

In the Classroom

Connecting Reading to Speaking & Listening Through Debate

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Quick Guide

Keywords: Debate, literature, parliamentary debate, reading, speech

Learner English Level: Intermediate – advanced

Learner Maturity: Junior high school and above

Activity Time: 1-2 class periods (for preparation and debate)

Materials: Novel, stop watch

Novels are excellent tools for teachers to introduce vocabulary and are often used to explain the meaning and nuance of words. The use of both graded readers and authentic texts has been increasing in popularity in the ESL and EFL communities, especially in reading classes. However, speaking and listening classes can also benefit from the use of novels and this can lead to cross-class connections. Using novels as a source of debate material allows students to practice and reinforce language learned in their reading classes while encouraging them to explore the ideas, characters, and issues presented in the readings in a deep and meaningful way.

Preparation

Before this activity, all students should read the same novel. The type of book, with the possible exceptions of biographies and histories, does not matter. I personally have used both Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and John Grisham's *The Client*, in graded reader form, with equal success. Students should learn the vocabulary, discuss plot points, and do character analysis as they normally would in a reading class until the book is finished.

Procedure

First Class Period

Step 1: Divide the class into small groups. Ask the students to come up with around three questions about the ideas, themes, characters, or problems faced in the book. These questions can be very specific to the novel discussed or extrapolated from its content. For example, in the case of *Frankenstein* there were questions ranging from *Who is responsible for the deaths in the novel: Dr. Frankenstein or the creature?* to *Do scientists have the right to create life?* Students may need some help coming up with good questions.

Step 2: Have students exchange their questions with another group. Ask them to come up with arguments and support for both sides of the questions their classmates asked. The students may take notes on the questions and discussion. This step only needs to be done once, but you may continue switching papers until all groups have had the chance to take notes on each other's papers.

Before the next class period, turn one of the questions into a debate motion. For example, in the earlier example of "*Do scientists have the right to create life?*" you might get either "This House believes that scientists have the right to create life" or "This House believes that scientists do not have the right to create life." You may choose the motion yourself based on what you think would be the easiest to make into a fair debate, or older students may want to choose a motion for themselves.

Second Class Period

Step 1: Choose the debaters and ask them to come to the front of the room. In earlier debates, you may want to specifically pick stronger students to model the activity, although I tend to let students volunteer or just pick them at random. Decide the Affirmative/Government and Negative/Opposition teams (again, either at random or by mutual agreement) and assign a motion. Students have 10-20 minutes to prepare.

Step 2: Have the audience vote on the motion before the debate by using a slip of paper or an online survey. They should choose one of the following: agree, disagree or undecided. Gather the results. I use an online survey tool like Kahoot! to tally the scores.

Step 3: Debate on the topic in your preferred style, using a stop-watch to keep track of the time per speech. I use Parliamentary Debate Association (PDA) style with 15-minutes of preparation, three-minute constructive speeches, and two-minute reply speeches because it fits into one 50-minute class period. I also prefer parliamentary style because it is more like natural conversation than evidence-heavy styles.

Step 4: When the debate is finished, ask the audience members to vote again. This time there should be only two options: agree or disagree. The group with the highest degree of positive change wins.

Adaptation

While debate may seem like an advanced activity, it can be practiced with lower level students. In this case, the flow of a debate needs to be explained with more scaffolding and Japanese support, depending on time constraints. I give my students an outline and encourage them to make their sentences on the spot, but it is also possible to make a blank “script” that students can fill in with their own information. Students may also benefit from watching a debate, either in English or Japanese, before jumping in themselves.

In terms of the content itself, both graded readers and original novels work for this activity. Simple stories, such as “The Boy Who Cried Wolf” or “Beauty and the Beast” are good options for young students or those with a limited vocabulary.

Smith: Connecting Reading to Speaking & Listening Through Debate

Option

Continue debating using other topics discussed in the first class period. This allows all students an opportunity to try debating on the same book and allows the teacher to cover multiple aspects of the text.

Extension

Ask students to write a reflection about what they learned. They should include comments about both the content of the debate (their feelings about the arguments and evidence presented compared to their own ideas and beliefs) and the debate itself (the importance of speech manner, organization, etc.).

Conclusion

Giving students the opportunity to discuss and debate about topics related to their reading in another class allows for a deeper understanding of and connection to the ideas and situations in that text. As teachers, we are always looking for ways to increase our students' understanding and interest in what we teach. Using debate to bring the issues and ideas presented in a text to life in the real world is one way to achieve this goal.

Mikaela Smith is a Southern California native who has been in Japan since 2012. She received a bachelor's degree with honors from California State University, Fullerton in Modern Languages in 2011 and graduated with her Masters in Teaching from the University of Southern California in 2012. She currently teaches at Keio Shonan Fujisawa Junior & Senior High School in Kanagawa.

