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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Using Debate-Based Activities to Develop Critical Thinking and Speaking Skills in EFL Classrooms

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Abstract. This article explores how debate-based activities can be used within Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) to develop both the speaking skills and the critical thinking of B1-level EFL learners. The discussion is organised around three questions: what to teach, who to teach and how to teach. It first identifies the speaking and thinking skills that debate develops, such as stating a position, supporting it with reasons and evidence, responding to opposing views and listening critically, together with the expressions learners need to do so. It then describes B1 learners as independent users who can give simple opinions but often struggle to build and defend an argument. Finally, it shows how a debate cycle of preparation, structured debate and feedback can be organised in two lessons on the motion that schools should begin each day with compulsory morning exercises. The article suggests that well-scaffolded debates give learners a real reason to speak and think carefully, and can help them become more fluent, organised and confident speakers.

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Introduction

Many EFL learners study English for years and still find it hard to express and defend an opinion in speech. Part of the problem lies in the classroom itself. Speaking is often given little practice time, and when language patterns are introduced without a real context and followed by little interaction between students, their speaking skills do not develop as they should [3]. A related problem concerns thinking. Learners taught mainly through teacher-centred methods are often reluctant to share their ideas or to analyse and question what they read and hear [2]. Yet both skills are needed together: to take part in a discussion in English, a learner has to decide what to say, organise it clearly and react to what others say.

Debate offers a way to develop these skills at the same time. In a debate, two sides present arguments on a given topic, or motion, and try to answer and weaken each other's arguments [2]. Studies in EFL settings have reported encouraging results. Senior high school students in Indonesia who took part in regular debates made significant gains in both critical thinking and speaking compared with a control group [2], and Dutch secondary school students at around B1 level produced more speech that was also more fluent, accurate, coherent and lexically rich after a ten-week debate programme [1]. This article explains how debate can be used as a communicative activity with B1 learners. It considers what should be taught, who the learners are and how the method can be applied, and then presents a two-lesson sequence built around a debate on morning exercises at school.

What to teach: speaking skills, critical thinking and the language of argument

Debate-based teaching has two linked goals. The first is a set of speaking skills: stating a position clearly, giving reasons for it, supporting those reasons with examples or facts, responding to an opponent's points, and organising a short speech so that listeners can follow it. Organisation deserves special attention, because debaters have to signal when they move from one argument to the next. In el Majidi et al.'s study, students who debated made clear progress in their use of such organising markers [1]. Learners also benefit from speaking at a calm, steady pace, which gives them time to think and makes them easier to understand [3].

The second goal is critical thinking, which can be understood as the ability to analyse, interpret, evaluate and explain ideas in order to reach well-reasoned conclusions [2]. In a debate, this means understanding and defining the motion, identifying the main issue, looking at it from different contexts, evaluating assumptions and evidence, and considering the consequences of a position [2]. Two practical ideas from public speaking make these skills easier to teach. First, an argument is built from premises, which provide reasons or evidence, and a conclusion that follows from them, and each premise needs support such as facts and statistics, definitions, examples, short narratives, testimony or analogies [4]. Second, debate depends on critical listening: learners must be able to tell facts from opinions and notice assumptions that a speaker has not supported with evidence [4].

These skills need clear language. Learners should be taught expressions for giving an opinion (*I believe that..., In my view...*), giving reasons and examples (*This is because..., For example..., According to...*), organising ideas (*First..., Moreover..., On the other hand..., To sum up...*), disagreeing politely (*I see your point, but..., I'm afraid I disagree because...*), rebutting (*My opponent claimed that..., however...*) and asking for clarification or evidence (*What do you mean by...? What evidence is there for that?*). They also need basic debate terms such as *motion, proposition, opposition, argument, rebuttal* and *evidence* [2], together with vocabulary for the debate topic. For the motion used later in this article, this includes words such as *compulsory, physical activity, concentration, energy, timetable, well-being* and *personal choice*.

Who to teach: B1-level learners

The target learners are at B1 level, the first stage of independent use of English. They can talk about familiar topics, describe experiences and give brief reasons for their opinions. However, their arguments tend to be short and loosely connected, they rely on a limited range of vocabulary and linking words, and they often pause or lose confidence when they have to answer someone who disagrees with them. Debate is a realistic choice for this level. The Dutch secondary students in el Majidi et al.'s study were on average at B1 level, and they still benefited from a full debate programme [1].

These learners have several specific needs. They need time and support to prepare, because building an argument in a foreign language is cognitively demanding. They need help in moving beyond personal opinion: in Iman's study, students often relied on their own beliefs and presented arguments without evidence, which weakened their critical thinking [2]. They need some knowledge of the topic, since learners who do not understand the issue cannot argue about it well [2]. Finally, many need help with confidence. Fear of making mistakes or forgetting what to

say is common among English learners [3], and anxiety about speaking in front of others is usually highest just before speaking begins [4]. Topics should therefore be familiar and relevant to the learners, ideally chosen with them [1], and the format should be small and structured before learners face the whole class.

How to teach: debate within Communicative Language Teaching

CLT aims to develop learners' ability to use language for real communication, not only their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. Lessons are organised around meaningful interaction, learners spend much of the time talking to each other in pairs and groups, fluency and accuracy are both developed, and the teacher acts as a facilitator rather than the main speaker. Debate fits these principles well. It gives learners a genuine communicative purpose, namely defending their own position and weakening the other side's, and this purpose pushes them to use accurate and varied language [1]. The exchange of arguments creates interaction in which learners notice gaps in their language and try to improve their output [1]. Debate is also learner-centred: students do most of the talking and thinking, while the teacher works as a coach and adviser [1]. Its competitive element keeps learners engaged, and students tend to describe debates as both enjoyable and useful [1].

In practice, a debate works best as a cycle of three stages. In the pre-debate stage, learners read about the topic, collect arguments and write a short case defending their side, so that reading and writing feed into speaking [1]. This stage is also where critical thinking is trained most directly, as learners define the motion, brainstorm ideas, select the strongest ones, support them with evidence and predict the other side's arguments [2]. Careful preparation also reduces anxiety, since it removes much of the uncertainty that makes speaking stressful [4]. In the debate itself, each speaker gives a short speech, then a rebuttal that answers the opponents' points, followed by an open exchange of arguments [1]. Formats can be adjusted to the class: two students against two, or one against one, give every learner a turn [1], while larger formats with three speakers on each side, a chairperson and a timekeeper suit later stages [2]. In the post-debate stage, learners summarise the debate, receive feedback and revise their written cases [1], [2]. Feedback can come from both the teacher and peers: in el Majidi et al.'s study, students noted mistakes and useful words while listening to each other, and teachers discussed common errors after the debates [1]. Repeating this cycle with new topics allows learners to carry their gains from one debate to the next [1].

Practical Application / Classroom Activities

The following sequence shows how a debate can be organised with a B1 class of about 16–24 learners over two 45-minute lessons. The motion is *This house believes that schools should start every day with compulsory morning exercises*. The topic suits B1 learners because it concerns their daily lives, needs no specialist knowledge and has strong arguments on both sides. By the end of the sequence, learners should be able to present two supported arguments for a position, respond to at least one opposing argument and use expressions for giving opinions, disagreeing and organising ideas.

The first lesson prepares learners for the debate. It begins with a short agree/disagree activity (8 minutes). The teacher reads statements such as *Exercise in the morning helps students concentrate* or *Students are too tired to exercise before lessons*, learners move to the "agree" or "disagree" side of the room, and two or three on each side give a reason. This kind of agree/disagree discussion is a simple way to start learners talking and to set a clear purpose for the lesson [3]. Learners then read two short texts on the topic, one in favour and one against (15 minutes). Working in pairs, they underline facts and opinions and look for unsupported assumptions, for example the idea that every student has time and energy in the morning [4]. They also discuss what the key words of the motion mean, such as *compulsory* and *every day*, since a clear definition keeps the debate on track [2].

Next, the class is divided into groups of four, with two students for the motion and two against it (15 minutes) [1]. Each pair chooses its two strongest arguments and writes them down using a simple frame: a claim, a reason, and a piece of support such as a fact, an example or a short personal story [4]. Each pair also predicts one argument the other side is likely to use and prepares a short answer to it [2]. The lesson ends with a brief language focus (7 minutes), in which the teacher highlights useful expressions for opinions, reasons, disagreement and linking ideas, and learners add them to their notes. For homework, each pair finds one more piece of evidence and writes a short case of about 150 words, so that reading and writing feed directly into the spoken debate [1].

The second lesson is the debate itself. Pairs first rehearse their speeches quietly for five minutes, which helps to reduce nervousness before speaking [4]. Each group of four then holds its debate at the same time as the others (20 minutes). Each speaker gives a one-minute opening speech, then each speaker gives a short rebuttal answering one of the opponents' points, and the round ends with a three-minute open exchange [1]. While opponents are speaking, learners note one point they want to challenge, one mistake they heard and one useful word or phrase [1]. After the first round, students change groups and debate again with new opponents, which lets them reuse and improve their arguments. Throughout, the teacher moves around the room as a coach, listens, keeps time and notes common errors and good language without interrupting [1].

The post-debate stage (20 minutes) turns attention to reflection and accuracy. Each group reports which argument was the strongest and explains why, referring to the quality of its evidence and reasoning rather than to personal preference [2], [4]. The class then votes on the motion. The teacher writes several common errors and some well-used expressions on the board, and learners correct and discuss them together [1]. Learners finish by summarising what they learned about the topic and about arguing in English [2]. For homework, they revise their written cases using the feedback they received [1], and the next motion is announced so that the cycle can be repeated.

To monitor progress, the teacher can ask learners to give a short spoken opinion on a familiar topic before and after a series of debates. Speaking can be rated for fluency, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and comprehension, and critical thinking for how well learners identify the issue, consider context, evaluate assumptions and evidence, and draw conclusions, as in Iman's study [2]. The amount of speech, its fluency, accuracy and the use of linking words can also be compared, following the measures used by el Majidi et al. [1].

Conclusion

This article has argued that debate-based activities are a practical way to develop both speaking skills and critical thinking within Communicative Language Teaching. What should be taught is the ability to state, support and defend a position, to answer opposing arguments, to organise a short speech and to listen critically, together with the expressions that make these actions possible. The target learners, B1 users of English, can already give simple opinions but need structure, preparation time, topic knowledge and confidence to argue effectively. Debate meets these needs when it is organised as a cycle: careful preparation in which learners read, think and write; a short, structured debate in small groups; and feedback that turns attention to evidence, reasoning and accuracy. The two-lesson sequence on morning exercises shows that this cycle can be carried out in an ordinary classroom with familiar content.

The research evidence is encouraging, as debating students in different EFL contexts have made gains in fluency, accuracy, coherence, vocabulary and critical thinking [1], [2]. At the same time, teachers should be aware of the limits. Debaters may focus so much on winning that they neglect grammar and pronunciation, and they may rely on personal opinion rather than evidence [2]. In addition, the learners in el Majidi et al.'s study were mostly high-achieving students [1], so weaker groups may need even more scaffolding. With careful preparation and regular repetition, however, debate can give learners something worth saying and the language and confidence to say it.

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