

# REVISING VOCABULARY AND TEACHING ESSAY WRITING THROUGH DEBATE: WHY USE DEBATE TECHNIQUES FOR TEACHING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE?

*Mateja Glušič Lenarčič*

*Gimnazija Celje - Center, Slovenia*

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## **What is debate?**

Debate is not simply a form of expression; it is, rather, a form of persuasion. Debaters hope to change minds. They hope that their listeners will come to see things their way.

Debate is not about the conflict of good and evil; neither it is about the conflict between the truth and falsehood or between facts and opinions. Debate is, rather, about the conflict of values and principles. Taken independently, each value has worth and validity, and deserves support. But when two valid principles conflict, a decision must be made as to which one is more important. Reasonable people will disagree about which one is more important. There is something to be said for each side. This is the nature of debatable proposition.

The virtue of debating both sides of a good resolution is that debaters come to understand that there are different ways of thinking about the same issue. By understanding and appreciating both sides, debaters come to a better understanding of their own ideas. When faced with conflicts beyond the classroom, they make decisions that are informed and principled, rather than prejudiced and capricious.

In short, arguing both sides has considerable educational value. It forces students to recognise that, in everyday life, there is no monopoly on truth (Driscoll, Zompetti, 2003: 13)

Students love to argue with their teachers. Debate is a perfect opportunity to teach students how to express their thoughts and opinions in a civilised, respectful way. They are not afraid of new ideas as long as they find them challenging. Students also learn that if they want to change someone else's

mind, the best way is to examine the opposing points of view and refute their premises. When students argue both sides of the resolution, they learn that both sides are worthy of serious consideration.

The most successful classrooms are those that encourage students to think for themselves and engage in critical thinking. Critical thinking allows us to think about our own thoughts and the reasons behind our points of view. It means that we reflect on our ways of making decisions and solving problems. Thinking like this means that our thoughts are consciously directed to some goal. Our thoughts and ideas are based not on our biases or prejudices but on logic and information we might gather and filter from many sources. As we think critically, we are always mindful of what and how we are thinking. When we detect an error or a different way to think about a problem, we explore it eagerly. Students who think critically are typically excited about their learning. They see challenges and opportunities for learning even in the most difficult intellectual tasks (ibid.: 4).

Can students benefit from debate in language classes?

Debate in class should:

1. Improve students' fluency,
2. Enrich their vocabulary,
3. Give them an opportunity to practise the language in real situations,
4. Teach them the importance of their choice of words, intonation, body language and facial expressions,
5. Teach them to be tolerant, patient and respectful of people who might think differently, and
6. Last but not least, boost their self-confidence.

Students are under enormous pressure to learn huge amounts of vocabulary but they are rarely given guidance as to how to go about it. They have a tendency to try and learn long lists by heart, but this is hardly the most efficient approach to the problem. The golden rule is to do lots of revision at regular intervals.

Secondly, students should concentrate on words with the highest frequency, particularly everyday words which also improve the students' spoken fluency. They should also take every opportunity to use the words in communication - there is considerable psychological evidence that students who like using the foreign language improve their oral performance and their overall acquisition of the language much more

rapidly than students who are reluctant to practise the language in real situations. (Grammar and Vocabulary for First Certificate 2002: 223)

The most efficient way of practising a language is to create a real situation in your classroom. Debate is a real situation. The first step in introducing debate is to teach students to consider an issue, a problem or resolution from opposing points of view. To begin with, a teacher chooses a statement students strongly agree with. It should not be too complicated or too emotional. For a resolution to be good, it has to involve a conflict of values or policies. It takes work to construct a good resolution, but it is not impossible. Often, a debate resolution can be constructed by looking at a daily newspaper or a text from their students' books.

A teacher writes arguments for on the blackboard and invites students to think of a few arguments against.

Example (1)

HOMEWORK IS USELESS

Arguments for:

- (1) *It takes me ages to do my homework.*
- (2) *It is boring and usually quite difficult.*
- (3) *If I make a lot of mistakes, my teacher gets angry.*

Arguments against:

- (1) *It helps me learn new words / structures.*
- (2) *If I do it carefully, I can get a good mark.*
- (3) *If I get a good mark, I am happy.*

*Students are divided into two groups, one for and one against. A teacher encourages students to support their points with justification (i.e. reasons or examples).*

Example (2)

WATCHING TV IS A WASTE OF TIME

Arguments for:

It is entertaining, relaxing and educational.

- (1) *TV enables people to unwind after a stressful, tiring day at work. Most young people find reality shows entertaining and surprisingly*

*educational. They learn a lot about our world by watching educational programmes, such as Discovery Channel or BBC. There is usually a whole range of interesting documentaries to watch which bring insights and sounds into your home that you would not otherwise have the opportunity to experience.*

(2) *It is a cheap form of entertainment.*

*It is very relaxing to sit in the comfort of your own home and be entertained without having to worry about getting dressed up and spending a lot of money to have a good time.*

(3) *It is also convenient.*

*It's always there, ready to be switched on.*

Arguments against:

(1) *There is too much violence / horror, etc.*

*There is often not much censorship of television. Programmes containing violence, horror and other unsuitable viewing material can be broadcast and watched by children without their parents' knowledge. Even cartoons are full of violent scenes and characters frequently use abusive language.*

(2) *It is bad for your eyesight.*

*The more people watch TV, the worse their eyesight gets.*

(3) *People don't talk to each other so much.*

*Watching television encourages people to be lazy and not to communicate with each other.*

(4) *There are more interesting things that could be done instead.*

*Spending quality time with your family and friends is much better than being glued to your television. Doing sport is another great idea of spending your free time usefully, not to mention reading an interesting book.*

(5) *It is easy to get addicted to it.*

*Television is a drug of the modern world. It is very addictive. Once you have become addicted to it, it is extremely difficult to find the right balance and to decide what is worth watching and what is not.*

(6) *It is unhealthy – people don't get enough exercise when they watch TV.*

*Lying on your couch, watching TV for several hours a day, not selectively, eating junk food and drinking excessively is a perfect way of*

*becoming a couch potato. The more inactive you are, the greater the risk of becoming ill is.*

Debate works best as a collaborative activity. There are many different techniques that can be used to generate and organise ideas (brainstorming, T-charts, M-charts, Venn Diagrams). Students report their ideas/findings as a pair/group while inviting the responses of others. The teacher running the discussion should encourage students to clarify their ideas, to add nuances, or to raise objections. They might use expressions some students do not know/understand. The teacher writes new word/s on the blackboard and elicits the meaning from the students. Through debate students revise and/or enrich vocabulary, improve their fluency, learn to express their ideas in a polite, logically organised way, gradually get rid of the fear of speaking publicly and consequently boost their self-confidence.

The teacher may also introduce new ideas that have not occurred to debaters themselves.

In the end, the teacher should lead the students towards some kind of rough consensus. What do they think are the best arguments in favour of the resolution? What do they think are the best arguments against it?

Students are divided into groups of four. The teacher encourages them to support the points with justification (i.e. reasons or examples) and to use the words they have learnt in their student's book, *The Third Edition of New Headway, Intermediate, unit 6*. The unit focuses on food and eating habits.

In the course of preparation and discussion, it often becomes clear that words in the resolution have more than one meaning. Sometimes, the range of possible meanings is fairly limited. Sometimes, it is broad, and possible definitions can be radically different. So, it is advisable to ask students to define the key words in the statement, preferably using a monolingual dictionary.

### Example (3)

#### FAST FOOD SHOULD NOT BE SERVED IN STATE SCHOOLS

##### Definitions:

fast food (n) food such as hamburgers that is prepared quickly in a restaurant;

junk food (n) informal food that is not healthy because it contains a lot of fat, sugar, or carbohydrate;

state school (n) a school that receives money from the government and provides free education;

Arguments for:

- (1) *It is unhealthy because it contains a lot of saturated fat, salt and sugar.*
- (2) *It is fattening and can lead to obesity.*
- (3) *It is not very varied.*
- (4) *Young people should be served a variety of dishes.*

Arguments against:

- (1) *It is easy to make, easy to serve.*
- (2) *It can be eaten with both hands without using cutlery.*
- (3) *It tastes good.*
- (4) *It is not too expensive.*

A teacher asks one student to define the key words in the statement. Then groups' spokespersons are invited to present their points, along with their justification. Again, if any new words are used, a teacher writes them on the blackboard.

Students are divided into groups of four. A teacher encourages them to support the points with justification (i.e. reasons or examples) and to use the words they learn in their student's book, The Third Edition of New Headway, Intermediate, unit 8. The unit focuses on money and happiness.

They define the key words in the statement, not necessarily using a dictionary. Happiness can mean a lot of different things to different people. So, they need to choose a definition that covers most people's idea of happiness. Also, they are encouraged to express their personal opinion at the end. They must not use colloquial or strong language.

Example (4)

MONEY BRINGS HAPPINESS

Definitions:

money (n) what you earn by working and what you spend in order to buy things;

happiness (n) the state of being happy;

happy about/with (adj) (1) having feelings of pleasure, for example because something good has happened to you; (2) satisfied and not worried; (3) suitable;

Arguments for:

- (1) *Wealthy people have no money worries.*
- (2) *They can afford a big house and an expensive car.*
- (3) *They can have a lot of hobbies and leisure activities.*
- (4) *They can go on holidays regularly.*
- (5) *They can be generous and do good deeds and help other people less fortunate than them.*

Arguments against:

- (1) *They usually have very few true friends.*
- (2) *They have no privacy.*
- (3) *They have no reason to get up in the morning.*
- (4) *Most people are envious of their fortune.*
- (5) *Another problem might be ceaseless hounding from the press.*
- (6) *Also, endless charity requests and begging letters from individuals as well as organisations.*

A teacher asks one student to define the key words in the statement. Then groups' spokespersons are invited to present their points, along with their justification. Again, if any new words are used, a teacher writes them on the blackboard. In the end, a few students present their personal opinion on money and happiness. They try to answer the question if money brings happiness to them or not. Finally, a teacher asks students if they know anybody who has a lot of money and is unhappy and anyone who has very little money but is happy. They should think of the reasons for that person's un/happiness.

### **‘For and against’ essays**

One type of argumentative essay is that which gives advantages and disadvantages (For and Against). It is a formal piece of writing in which a topic is considered from opposing points of view. A good essay of this type should consist of:

- a) *an introductory paragraph* in which you state the topic. This means that you talk generally about the topic without giving your opinion;
- b) *the main body* in which the points for and the points against, along with your justification, appear in two separate paragraphs; and
- c) *a closing paragraph* in which you give either your opinion or a balanced consideration of the topic.

### **Points to consider**

Make a list of the points for and against before you start writing.

Write well-developed paragraphs in which the points you present are supported with justification (i.e. reasons and examples).

Do not use informal style (short forms, colloquial language, etc.) or strong language (e.g. I firmly believe, etc.).

Try to include a quotation relevant to the topic you are writing about. For example, if you are writing an essay on space exploration, a quotation you may include is: ‘One small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind.’ (Neil Armstrong)

Begin each paragraph with a topic sentence which summarises what the paragraph is about.

*However, there are disadvantages to owning a house. (topic sentence)*

Firstly, it can be rather expensive and tiring to maintain. For example, repairs to the outside of the house can be costly, not to mention the time-consuming task of caring for a backyard or garden. (point & justification)

(Evans, 1998: 64)

Students put the jumbled sentences in the correct order. Then they write them out in two separate paragraphs, one including all the advantages (arguments for), the other all the disadvantages (arguments against). Finally, they find a suitable beginning and ending.

Example (5)

DISCUSS THE ADVANTAGES & DISADVANTAGES OF LIVING IN A FOREIGN COUNTRY.

- a) *Finally, living in a country with a different climate can prove beneficial to both one's health and state of mind.*
- b) *In addition, many people become more independent and self-reliant by having to cope with difficult situations on their own.*
- c) *Every morning some people strap on their skies, climb into their canoes or ride a horse to get to their jobs. They are not eccentrics, though; they have simply chosen to live in a place where ways of getting to work differ from those in their own country.*
- d) *On the other hand, even if you try your hardest to adapt to your new surroundings it is likely that you will often experience moments of isolation, frustration and loneliness. This can be caused by communication problems, especially if you cannot speak the language yet.*
- e) *In conclusion, living abroad is a good way to learn to co-exist with others. Perhaps if everyone experienced life in a foreign country, relations between countries might improve and the world would become a more peaceful place.*
- f) *What is more, finding a job can often be a stressful experience as in some countries foreigners are not easily accepted.*
- g) *Moreover, one is given the chance to learn and become fluent in another language through everyday use.*
- f) *One of the main advantages of living in a foreign country is that it gives you the opportunity to experience an entirely different way of life, which can be a valuable form of education.*

(adapted from Evans, 1998: 66)

Key: c, h, g, b, a, d, f, e

MORE EXAMPLES OF ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY TITLES

- (1) *Cinema will soon be a thing of the past.*
- (2) *The plane is the most convenient means of travel.*
- (3) *Cars are the greatest danger to human life today.*
- (4) *Science has created more problems than it has solved.*

(5) *Being different means being unpopular.*

(6) *People spend too much time and money on fashion.*

Children should leave home at the age of 16.

Climate change is the biggest threat to humanity in the 21st century.

### **Literary essays**

Students are asked to read a book *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* by Mark Haddon. They discuss the relationship between Christopher John Francis Boone, a fifteen-year-old boy with Asperger's Syndrome, and his parents.

A teacher writes two sentences on the blackboard.

Who could have said ...

I care, therefore I left.

I love, therefore I stayed.

Students tell who they think could have said that and support their answers with examples from the book.

Then students read a passage from the book. (Hadden, 2004: 121/122)

Dear Christopher,

I'm sorry it's been such a very long time since I wrote my last letter to you. I've been very busy. I've got a new job working as a secretary for a factory that makes things out of steel. You'd like it a lot. The factory is full of huge machines that make the steel and cut it and bend it into whatever shapes they need. This week they are making a roof for a cafe in a shopping centre in Birmingham. It's shaped like a huge flower and they're going to stretch canvas over it to make it look like an enormous tent.

Also we've moved into a new flat at last as you can see from the address. It's not as nice as the old one and I don't like Willesden very much, but it's easier for Roger to get to work and he's bought it (he only rented the other one), so we can get our own furniture and paint the walls the colours we want to.

And that's why it's been such a long time since I wrote my last letter to you because it's been hard work packing up all our things and then unpacking them and then getting used to this new job.

I'm very tired now and I must go to sleep and I want to put this into the letterbox tomorrow morning, so I'll sign off now and write you another letter soon.

You haven't written to me yet, so I know that you are probably still angry with me. I'm sorry Christopher. But I still love you. I hope you don't stay angry with me forever. And I'd love it if you were able to write me a letter (but remember to send it to the new address!).

I think about you all the time.

Lots of love.

Your Mum.

x x x x x x

A teacher writes on the board 'Discuss what kind of parent Mrs Boone is.' A teacher elicits ideas from students and writes them on the board, then students write their essays as homework.

### **Final thoughts**

Debate is a very efficient and challenging method of teaching a foreign language. It enables you to revise new vocabulary and teach students how to organise their thoughts and ideas sensibly. Students acquire a lot of general and specific knowledge.

They become more aware of what is happening locally as well as globally. Debate raises their political, cultural, social and environmental awareness. They become genuinely interested in different topics and also learn to think logically and critically. They generally ask a lot more questions, sometimes even unpleasant ones, and are rarely satisfied with simple answers, not to mention the fact that they learn to listen to each other even when they disagree.

Perhaps if everyone was taught to listen to and respect people who think differently, there might be fewer misunderstandings among people and relations between countries might improve and our world would hopefully become a more peaceful place.

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