active use of the target language. Secondly, the use of debate readily offers the opportunity to truly combine language and content, which I feel is essential at university level. In turn, a strong focus on content offers the opportunity for students to realistically practice research skills and move away from the fact oriented education and examinations which they have experienced before university.

How did we successfully operate both independently and with the shared final purpose indicated above? This was achieved by both teachers making use of James Venema's proto-coursebook, *An Introduction to Debate* (unpublished), which introduces key concepts such as deciding propositions (resolutions) and their different types, the use of “signposts” and “supports”, and the criteria in judging debates.

Debate Content

With regard to content, here I focus on what I am more familiar with, which is what my classes did, as opposed to what James's classes did. Although in previous debate classes, I have used the topics in the coursebook *Debating the Issues* (Macmillan Language House), in this semester, I decided to focus on the following four areas: education, young people, immigration, and the Olympics. These were chosen for various reasons, including their relationship to a course with a more historical focus in the following semester, the opportunity for cross-cultural comparison (particularly between Britain and Japan), closeness or relevance to their own experience, and timeliness (especially in the case of the Olympics which were about to be held in London). Background material on content included items of vocabulary development (particularly from *Key Words for Fluency* (Thomson+Cengage), questionnaires, and authentic reading and video items. The latter included such content as: a student caught up in riots in the UK in 2011 (*The Daily Mail* newspaper), differing attitudes of immigrants towards Britain (P. Panayi, *The Impact of Immigration*, Manchester University Press), the changing role of women in the Olympics (*The Independent* newspaper) and contrasting Olympic sprinters, Jesse Owens (1936) and Usain Bolt (2008/2012) (BBC video).

Development using this content was going on in parallel with teams preparing for a debate on each topic. In general, three class meetings were used for each topic, with the teams and proposition being decided in the first lesson, with the teams having some time for preparation (in addition to that done out of class time) during the second lesson, and the debate itself taking place during part of the third lesson. Logistics offered both benefits and challenges. With a fairly large class of 29, it gave the opportunity to break up the class, with the two current debate groups, of three members each, going to separate locations, and the remaining students staying in the main classroom. While it might seem to be a challenge to find three simultaneous locations, the unfortunate effects of staff downsizing due to budget reductions have readily provided such locations. More challenging is organizing the class so that the debate teams can be helped at the same time as the main class (those students who are not team members for that topic) is going on, and careful timing, particularly at the problematic preparation stage for refutation speeches (see below), to give the debate teams adequate time to prepare while keeping the main class positively occupied.

Organization of the Debates

Before turning to the organization of the final debate, I just briefly consider the organization of the debates in general. As indicated above, good propositions were developed and a vote taken on the best, the formation of debate groups was literally “out of a hat (a bag)”, and the order in which the groups spoke was by “rock, scissors, paper”. Video clips of debates (usually broadcast weekly on BBC World) were shown to give an idea of the atmosphere of a real debate, and the idea of “before and after” voting by the audience (other class members) to see if they were “swayed” was borrowed. Until our fourth debate, we had two teams of three, but in preparation for the final joint debate, we had two groups of four members in our fourth debate.

I now come to the final joint-debate and would like to consider some of the issues in its organization. On this occasion, it was decided that the debate would be held at James's university, following previous debates held once each at our respective universities, but by no means annually. So, what were the issues? The first main issue was location and access. The Nagoya area has numerous universities, but neither of ours are ideally located, being respectively in the north east (his) and south east outskirts (mine). With most public transport radiating from the centre, that really necessitated the use of cars. The second issue was timing. Although

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universities in Japan follow a generally similar timetable, there were still issues to cope with. While we both had our regular classes on Wednesday mornings, the times were different. At my university, there is the rather typical setting aside of Wednesday afternoons for meetings (faculty) and club activities (students). (As many teachers will know, the latter are central to many students' lives.) On the particular date chosen, some students also had to get back for a meeting connected with a later teaching practice period. James was able to come to an agreement with another teacher in a Media Studies reading class to use that class time for the debate. The third issue was team selection. While James used a hybrid system of teacher recommendations and student voting to choose the strongest students, I had a more "mixed bag", as, logistically, we could not take the whole class. Therefore, my teams (two teams of four, plus a standby person for each team) were made up of those who had not already taken part in a debate (basically compulsory) and those who particularly wanted to go and who did not have conflicting appointments. The debate was scheduled in our 15th class in both cases, but I still had one more class (16th), which I made voluntary for those who went to the inter-university debate. The fourth issue was topic and proposition selection. In the weeks leading up to the debate, James' s students first offered a list of possible propositions on accessible themes. My students selected five of them in order and a collective final decision was made. We thus decided to have two debates on the following propositions:

1. "Smoking should be banned in all public buildings in Japan."
2. "The legal drinking age in Japan should be lowered to 18 years old."

For each proposition two members handled the affirmative speech and two the refutation, partly to reduce time pressure. The final issue was judging. Obviously, it was easier for teachers at the debate site (one full-time and one part-time) to fill this role. As you will see, any doubts about impartiality were dispelled by the results.

Debate Day

So, what happened on the day? Nine of us and myself arrived in two cars, plus one (more sweatily) by underground and bus. The host students welcomed us and after opening remarks from the student MCs (a role which also offers useful experience) and James, the first stage speeches (five minutes each for positive and negative speeches) for the first resolution were immediately followed by those for the second resolution, allowing the team concerned with the former to start on their refutation speeches as soon as possible, to shorten the break time. Although this was subsequently longer than the planned five minutes, as necessitated by the undoubted challenge of rapidly responding to at least somewhat unexpected arguments, we remained basically on schedule. There was another five minutes maximum for each of the refutation speeches. After a brief discussion, the judges tied one debate and gave the other to my students. All students were presented with a certificate with their name. Although a small point, it offered a welcome degree of 'validation'. I gave the final words, completing a balance between our institutions.

What were the final benefits for the students? As I indicated in my final words to the audience and debaters, both my students and I were impressed by the abilities of the opposing teams. The results were close. From my memory, the opponents performed the best among the three debate sessions we have had over the years. It appeared that this event had motivated everybody and we looked forward to the next session, hopefully one year on. In addition, the teams had benefited from a wider range of feedback from judges other than their regular teachers concerning their strengths and weaknesses. My personal wish is to look more closely at the strategies and dynamics of such debates and I hope to contribute an article on this to a future issue of *Mask & Gavel*.

In conclusion, both James and I would strongly recommend that you consider the challenge of such an inter university joint-debate if you are able to find willing participants. If you are near enough to us geographically, why not join us?

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