

ՄԵԹՈԴԻԿԱ / METHODOLOGY

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46991/FLHE/2023.27.1.067>

Liana BARSEGHYAN*
Yerevan State University

CLASSROOM DEBATING: BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES FOR UNDERGRADUATE EFL STUDENTS

The paper aims to reveal the benefits and challenges of classroom debate for undergraduate students. Speaking is the ultimate target in English language teaching. However, this is the language skill that students struggle most with. Some of the underlying reasons are fear of making mistakes, lack of background knowledge on the subject matter, insufficient vocabulary and grammar. Another significant factor is methods of teaching that might arouse interest, affect willingness to engage in the active learning process or, on the contrary, demotivate learners and hinder participation. The present study attempts to investigate the peculiarities of debate implementation, the role of the given tool in EFL teaching. It is a qualitative descriptive study based on observation method and a questionnaire to gather data on students' perceptions and attitudes towards their participation in a series of class debating.

Key words: *debate technique, Oxford-style debate, debate format, proposition and opposition sides, motion, mastery of speaking skill, critical thinking*

Introduction

The majority of foreign language students prioritize speaking skill as their ultimate goal. As Dr. B. Sayin states, “Acquisition of speaking skills is among the most essential language skills for students currently, since language competency is measured through speaking. Every language learner desires to acquire correct communicative skills and fluency in speaking, while teachers

* barseghyanliana@ysu.am



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

Received: 10/04/2023

Revised: 29/05/2023

Accepted: 30/05/2023

© The Author(s) 2023

aim to give the necessary education” (Sayin, 2015, p. 827; see also Galstyan, 2021). G. Liao believes that speaking is of the utmost importance in daily interactions as initial judgements about an individual’s language competence are usually formed based on their ability to talk clearly and fluently (Liao, 2009). Ample research has been conducted to find out how this task can be cleverly fulfilled to secure fluency, efficient knowledge acquisition, in the meantime involving all four language skills in the process.

In his paper on teaching speaking K. Hayriye distinguishes various types of classroom speaking activities, such as communication games, discussions, role plays, information gaps, brainstorming, storytelling, story completion, reporting, case studies, simulation, role play, picture narrating and of course debating (Hayriye, 2006).

D. Firmansyah suggests that debating on motivating issues is probably the best way to boost interest, research, reading, listening and speaking skills through team work and cooperation. Moreover, it develops critical thinking and problem solving capabilities in students. He claims that debating is a great speaking activity for language learners because it engages students in a variety of linguistic and cognitive ways. According to him debate is a common form of interactive, persuasive argumentation used to influence and convince the audience. In debating class, students are taught to listen carefully to their peers’ perspectives before replying (Firmansyah, 2019).

The main purpose of the research is to find out how the debate technique can improve students’ speaking skills and to analyze the classroom situation when the latter is implemented in EFL class. The study was conducted for one semester in a group of 43 undergraduate freshmen, from batch 2021 to 2024, Department of Mathematics and Mechanics, level B1-B2. Regular debates had been held from February to May 2022. The topics covered a wide range of issues on politics, business, ethics, education, social life and technology. After each debate the results were evaluated, success and failure identified. Students then worked on previous drawbacks, thus increasingly improving performance and efficiency with each successive debate. Major assessment indicators were pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and fluency. Comprehension, collaboration, timekeeping and structure were also taken into account. At the end of the term a questionnaire was filled in by the participants to conclude the research findings. The paper also presents the structure of Oxford-style debate, which is the most widely used one at colleges and universities. Links to debate terminology, resources on popular motions to discuss in the classroom are provided at the end of the paper, in the References section.

Debate Strategy in the Classroom

J. Camp and A. Schnader consider regular classroom debates as a highly effective, motivational strategy to involve students in the learning process, foster higher-order thinking and most importantly, inhibit automatic memorization of the material (Camp, Schnader, 2010; see also Aperyán, 2021). Consequently, by making educated decisions and judgements in a speaking context, which are based on reliable sources of information, discussions can aid learners to minimize prejudice, particularly when opposing perspectives are offered and contested. Students' speaking abilities are tested during debates, as they are forced to address their opinions on the topic, whether it is done clearly, understandably or not.

Debates may be about real or simulated issues, however, students are required at least some basic understanding of the subject matter and must be able to articulate various viewpoints regarding the issue to support their argument. There are certain debate formats most frequently practiced at schools, universities and college debate leagues. Most of them have some features in common. To be more specific, all debates have two sides: a 'proposition side' and an 'opposition side'. While the opposition side's role is to contest the resolution, the proposition should push for its approval. In most cases, a judge or judges' responsibility is to decide who the winning team is. Some of the most widely used formats are Parliamentary Debate, Oxford-style debate, Lincoln-Douglas Debate, Team Policy Debate, NDT Debate, CEDA Debate (<https://www.myperfectwords.com/blog/debate-writing/types-of-debate>).

Oxford-style Debate

The Oxford Union, the debating society of Oxford University, most famously uses Oxford-style debates. The latter is the format used by the students in our classroom for the given study as well. The Oxford style of debate is characterized by its formality and structure. As most other debate styles, it also takes place between two teams - opposition and proposition. The 'resolution' or 'motion' is the debatable issue which is to be argued for or against using supporting ideas and valid evidence. Each side has three chances to make its case by the opening, second and summarizing speakers (a whip or a summator). The fact that you are attempting to persuade a third party during the debate, the floor, your audience or judges, is one of the elements that sets it apart from straightforward argument. The judge may also give the teams of debaters points. After the debate they tell how they voted

and why they voted that way (<https://www.azregents.edu/sites/default/files/public/Oxford.pdf>).

Before starting our classroom debates, students had been assigned to watch Oxford University and IQ2US debates /Intelligence Squared U.S./. IQ2US is a non-profit organization. Their debate series favour and use the Oxford-style format which enables both sides to have an equal opportunity to share their arguments and opinions. IQ2US debates can be found on YouTube, as Apple and Google podcasts, the tickets for the debate attendance can be bought on their official webpage. On its official webpage the latter says:

IQ2US promotes intellectual and viewpoint diversity by fostering respect for contrary opinions, curate thought-provoking conversations around the most important issues of the day and present the world's thought-leaders to illuminate complex topics from multiple perspectives. The IQ2US debate series promote critical thinking by making extensive research archives and debate content available for classroom use. It provides a forum for balanced and intelligent debate that is widely distributed as a radio program, podcast, online broadcast, television, and digital video series (<http://www.intelligencesquaredus.org/debates>).

Decades of academic research have proven that through debate students acquire various educational benefits as they learn and improve skills far beyond what can be learnt in any other setting. While debating students accumulate knowledge across several disciplines outside their normal academic subjects. They provide an engaging learner-centered activity, thereby improving rigorous higher-order analytical, critical thinking skills. Debates also encourage teamwork, promote empathy as well as intellectual humility (<http://qatardebate.org/benefits-of-debating>).

In order to get students more active and involved in the learning process, they need to be provided an opportunity to communicate verbally. P.Zare and O. Othman have conducted a comprehensive study on the benefits and challenges of using classroom debates systematically in the classroom for EFL/ESL students. According to them students are more willing to engage with the learning process and yield better results when offered active learning opportunities and techniques. The results obtained from their studies suggest that flourishing classrooms involves interactive learning. Moreover, they indicate that learning diminishes when students are forced into passive roles and practices (Zare, Othman, 2015). Classroom debate is definitely one of the most efficient tools to create a more exciting environment for students to be involved if applied systematically and properly.

Some Benefits of Debate Technique

In the given section of the paper we will elaborate on some benefits of debate technique which were identified after regular classroom debates had been held for one academic semester. After each debate students were having a brief discussion on their performance, pointing out the flaws they would like to correct next time. Students demonstrated substantial improvement in communicative skills, leadership, critical thinking, problem solving, even empathy. Debates were intellectually inspiring and exciting activity, especially the preparatory work, hours devoted to research, out-of-class discussions, case writing and practicing.

Critical thinking. Almost all students stated that participation in debates promoted analytical, critical thinking which is perhaps the most important skill debaters learn in tandem with problem solving and creativity. Debates helped students see the power of asking good questions, offering rational, reasoned arguments and sound evidence behind a particular stance or conclusion. As a result, they gained more confidence, learned to collect, organize, and present information in a compelling fashion to sound more persuasive.

Academic skills. After participating in competitive debates students showed marked improvement in a number of academic skills. Due to debating they excelled in oral communication, upgraded significantly their reading comprehension as well. Students became comfortable with new concepts, unfamiliar language, gained access to a wide array of new information on various issues. They also learned how to do research, fact-checking, gather statistics to ensure precision of reporting and argumentation. Presentation skills also improved markedly.

Mental and emotional maturity. Debates were not only fun but they taught students to recognize how others think, to engage with serious subject matter in a mature, professional environment, develop stronger relationships with peers, cooperate and resolve conflicts. Ultimately, debates increased students' motivation, self-confidence and self-esteem by gaining skills necessary to become competent adults. Confrontational nature of classroom debates promoted students' ability to handle disagreements in a polite way, manage emotions, demonstrate empathy, see different perspectives mastering the basics of intellectual humility. Participants gradually learned to change their positions and accept alternative viewpoint if given better reasons.

Collaboration. Achieving the same goal, winning over the opponents creates cooperation, team work, out-of-class socializing. Findings of the study suggest that debate preparation was a constructive small group task,

in which every student noticeably benefited from the inputs of their classmates. Efficient cooperating brought creative, original solutions, better reasoning, developed students' leadership, problem solving and time-management skills. Collaborative approach resulted in brainstorming innovative ideas, higher order reasoning, as well as transfer of knowledge to different situations and new experiences that might be useful to students in the future after they graduate from institution, in their career and everyday life.

Students' opinions about the results of classroom debating for one semester are reflected in statistical survey questionnaire below filled in by 43 participants of the study.

1. Do you like speaking activities?	Yes 36ss	No 7ss		
2. How do you feel about speaking in class?	Easy 18ss	Average 15ss	Difficult 10ss	
3. Which speaking activities do you prefer most?	Group discussions 9ss	Debates 17ss	Case studies 7ss	Presentations 10ss
4. What was the most challenging part in class debating for you?	Poor grammar 14ss	Insufficient vocabulary 17ss	Pronunciation 4ss	Unfamiliar topic 8ss
5. Participating in debating was?	Great 19ss	Enjoyable 16ss	Difficult 8ss	Not useful –
6. Which aspects of language would you like to improve most to enhance speaking skills?	Grammar 11ss	Vocabulary 16ss	Pronunciation 6ss	Listening 10ss

7. Would you like to continue having competitive class debates in the future?	Yes 37ss	No 6ss		
---	-------------	-----------	--	--

The questionnaire held among the participants showed that having classroom debates was both exciting and challenging. Though students initially had some anxiety speaking in the context of debate, the activity was certainly a beneficial experience for them. They stated that regular debates promoted deeper issue comprehension, since they were interactive learning practices. Personal interest and participation as well as competitiveness aroused emotions, which created a favorable environment for broader knowledge acquisition and application. However, debates did not come with benefits only. As one can imply from the survey’s results, most of the participating students reported they enjoyed being given opportunity to be part of the team and to contribute in the classroom personally. However, they encountered some obstacles during the process that should not be ignored.

The most challenging aspects of debating according to the participants were elaborating one's own arguments in a clear and structured manner and withstanding the rebuttal of the opposing side, especially when they had been assigned to argue in favor of points they didn’t believe in. Arguing for a side they did not personally agree with was challenging for many students. Another problem recorded was that debates sometimes intensified contradicting opinions and led students to select evidence that supported their pre-existing positions while ignoring contradictory evidence. These behaviors resulted in arguments caused by confirmation bias. In addition, serious adverse attribute of debates was created by differences in language levels. Students with limited English proficiency had difficulty in talking fluently, expressing themselves properly. As a consequence, lack of vocabulary and grammar created frustration. They were unwilling to participate, engage in the process. Listening to a few active students was not an active experience for them.

Conclusion

From all the data analysis about using debate technique in the classroom it can be concluded that regardless of few obstacles mentioned above, debates

are indeed an effective tool to improve speaking. Moreover, they teach several important skills including the ability to pose right questions, effective listening, note-taking, research skills, conceptualizing of diverse ideas around complex issues. Overall, students are very enthusiastic to prepare for and participate in competitive debates as they mostly give preference to active learning methods. They feel empowered and motivated to have a say, to share their opinion, to persuade. Teaching speaking through debating can be useful and enjoyable experience for both teacher and students. The links below given in the References list introduce glossary, main terms, different formats of debates and best debatable motions updated in 2022 to be used at high schools and universities.

REFERENCES

- Sayin, B. (2015). Considerations on speaking skills: Essence of learning and teaching speaking. *US English Teaching*, 12(11), 827. <https://www.davidpublisher.com/Public/uploads/Contribute/564e97>
- Galstyan, M. (2021). Current Problems of Quality of Education in Armenia. *Journal of Sociology: Bulletin of Yerevan State University*, 12 1(33). <https://doi.org/10.46991/BYSU:F/2021.12.1.071>
- Liao, G. (2009). Improvement of speaking ability through interrelated skills. *Journal of English Language Teaching*, 2(3). Retrieved November 1, 2022, from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/42386371_Improvement_of_Speaking_Ability
- Hayriye, K. (2006). Teaching speaking: Activities to promote speaking in a second language. *The Internet TESL Journal*, 12(11). Retrieved September 15, 2022, from <http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Kayi-TeachingSpeaking.html>
- Firmansyah, D. & Valatansa Vegian, E. (2019). Improving the students' speaking skill through debate technique. *Professional Journal of English Education*, 2(6). Retrieved May 22, 2022 from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/337249689_Improving_the_Students'_Speaking_Skill_through_Debate_Technique
- Camp, J., & Schnader, A. (2010). Using debate to enhance critical thinking in the accounting classroom. *Issues in Accounting Education*, 25(4). Retrieved April 14, 2022, from <http://dx.doi.org/10.2308/iace.2010.25.4.655>
- Aperyan, Y. (2021). The Internationalization of Higher Education in Armenia Nowadays the Analysis of the Existing Problems. *Journal of Sociology:*

Bulletin of Yerevan State University, 12 (1(33)).

<https://doi.org/10.46991/BYSU:F/2021.12.1.079>

Zare, P., & Othman, O. (2015). Students' perceptions toward using classroom debate to develop critical thinking and oral ability. *Asian Social Science, 11(9)*. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/277615194_Students%27_Perceptions_toward_Using_Classroom_Debate_to_Develop_Critical_Thinking_and_Oral_Communication_Ability

<https://www.myperspectives.com/blog/debate-writing/types-of-debate>

<https://www.azregents.edu/sites/default/files/public/Oxford.pdf>

<https://www.intelligencesquaredus.org/debates>

<http://www.qatardebate.org/benefits-of-debating>

<https://www.busyteacher.org/7245-conducting-class-debate-essentials.html>

<https://www.debate-motions.info/best-debatable-topics/?amp&fbclid>

<https://www.weareteachers.com/high-school-debate-topics>

<https://www.esu.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Debating-Glossary.pdf>

Լ. ԲԱՐՍԵՂՅԱՆ – Լսարանային բանավեճի առավելություններն ու մարտահրավերները բակալավրիատի ուսանողների համար. – Հոդվածի նպատակն է բացահայտել լսարանային բանավեճի առավելություններն ու մարտահրավերները բակալավրիատի ուսանողների համար: Բանավոր խոսքի զարգացումն անգլերենի ուսուցման հիմնական նպատակն է: Այնուամենայնիվ, այն ուսանողների համար ամենաբարդ հմտությունն է. դրա հիմնական պատճառներն են վախը, թեմայի վերաբերյալ նախնական գիտելիքների բացակայությունը, բառապաշարի և քերականության անբավարար իմացությունը: Մեկ այլ կարևոր գործոն է ուսուցման մեթոդների ընտրությունը, որը կարող է հետաքրքրություն առաջացնել, ազդել ակտիվ ուսուցման գործընթացում ներգրավվելու պատրաստակամության վրա, կամ ընդհակառակը՝ ապաքաջալերել, խոչընդոտել ուսանողների մասնակցությանը: Մույն հոդվածը միտված է ուսումնասիրելու բանավեճի անցկացման առանձնահատկությունները, տվյալ մեթոդի դերը օտար լեզվի բանավոր խոսքի ուսուցման մեջ: Ուսումնասիրությունը հիմնված է ուսանողների մասնակցությամբ եզրափակիչ հարցման արդյունքների վրա:

Բանայի բառեր. բանավեճի տեխնիկա, Օքսֆորդ ոճի բանավեճ, բանավեճի ձևաչափ, կողմ և դեմ կողմեր, բանավեճի թեմա, բանավոր խոսքի հմտության տիրապետում, քննադատական մտածողություն

Л. БАРСЕГЯН – *Классные дебаты: преимущества и трудности для студентов бакалавриата, изучающих английский как иностранный язык.* – Цель данной статьи - раскрыть преимущества и трудности проведения классных дебатов для студентов бакалавриата. Навык владения устной речью является конечной целью обучения английскому языку, которая достигается большим трудом. Некоторыми из причин являются недостаточные знания о предмете, его словарного запаса и грамматики, равно как и страх совершить ошибку. Еще одним значительным фактором являются методы обучения, которые могут вызвать интерес и мотивировать студентов на активное участие в процессе обучения или, наоборот, разочаровать учащихся и препятствовать их эффективному обучению. В данном исследовании предпринимается попытка исследовать особенности реализации дебатов в процессе обучения, а также роль данного инструмента в преподавании английского языка как иностранного.

Ключевые слова: техника дебатов, дебаты в Оксфордском стиле, формат дебатов, стороны за и против, тема дебатов, овладение навыком устной речи, критическое мышление