

A Moot Point: How Group Debate Can Engage and Motivate Japanese University English Students

論点：日本の大学英語におけるグループディベートと学生への影響
について

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ABSTRACT

This paper will outline the numerous benefits of utilizing a debate task in the Japanese university classroom. All four of the key skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing) can be improved through the use of debate. A key point is that it places student-centred learning and critical thinking at the fore. The debate task presented in this article differs greatly from much of the existing literature, which is often highly structured and aimed towards native speakers, particularly North American high school students. As the teacher, our role is to introduce the task and make it very clear that this is not a competition, nor should learners rely too heavily on reading pre-prepared notes, but make it clear that they will receive a favourable grade for how they facilitate and encourage group debate and discussion. These accommodation skills are crucial for an authentic ELF environment, as non-native speaker intelligibility should have primacy of place in the classroom (Jenkins, 2000). This paper will clarify how the debate task can be successfully performed and offers student feedback that highlights the applicability of the task to the Japanese university classroom. The final part of the article presents classroom based research which demonstrates the great number of benefits and some issues and ways in which the task could be improved in the future.

KEYWORDS: Debate, Speaking task, Motivation, ELF, Fluency

1. INTRODUCTION

Through my 5 years experience of teaching in universities in the Tokyo area I feel the number one obstacle to a genuine and holistic improvement in our students' level of English is that their previous experience of the subject has not been connected to their real lives. It seems to me that the average Japanese learner has an acceptable level of grammar and vocabulary relative to their level, however, they lack the opportunity to apply this knowledge in any meaningful or practical way. They do not make use of it in authentic real life situations (Thornbury, 2005). In general it could be said that throughout

the average learner's academic encounters with English the focus has been on reading, rote learning and teaching more 'testable' skills, with classes often held in Japanese and with little opportunity to actually speak English. Subsequently, developing speaking skills and practicing authentic fluency building tasks have been given precious little attention (Flowerdew & Lindsay, 2005). As such many learners lack the ability to instigate and sustain conversation in English, especially for a prolonged period of time (Brice, 1992). As Rivers makes clear, 'Japanese English proficiency achievements are consistently among the lowest in Asia' (2011, p. 115). A tradition of rote learning, lack of student-centered activities and a paucity of opportunities to practice communication skills inside and outside the classroom have been cited as barriers to improving students speaking and fluency skills (Aclan & Aziz, 2015). This paper aims to share the positive experiences I have had using a group debate task and how it can provide a successful platform for student-centred learning which helps students to negotiate for meaning by placing a primacy on intelligibility and fluency. I feel it also impacts all four of the main skills and crucially helps to develop critical thinking. As Akerman and Neale state in their comprehensive survey of debate as an educational tool, 'students' perceptions provide strong evidence that taking part in debate activities leads to improvements in their communication and argumentation skills, including improved English when it is not their first language' (2011, p. 5).

For me, while I am an English teacher per se, I harbour ambitions to improve learners' soft skills such as critical thinking and attempt to broaden their world view by encouraging the development of English as a vehicle through which they can experience new cultures and ideas by traveling or studying abroad. As Rear points out, 'students from Asian backgrounds are said to have particular difficulty in adapting to the demands of the Western academic tradition, with educational background and insufficient language skills commonly cited as the most significant factors' (2016, p. 51). Improving learners' English ability is of vital importance to me, however, doing this while simultaneously making demands of their logic, persuasive techniques and critical thinking are of exponential benefit for all. While technological advancement and nonverbal communication increase unabated, it still remains pertinent that 'oral communication is often cited by employers, alumni, professional organizations, and accrediting agencies as an important skill for recent college graduates entering the workforce' (Carroll, 2014, p. 1). When the above situation is taken into account I feel encouraging debate tasks, such as the one elaborated upon in the article, will help to develop these much sought after soft skills. As acknowledged in the literature, most of the resources on teaching debate are aimed at native-speakers, in particular, American high school students (Stewart & Pleisch, 1998) and, as a consequence, 'there are few published debate materials for non-native speakers' (Krieger, 2005, p. 6). I feel very strongly that the debate task outlined in this paper can improve students' English in a learner-centred, communicative fashion. It can also play a role in developing learner autonomy, critical thinking and preparing young adults to face the challenges of the 21st century globalised workplace (Aclan, Aziz, & Valdez, 2016). This paper not only outlines how to implement the debate task in the ELF classroom, but it also considers student feedback in the form of a ten-question SurveyMonkey form. For consolidated pedagogical improvements to take place and enrich our field it is essential that we gather evidence to support our claims, and that some of this evidence should

originate from the learners themselves (Goodwin, 2003).

This article is organized into the following sections: the literature review will seek to justify the necessity of this paper and how it can address the lack of practical classroom content regarding the implementation of student debate, especially in a Japanese ELF (English as a Lingua Franca) context. Secondly, how to implement the debate task will be explained to ensure readers will have a clear and concise picture of how to carry out the task in their classroom. Next, the SurveyMonkey questionnaire will be introduced and some key findings will be discussed before the paper finishes with some overall conclusions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

As a key part of the Tamagawa CELF curriculum we utilize two textbooks, one which focuses on teaching TOEIC and the other which mainly concentrates on reading and vocabulary acquisition. While these resources are a fundamental part of our day-to-day job, I feel a lot more should be done to connect the classroom to the students' real lives and give them an increased sense of ownership and autonomy over their English and overall educational development. There are many ways in which I attempt to do this and I feel the debate task outlined in the paper is one of the more successful and sustained examples. To prepare thoroughly for the debate learners must choose a topic, research individually and practice as a team. As such, this process promotes active learning and gives a real sense of responsibility over the choices the learners have made (Akerman & Neale, 2011). Learners must also question and justify their own opinions and through the process of working with their teammates and practicing with their counterparts, who hold an opposing opinion, they become aware of a plurality of thought within the classroom. As such, 'debate can compensate for the limitation of the traditional classroom by shifting the focus of conversational control to students' (Amiri, Othman, & Jahedi, 2017, p. 121). The crucial part of the debate task is that it is student-centred and it promotes student-student interactions (Zare & Othman, 2013). Personally, my preferred style of teaching is where I am not the most important person in the classroom, where I can play the role of a facilitator rather than a lecturer. The benefit of the debate task is the overall philosophy that is espoused, where students are not considered 'vessels waiting to be filled with instruction' but, 'they bring to class theories, attitudes, skills and habits that shape the success or failure of the activities they will pursue there' (Goodwin, 2003, p. 157).

It is clear that research shows debating has a positive impact on student's spoken communication skills (Carroll, 2014), however, if implemented in an effective fashion, I feel it can make a positive impact on all four of the key skills. As Zare and Othman explain, debate 'can promote and foster efficient and successful listening, reading and also writing' (2013, p. 1510). This is due to the importance of critical reading and taking clear, usable notes during the preparation stage. During practice and the debate itself critical listening is essential as it is vital to respond appropriately to group members rather than simply reading a pre-prepared script. Learners will have to adjust, accommodate and work as a team as they negotiate for meaning. This places a primacy on intelligibility rather than specifically on form or comparing their language to that of a native speaker. As Aclan and

Aziz identify, these aspects of the debate task ‘makes it a perfect pedagogical tool because it integrates reading, speaking and listening’ (2015, p. 9). Critical reading and writing skills can also be consolidated through a post-task writing assignment which would further build on the ideas developed during the debate and help to establish the learners’ independent stance. It is widely acknowledged that critical thinking is a crucial skill in the modern workplace (Akerman & Neale, 2011) and its development should be a key goal for educators in both a first and second language context (Rear, 2010). While they still, at times, have an important role to play in the classroom, it could be said that, ‘traditional teaching techniques like textbooks, lectures, and tests with right answers insulate students from the open questions and competing answers that so often drive our own interest in our subjects (Goodwin, 2003, p. 162). I feel it is important to respect our learners and treat them like adults. To most of life’s important questions, there is very seldom a single black and white answer and I feel our activities in the classroom and the overall philosophy of our curriculum should reflect this. The debate task presented in this article reflects this philosophy very well. It activates all four of the key skills and encourages critical thinking in a learner-centred motivational fashion.

3. DEBATE TASK

Effective group communication and fluency building is the very *raison d’être* of the debate task. However, this can often be impeded by too much teacher-led instruction and the relatively low level of the learners who may struggle to make their opinions lucid in their L2. An important way to combat this and to build confidence and familiarity with the task is optional, but strongly recommended stand-alone 90 min lesson. I would often do this earlier in the semester so learners can practice and understand the concept before the more rigorous assessed debate starts later in the term. It allows the class to understand how the debate works, reduces the necessity for lengthy teacher explanation and gives a practical demonstration of how important preparation and practice are in the real assessment.

Depending on the number of students in the class the debate requires 4-6 people in a group. At least two students will be ‘for’ and two ‘against’ the particular topic. Initially, I will give some examples of both formal and more casual debate topics (e.g., legal drinking age should be 20 or 18, Ghibli movies are better than Disney etc.), provide some brainstorming time, elicit ideas and write some of the workable topics on the board. The students will then vote for the topics they want to choose and whether they will be ‘for’ or ‘against’. For example, in a 16 student class, there would be four groups, with different topics, comprised of two students being ‘for’ and two ‘against’. In this condensed version of the fully assessed debate, the learners only have one class to work in their small groups (of ‘for’ or ‘against’) to research and make notes before joining their counterparts to attempt the debate in the final 10 minutes of the class. In this case, the debates will take place simultaneously as to not put too much pressure on them if there is some silence or they have to revert to their L1 on occasions. However, the final assessed debates will take place in the middle of the classroom and as such there will be an element of pressure to perform in front of an audience. At the end of this introductory debate class it is the teacher’s role to be positive and stress that through asking questions, helping each other

and preparing and practicing thoroughly they will be able to conduct the real debate all in English for 15-20 minutes.

Most debate tasks in the literature are highly structured and often allocate specific roles to individual students with time limits to state your opinion and prepare a rebuttal etc. However, this specific version emphasises student interaction and encourages a natural flow to the discussion. In this sense I agree very much with Stewart and Pleisch when they advise that the ‘introduction and conclusion, usually lengthy monologues, are de-emphasized in order to allow more time for the...team members to participate actively’ (1998, p. 1). Even through the practice stage, which in the full assessed debate can be allocated a 90 minute class for research and rehearsal, the focus should be on listening, responding and encouragement, rather than memorization and recitation. This allocation of class time is essential as a study by Fauzan clarifies, ‘by practicing speaking in the debate practice, they improved their fluency as well as their confidence’ (2016, p. 56). It also provides a perfect platform to aid the learners with some example prompts, questions and also how to open and close the debate to support and scaffold the class. It is essential to convey the idea that they should not rely on a pre-prepared script and they will receive a favourable grade if they rotate the speaker regularly, always finish their point with a question, resist the temptation to speak too much, especially with regards to making multiple points at once, and support the more reticent learners. It is important to deemphasize the competitive element and stress that it is through preparation, practice and supporting each other that they will be able to conduct a natural, fluent 15-20 minute debate in English and consequently merit a favourable grade. As Carroll explains, ‘the goal of the exercise is to enhance oral communication skills as opposed to mastering competitive debating technique’ (2014, p. 7). Finally, there is time for the audience to ask questions at the end of the debate and this can also be considered as part of the grading criteria. This encourages active listening from the audience and provides further opportunities for output and criticality by the debate participants.

4. METHODOLOGY

To gain a deeper insight into how the group debate task is received by students I thought it would be beneficial to do a post-task survey asking learners a variety of questions to find out some of the positive and negative aspects of the task by collecting some feedback and comments. I wrote ten questions using the SurveyMonkey (<https://www.surveymonkey.com/>) application and asked six classes of lower-intermediate level learners to complete the questionnaire. The questionnaire was optional and anonymous and in no way connected to their grade. The six classes were comprised of between 14-22 learners and overall I received 89 completed surveys. The ten questions were as follows: (Q1) Are you a man or a woman?; (Q2) How old are you? (Q3) What topic did you choose for the group debate?; (Q4) Was it fun?; (Q5) Was 15 minutes for each debate the right amount of time?; (Q6) Did you think your topic and questions worked well for the debate?; (Q7) Did you enjoy other class members debates?; (Q8) Did the debate help you get to know your classmates better?; (Q9) Do you feel the debate helped improve your English communication skills?; and, (Q10) Please try to make some final comments. The average time to complete the

questionnaire was 12 minutes and many students chose to make additional comments. In the next section I will discuss each question in turn and highlight some interesting findings and results.

5. FINDINGS AND RESULTS

For the first question there was a roughly even split in the gender of the respondents, 44 (49.44%) people were male and 45 (50.56%) female. As the classes I conducted the survey with were predominately first-year university students enrolled in a compulsory English language class the vast majority of their ages were between 18-19, however, there were some second-year students who were 20 years old (11 in total) and also one student who was 21. The diversity of the topics they chose was interesting and I feel this highlights the learner autonomy the task provides. While some topics could perhaps be described as predictable or rudimentary e.g., ‘summer vs. winter’, ‘iPhone vs. Android’, a great majority were critical and often provocative e.g., ‘living with family or alone’, ‘getting married or staying single’, ‘private or public high school’, ‘is it better to be a man or a woman’, ‘24-hour city life (e.g., convenience stores, trains, etc.) is good or bad’ etc. Question 4 generated a very positive response, as can be seen from Table 1 below, with only 1 person feeling that the task was boring and also only 1 person out of 89 people stating that it was ‘not fun’. While it is impossible to say who, this single student seems to have been a higher level learner who lived in America for an extensive period. While they were significantly higher than other members of the debate group, it was slightly disappointing that they did not find some enjoyment from supporting the other members of the group, which they actually did very successfully. The question also provided some interesting comments with many people finding the task to be enjoyable and a good opportunity to learn from other members of the class e.g., ‘every member of my group talked a lot’, ‘many people speaking together is fun and useful about my English skills’. The comments also highlight the relative difficulty of the task and, while some learners were understandably apprehensive about debating in front of an audience, the sense of success many of the learners felt was palpable. For example, ‘it was hard to prepare but I had a sense of achievement!!’; ‘I was very nervous, but I could speak my opinion. I was happy’; ‘when I couldn’t come up with nice ideas, the other members helped me. So, I could relax and keep talking. That helped me gained confidence’. This is very pleasing and I think, for the majority of learners, achieving something in English that they may struggle even in their L1 gives a great sense of confidence and a realization that they can apply their English skills to real-life authentic situations.

Table 1

Question 4: Was it fun?

It was boring	Not fun	Medium	Yes, quite fun	Yes, very fun!	Total
1	1	18	44	25	89
1.12%	1.12%	20.22%	49.44%	28.09%	

Question 5 indicated that the vast majority of learners felt 15 minutes was appropriate with 72 (82.76%) people agreeing that this was the optimum length of the debate. As I timed the assessments, however, many groups did, in fact, speak for 20 minutes. Ultimately, I feel it should be up to the discretion of the teacher to be responsive to the individual classroom environment and allow some flexibility concerning the timing of the debate. In addition, I certainly would not use a visible timer as I feel this may inhibit the group and make them more conscious that this is an assessment. A key feature of the task is fluency and I would like learners to immerse themselves in the debate, relax, and improvise as much as possible. Questions 6 and 7 both received very positive feedback and the comments indicated a very high level of engagement with the task (as you can see from Tables 2 & 3 below). For question 6 it is evident that many students worked hard to prepare for the debate and I feel the comments reflect an increased sense of motivation to study English, such as: ‘yes. I think more deeply’, ‘because our debate was activated so much. I understood that going to European countries is very useful to study English’; ‘I could speak a lot and helping others the debate made me think more deeply about my topic. So this experience is useful to teach other people’; ‘I have been working hard on the topic’. Question 7 also suggests that listening to other groups was very beneficial for the majority of the audience. For example: ‘I could be relaxed to listen the debate. It was very fun!’; ‘especially, the last team’s debate was great!! It was easy to listen what they are saying and they didn’t get too nervous’; ‘all groups use easy English, so I could understand easier. Also, their topics were interesting and simple’, ‘because teacher make comfortable atmosphere’. However, there were some learners who, perhaps understandably, felt it was difficult to follow other groups’ debate: ‘I could not understand English sometimes’; ‘sometimes I couldn’t understand content of debate’. This is similar to Zare and Othman’s findings that some learners, ‘considered that listening to other students debating has not been an active and educational activity’ (2013, p. 1507-8). While the question and answer time at the end of the debate is useful to encourage active listening, it is true that many students did not volunteer to ask questions. Perhaps when conducting this debate again in the future I will more actively encourage post-debate questions by emphasising that it will have a positive impact on their grade, or have them take notes on another group’s debate to write a summary for homework.

Table 2

Question 6: Did you think your topic and questions worked well for the Debate?

Not at all	Not really	Medium	Yes, quite well	Yes, very well	Total
3	2	26	30	27	88
3.41%	2.27%	29.55%	34.09%	30.68%	

Table 3

Question 7: Did you enjoy other class members' debates?

Not at all	Not really	Medium	Yes, quite interesting	Yes, very interesting	Total
2	2	14	38	32	88
2.27%	2.27%	15.91%	43.18%	36.36%	

I was very pleased with the overwhelmingly positive response to the last three questions. It would seem a crucial element of the fluency building process to try to make the in-class learning atmosphere as welcoming and supportive as possible. I feel it is important to encourage class interaction and for learners to build trust and friendship and I feel this is reflected very well by the results in Table 4. Some comments were also very positive and encapsulate the spirit of the debate task well: ‘to help each other, I get to know them better’; ‘because we talk a lot to prepare’; ‘we talk a lot outside the class for the debate’; ‘I could understand the feeling of my friends through the debate’. This would seem a resounding success and hopefully, through the forming of these class ties, the debate task will help cultivate a more positive class atmosphere to conduct improved fluency and teamwork activities throughout the rest of the semester. While it is difficult for learners to judge if their English communication skills have improved with any degree of accuracy, the, albeit slightly anecdotal, results of question 9 are still extremely pleasing. These very positive comments reflect these findings well: ‘I can improve my vocabulary’; ‘I practice very much’; ‘I could get a little confidence. So I want to speak more’; ‘because no script, no dictionary, it was very good practice to think quickly in English, because it was practical learning’; ‘normally, I don’t talk in English, but I talked very much in English in this debate’. Unfortunately, there is not enough space in this article to list too many of the comments generated in question 10. Here is a small sample of the comments which demonstrate how positively the debate task was received by Japanese university students: ‘I tried to speak a lot. It was so fun!!’; ‘the debate was very interesting and I had fun working on it. I think I did very good on the fact that I didn’t speak too much and our group spoke equally’; ‘it makes me feel better and I think it was important for me to improve my English skills’; ‘the Debate improves my English skills! In the future, I want to help foreign tourist!’, ‘first I think debate is so hard, but I was able to enjoy debate. I feel my English growing’; ‘I enjoy this class very much!! I’m looking forward to the second class and I strive to improve the skills of English more!’

Table 4

Question 8: Did the Debate help you get to know your classmates better?

Not at all	Not really	Medium	Yes, a little	Yes, very much	Total
0	2	17	40	30	89
0%	2.25%	19.10%	44.94%	33.71%	

Table 5

Question 9: Do you feel the Debate helped improve your English communication skills?

Not at all	Not really	Medium	Yes, a little	Yes, very much	Total
1	1	17	37	33	89
1.12%	1.12%	19.10%	41.57%	37.08%	

6. CONCLUSION

As demonstrated throughout this paper and highlighted in the student comments above, I feel debate is an extremely fruitful activity for language learning as it activates all four of the key skills and, if implemented appropriately, develops a great sense of achievement and intrinsic motivation among learners. I feel that the development of intrinsic motivation, cultivating your own language learning goals and building a vision of the person you want to become is crucial for successful SLA (Dörnyei, 2003; Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014). In Japan, most university English classes only last for one year and, in some cases, it could be the last formal English lessons our learners ever have. Therefore, the development of an intrinsic desire to continue to learn and use English as a lingua franca both inside and outside of the classroom is a crucial element of our job. As such I feel the debate task described in this paper can certainly contribute towards this goal. I hope that this article can go some way to bolstering these claims and add to the continuing development of the ELF debate field.

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