

In the Classroom

Speed Debate for Beginners

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Quick Guide

Keywords: Debate

Learner English level: Low-intermediate and above

Learner maturity: High school and above

Preparation time: None

Activity time: 45 - 60 minutes

Materials: Blackboard and chalk or whiteboard and markers.

Notes: For demonstration purposes the activity works best with a pair of teachers.

Debate is often considered one of the most challenging techniques to bring into an ESL classroom. The expectation of a good debater is someone with advanced language skills, a breadth of knowledge, and the ability to react and aggressively argue a point of view. While these qualities are certainly desirable and useful as one gains experience, they are not explicitly necessary, especially for students who are new to debate.

Like any challenge, there are certainly easy first steps that can be practiced to gain confidence and experience, and to build towards more complex and advanced language use later.

The goal of this speed debate exercise is to quickly develop the most basic debate skills using easy language.

All experienced ESL teachers are familiar with situations where students have English ability but are shy about expressing what they know. Perhaps they are second-guessing their responses or checking and double checking their answers in their heads before finally getting the confidence to try to respond. This method of answering can be safer but is not very efficient for learning and can slow the pace of a class with larger numbers of students. Additionally, slow and deliberate responses are not ideal for a debate setting.

I wanted to develop an activity in the framework of a competitive speed game to put students in a situation where they did not have time to second guess or rehearse their responses. I also wanted to make sure that in this debate activity they would not be punished for making mistakes.

It is important to start with the basics. For more advanced debate, one of the most important aspects of presenting an effective argument is to be objective, giving reasons to support a point of view that are not personal in nature. This speed debate activity is ignoring that aspect of debate for a couple of reasons. When starting out, the primary objective is a speedy response and students are naturally more able to express their own likes and opinions firsthand than they are able to speak about researched details or logical, universal truths. Objectivity is an aspect that should be tackled much later, once the students have become comfortable with the structure of a debate speech and the experience of constructing counter arguments. At this stage, largely personal or simple responses are perfectly acceptable.

The Activity

This is an overview of the steps to Speed Debate.

Round 1

1. Teachers explain and demonstrate.
2. Divide class into debate teams.
3. Student write one- or two-word reasons for their position on the topic decided upon.
4. Award a point to the faster team.

Round 2

5. Teachers explain and demonstrate.
6. Students put previous reasons into sentences.
7. Award a point for the faster team.

Round 3

8. Teachers explain and demonstrate.
9. Students put sentences into debate speech structure.
10. Award a point to the faster team.

Description

Round 1

The first step in Speed Debate is to demonstrate the activity. Modeling with just a minimal explanation is the most efficient and effective way to show the students how the activity is done.

Sample explanation:

“Now we will have a speed debate. The fastest side will win. English mistakes are okay. Easy answers are okay. One-word answers or two-word answers only, please. No sentences. The fastest side will win. Please watch.”

For demonstration in my own classes, I usually model using the topic of Disney vs. Ghibli. These are both animation studios that Japanese students are very familiar with and that have

distinct differences. Anything that can connect with one's own students is good for the demonstration.

The lead teacher is on one side of the board, and another teacher is on the other side. Ideally, one will have time to talk about this activity with the other teacher before class begins, but it isn't necessary. If the activity and its explanation are simple and clear enough for students, it should be clear enough for other teachers hearing about the activity for the first time. If there is not another teacher on hand, the activity can be demonstrated, albeit less effectively, by only showing one side.

Under each debate topic, the numbers 1-5 should be written on the board as well. (See Figure 1).

Figure 1

Debate reasons table (blank)

Ghibli	Disney
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.
5.	5.

The teacher begins modeling the activity by saying something like, *"I think Ghibli is better. The other teacher thinks Disney is better. Why? Are you ready? Go!"* Both teachers then quickly write one or two-word answers. For demonstration purposes it can be effective to purposely misspell a word on each side while playing. For example, see Figure 2.

Figure 2

Debate reasons table (one or two word answers)

Ghibli	Disney
1. colorful	1. songs
2. female characters	2. karacters
3. musik	3. Aladdin
4. Totoro	4. old stories
5. Japanese	5. cute

Whichever teacher finishes writing their list first makes a big show of it to make it clear that the quicker side is the winner of the activity. The class is shown that the winning side gets one point for finishing the first round. Check the answers and spelling after awarding the point. It is important to award the point first before reviewing and correcting to further enforce that speed is the only determining factor in deciding the winner of the activity. If possible, it is best to leave the teachers' answers up for demonstrating the objectives of the next round later.

Now it is the students' turn. Four or five reasons on each side is ideal. Four or five students line up on each side of the board. The teacher explains that student number one writes reason number one, student number two writes reason number two, and so on. If it is a small class of eight to ten students this works perfectly. If there are 20 students or less, the game can be played in a couple of rounds; the first half of the class plays the first round while the others watch, then the topic is changed and the remaining students do the next set. With a larger class of 40 students, one teacher could take half the class to the front of the room and the other teacher could run another speed debate at the board in the back of the class so there are more students active and engaged at all times. For an odd numbers of students, a teacher can jump in to even the teams out as well.

It is best to give the students very simple debate topics with lots of easy reasons, at least for the first time this activity is played. Some good examples are: summer vs. winter, Disneyland vs. Universal Studios Japan, Japanese food vs. Western food, etc. These topics are culturally specific and relevant to my own Japanese students, so it is good for other teachers to be mindful of bringing in topics that are within their students' own knowledge and personal experience.

The teacher can divide the class into sides based on their real opinions or just divide the group into two teams. It is fine if the teams are uneven, as long as the number of reasons each team writes is the same. Regardless of whether this activity is aimed at low-level ESL students or advanced speakers, it is best to start easy and simple, and work up to the more complex language or topics later. The students should be reminded that the objective is speed, not correct English, advanced vocabulary, or strong reasons.

The first round is played out and the quicker team is awarded with one point. Then it is time to go back and check for spelling. The reasons should be checked while being very lenient since the objective at this stage is speed rather than quality of content. If one of the reasons is really far off point, it should be corrected and changed so the reasons make sense for the next round.

Round 2

For the demonstration of round two, the teachers return to the board where they had written their original five reasons about Disney vs. Ghibli.

Sample Explanation

“Round two. Make sentences. The fastest side will win. Short, simple sentences are best. Mistakes are okay. The fastest side will win. Are you ready? Go!”

Both teachers use their previously written reasons and put them into sentences (see Figure 3). As before, for demonstration purposes, it can be useful to purposely include a mistake or two.

Again, whichever teacher finishes their sentences first clearly celebrates to demonstrate they won with speed.

Figure 3

Debate reasons table (sentences)

Ghibli	Disney
1. colorful The movies are colorful.	1. songs There are fun songs.
2. female characters There are good female characters.	2. characters There are great characters.
3. music There is nice music.	3. Aladdin Aladdin is a good movie.
4. Totoro Totoro is a good movie.	4. old stories They use old stories.
5. Japanese They are Japanese.	5. cute The characters are cute.

As in round one, the point is awarded to the faster side first, *then* the sentences are checked for grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

Optional

If the teacher really wants to make a point of demonstrating that simple is best, at least for this activity, they could conspire with the other teacher ahead of time for one to write very simple sentences and the other to write lengthy ones. Then after points are awarded they can make the

following point: *"These sentences are better answers and have better English, but the short sentences won."*

Now it is the students' turn for round two. Using the same reasons they wrote for round one, they convert those one or two word answers into sentences. For an additional challenge, the student order could be changed so they have to write sentences for reasons that were supplied by different students.

Round two is played and the faster team is awarded a point. To keep things tidy and clear, this is a good time to erase the responses from round one while leaving the full sentences on the board.

Round 3

Now for the third and final round of speed debate. This can be a good opportunity to go over the words: introduction, reasons, and conclusion, particularly if these are new vocabulary to the students. It is also effective to have the students repeat the simple introduction and simple conclusion sentences so the students get the rhythm and pronunciation.

Sample instructions

"This is a debate. A debate speech must have an introduction, reasons, and a conclusion. Here is a simple debate introduction.

I think A is better than B.

Next, after the introduction, are the reasons in full sentences. Last, is the conclusion. Here is a simple debate conclusion:

For these reasons, I think A is better than B."

Having taught the simple introduction and conclusion, the teachers are ready to demonstrate the final round of the speed debate. The final round is simply plugging in the introduction, reading the five sentences created during round two, and then plugging in the

conclusion at the end (see Figure 4 for an example). The teachers take turns, each reading their full speed debate speech, while also timing their readings. Whoever reads the speech in a shorter amount of time is the winner.

Figure 4

Debate reasons table (speech version)

<p>Ghibli</p> <p>I think Ghibli is better than Disney.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. The movies are colorful.2. There are good female characters.3. There is nice music.4. Totoro is a good movie.5. They are Japanese. <p>For these reasons, I think Ghibli is better than Disney.</p>
<p>Disney</p> <p>I think Disney is better than Ghibli.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. There are fun songs.2. There are great characters.3. Aladdin is a good movie.4. They use old stories.5. The characters are cute. <p>For these reasons, I think Disney is better than Ghibli.</p>

Each team of students chooses one member to read their team's whole constructed speech. The chosen students from each team take turns presenting and the teacher times each side giving a point to the faster speaker. Depending on the remaining time in class, different students may attempt to read the same speech again, competing against a new opponent on the other team.

The activity can continue, changing the students' teams and the debate topics for the remaining time available in class. Once the students have played the game as teams a number of times and they are familiar with the debate format, it could be leveled up even further.

In my own experience, after completing a few speed debates of different topics I have had success with asking for two volunteers to make a new speed debate on any two sides of some simple debatable topic. For example, the two students could choose two movies or singers and debate which one is better. I timed that competition, awarding the speedier debater to be the winner.

I also like to take a moment at this point of the class to call attention to the fact that the students have developed a full debate speech with an introduction, reasons, and a conclusion with absolutely no preparation time, and that they have delivered that full speech very quickly.

Extension

This speed debate activity can be used multiple times across multiple classes. The first time the goal was speed. The next time the class meets, the speed debate activity could be re-used exactly the same but this time, spelling, grammar, and punctuation are important. Perhaps points are given for each mistake-free task as well as to the quicker team. The teacher could give bonus points if a team can find a mistake in their opponents' sentences and fix them.

The third session, the focus could be on effective or objective reasons rather than speed or lack of mistakes. Judgment for effective reasons could be given to the teachers or a student who is not in either group but is assigned to be the judge.

Conclusion

I believe this type of activity works well to break students out of the habit of sentence writing that favors slow and deliberate translation. With the activity's clear and easy framework, the students should be able to realize that they have more ability to respond quickly and have more natural responses in English.

I developed this activity for use at a high-level English Intensive Course high school and have used it there successfully several times. Students were not only able to complete the tasks of the activity effectively, but there was smiling, laughing, and excitement throughout the class.

I also had opportunities to try it at high schools with low-level students, and to my surprise they were just as successful as the more advanced school. To me this shows that the objectives of the activity effectively teach the foundational building blocks of a debate speech while also giving students the practice they need to produce language without overthinking and just reacting in a natural, communicative way.

Zach Strickland came to Japan 15 years ago and has taught all ages and education levels from infants to seniors. He was a member of the Pirates of the Dotombori bilingual, improv comedy group for 10 of those years and performed across Japan and Asia while also teaching performance workshops. He lives with his wife and daughters in Osaka.

