

Classroom Debates: Shifting the Focus

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While debates can be a useful means for language learners to practice fluency and exchange opinions, they can easily turn into disastrous sessions where hostility run rampage out of adamant views and unexamined preconceptions. When there is risk of the latter happening, particularly with complex and controversial debate topics, it is necessary to balance spontaneity with structured pre-debate activities and controlled language practice to facilitate a cooperative learning experience. This article offers suggestions and classroom materials to shift the focus of debates from winning arguments to appreciation of diverse perspectives, critical thinking, and language skill development.

Key words: Critical Thinking, Multiple Perspectives, Functional Language, Debate Strategy

Así como los debates pueden ser una herramienta útil para los estudiantes de lenguas como práctica de fluidez y el intercambio de opiniones, fácilmente pueden convertirse en unas sesiones desastrosas en las cuales la hostilidad promueve el desorden, puntos de vista inflexibles y preconcepciones sin fundamento. Cuando se corre el riesgo de que esto último suceda, particularmente con temas complejos y controversiales, es necesario balancear la espontaneidad con actividades previas al debate y con una práctica dirigida del lenguaje para así facilitar una experiencia de aprendizaje cooperativo. Este artículo ofrece sugerencias y material de trabajo en el aula para cambiar el foco de los debates, de argumentos decisivos a una apreciación de diversas perspectivas, pensamiento crítico y el desarrollo de habilidades del lenguaje.

Palabras claves: Pensamiento Crítico, Perspectivas Múltiples, Lenguaje Funcional, Estrategias de Debate

Have you ever witnessed your classroom turn into a battlefield, where your genial students become aggressive extremists with unyielding opinions, and wondered what happened to your role as an educator and what on earth were the students learning and experiencing? While clashing opinions are inevitable during class debates on contentious topics, balancing fluency practice with an organized structure can shift the focus on winning an argument to sharpening critical thinking skills, developing multiple perspectives, and gaining a better command of functional language.

The following is a method of facilitating debates, for mid-intermediate to advanced students, that may be adapted for use in your teaching context. It was developed after I experienced the ineffectiveness of trying to offer error correction or redirect conflict in midstream, as students obstinately argue for their views in incorrect language. The method focuses on critical thinking and functional language, and offers a structure for students to think through and create a strategy for opposing debate positions. In the process, students gain broader perspectives on both sides of a debate topic. In addition, it addresses the common situation of dominant students taking up much of the speaking time while more reserved students hardly get a word in edgewise.

Before getting to the 'debate table', the sequence of activities could be:

- Selection of a debate topic via a vote on the topics provided as well as topics students suggest.
- Pair work: creation of an outline of issues and major reasons for taking each position of a debate topic.
- Teamwork: creation of a debate strategy that identifies a challenge and defense for each of the reasons for each position of the debate topic.
- Review of function language for debates: to present a view; to support someone's view; to disagree and present an alternate view.
- Random assignment of a debate position for each team.

Creating a debate outline

With a sample class of 12 students, the pair work activity could simply be a random pairing of two students: 1 and 2; 3 and 4; 5 and 6; 7 and 8; 9 and 10; 11 and 12. Students brainstorm their ideas on issues and reasons for each position of the debate topic, and outline them on the worksheet (see Appendix 1).

Planning a debate strategy

For the teamwork activity, the paired students are split into two teams: 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11 in one team and 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12 in the other team. This way of grouping

maximizes the variety of issues and reasons that each team has to work with. In planning their debate strategy, they have to prepare to take on either position of the debate, as at this point, students still do not know which position of the debate they are on. Depending on the complexity of the debate topic, this activity can take between half an hour to an hour. Each team is given a large piece of paper to chart out their “Debate Strategy” (see Appendix 2). After each team has finished discussing and writing ‘challenge’ and ‘defense’ statements for each of the four major reasons they have chosen for both positions of the debate topic, students tend to be more conscious of the relativity of views and opinions and have a greater tendency to listen to others with a more sympathetic ear.

Using gambit cards for debates

In the next preparatory activity for the actual debate, students are given the “Functional Language for Debates” (see Appendix 3) for oral practice of each of the phrases to present a position, to support a team member’s comments, and to debate against someone’s position. Each team is given a set or two of the “Gambit Cards for Debates” (see Appendix 4). How many sets you give out will depend on your class size and the language abilities of your students. Students divide up the sets of cards so that each team member has an equal number of cards.

Remind students that they should use one of the three phrases on each card every time they speak during the debate. Each team member should try to use up all his/her cards. A team scores a point when a member expresses his/her ideas by using the correct functional language on the cards. Each card is turned over as the language is used. You can easily monitor which students need to speak up by looking at how many cards each student has turned over. Very often, you will see students nudging each other to use the correct language on the cards to express their opinions, in order to score a point. And, with their “Debate Strategy” fully in front of them for reference, no one is tongue-tied or short of ideas, challenges, or defenses to express.

Ready for the debate table

Unless a student feels very strongly about the debate topic and insists on being on one side or the other, randomly assign a position for each team. The random assignment just before the actual debate, after the process of creating an outline and the “Debate Strategy,” drives home the point that the purpose of the debate is language practice, and that opinions and perspectives are diverse and relative, that they should all be taken into consideration. And, when the focus is on using correct, courteous functional language and awareness of multiple perspectives, students tend to be less bent on winning an argument based on their own views

and more accepting of others' opinions. In using the debate cards that also serve as cues for correct language, everyone has equal support and opportunity to speak up and walk away from the debate table with broadened perspectives and a better command of the English language.

References

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Appendix 1: An outline of issues and reasons

A. With your *partner*, discuss and create an outline for your debate.

I. Write down some *issues* that the topic evokes:

II. Write down 4 major *reasons* for taking each position of the debate.

Position A: _____

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Position B: _____

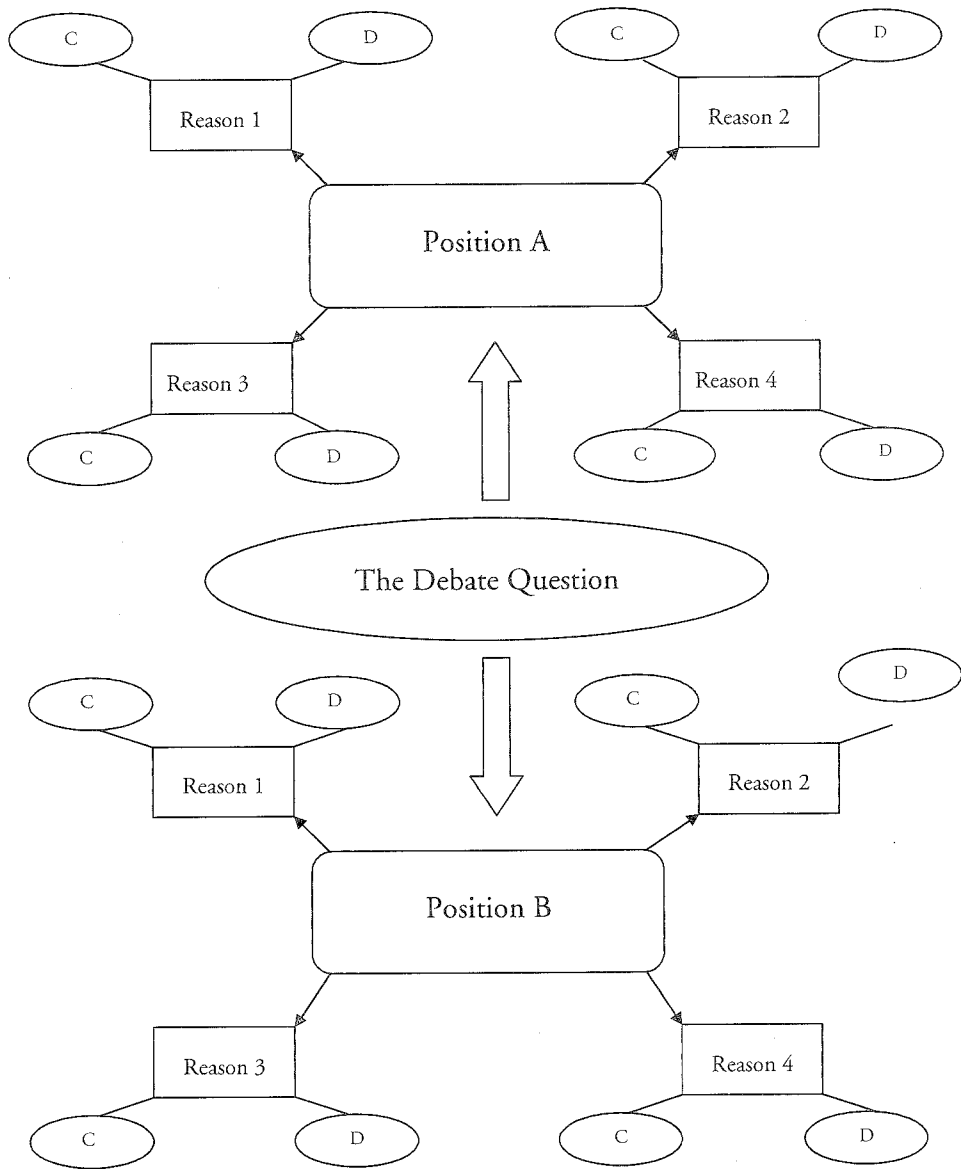
1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

B. Form teams and create “A Debate Strategy.”

- With your team members, discuss the issues you wrote and share your four reasons for both positions of the debate.
- Decide on which reasons to use, and chart them on your “Debate Strategy.”
- Write a ‘Defense statement’ to back up each of the reasons for both positions of the debate.
- Write a ‘Challenge statement’ to question each of the reasons for both positions of the debate.
- When the debate starts, remember that the focus is not on winning an argument, but on speaking, exploring ideas, and gaining new points of view on different topics.

Appendix 2: A debate strategy

C = Challenge D = Defense



Appendix 3: Functional language for debates

To present your position:

I think ...

I feel that ...

I believe... because ...

The way I see it...

From my point of view...

My perspective is ...

In my opinion ...

I know that ... , so ...

I must say that ...

My position is ...

To support your team's comments:

Yes, I think so too because...

I agree with him/her because...

I'm of the same view because...

That's how I feel too, considering ...

That's exactly what I think ...

That makes sense to me because/considering that...

I fully support his/her point because ...

I totally agree with him/her, considering that

For sure, considering that ...

I'll say yes to that because ...

To debate against someone's position:

I don't agree because...

I tend to disagree because...

I don't think so, given that...

Yes, but have you thought of/about ...

Yes, but what about ...

Okay, but what if.....

Granted, however, ...

I see, but on the other hand...

That sounds unreasonable because ...

I see things differently, in that ...

Appendix 4: Gambit cards for debates

- To encourage even participation, give each team one or two sets of these cards depending on your class size.
- Ask each team to deal the cards out equally.
- Each member in the team must try to use up his/her cards.
- A team gains points by correctly using one of the gambits on their cards correctly.
- Point out that the first phrase is for presenting opinions, the second phrase is for expressing agreement and support, and the third phrase is for expressing disagreement and a different point of view.



<p>I think ... Yes, I think so too because... I don't agree because...</p>	<p>I feel that ... I agree with him/her because ... I tend to disagree because...</p>
<p>I believe... because ... I'm of the same view because... I don't think so, given that...</p>	<p>The way I see it... That's how I feel too, considering ... Yes, but have you thought of ...</p>
<p>From my point of view... That's exactly what I think ... Yes, but what about ...</p>	<p>My perspective is ... That makes sense to me because ... Okay, but what if ...</p>
<p>In my opinion ... I fully support his/her point because ... Granted, however, ...</p>	<p>I know that ... , so ... I agree with him/her, considering that... I see, but on the other hand ...</p>
<p>I must say that ... For sure, considering that... That sounds unreasonable because ...</p>	<p>My position is ... I'll say yes to that because... I see things differently, in that ...</p>