

# Teaching Debate in Japanese Universities

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## **[Abstract]**

The teaching of “Debate” in Japanese universities nationwide has become increasingly common in recent years. This paper aims to show that the teaching and learning of debate should be a central part of any second language program. The practice and development of the basic language skills alone would justify the inclusion of a course on debate in an English as a Foreign Language curriculum. When coupled with the cognitive and critical thinking skills involved in debate, there can be little doubt about the value of such learning. This paper begins with a discussion of what debate means and why it should be an integral part of second language learning. Debating formats and the practicalities of teaching debate will then be examined, followed by a consideration of student needs and abilities. The distinction between “learning how to debate” and “learning how to debate in an EFL course” will also be addressed, including the use of textbooks and other supplementary resources for teaching debate. A final section will be devoted to evaluation, in terms of how to judge the performance of those debating as well as one of self-evaluation for individual debaters, to reflect on and plan how to improve their debating skills.

## **Introduction**

English departments at Japanese universities are increasingly including courses teaching debate in their EFL programs. More and more students are now entering university with debating experience as well. As Chuo University’s Yoshihiro Yano notes, “English debates at the high school level have been spreading at an explosive rate” (Yano, p. 1). Last month (December, 2015) a total of 66 high schools nationwide participated in the 10<sup>th</sup> All Japan High School English Debate Tournament (Henda, 2016). At the university level regional and national

debate tournaments are held regularly. Debating societies and ESS clubs representing prestigious universities such as Tokyo University, Kyoto University and Waseda University compete alongside smaller colleges and universities. There are also a number of leagues sponsoring debate activities, including the Kanto Universities E.S.S. League (KUEL), the Japan Universities E.S.S. League (JUEL), The Tokyo Intercollegiate Debate League (TIDL) and the Kansai Intercollegiate Debate League (KIDL).

The popularity of debate in Japan is not limited to clubs and circles, however. Increasingly, Debate is becoming a regular part of EFL curricula in more and more universities. Debate can be seen as both a content-based and language-based subject. Either way, there is no doubt that the language skills involved in debating are the skills that are central to any second language program. When these skills are combined with the cognitive and critical thinking skills necessary for learning debate, the value of teaching debate in university cannot be underestimated.

After consideration of what the subject of debate entails and why it should be taught in Japanese universities, this paper discusses the practicalities of teaching and learning debate and the need to take into account learner needs and abilities. The final section is devoted to the evaluation criteria of debate performance.

## **What is Debate?**

Debate is a contest between two individuals or teams, competing to present the most compelling or persuasive argument on opposite sides of a controversial issue. Debate is not a discussion; each side must remain committed to their position, with no room for compromise or any indication of an opinion or attitude change as a result of what the opposing team may say. Nor is debate an argument in the sense of a verbal exchange or dispute in which participants adamantly and repeatedly voice their opinions, often in a heated manner. Rather, the argument is a line of reasoning or set of reasons supporting an idea or action. It is a carefully structured argument, built on logic and reason, supported with clear examples and evidence.

The debate commences with a proposition or resolution, often beginning with the words, “Be it resolved that ...” or “Resolved: That ... (should) ....” The topic for last year’s All Japan High School Debate

Tournament concerned Japan's Self-Defense Forces and their increased involvement in the United Nations Peacekeeping Operations. The resolution would then be stated: "Be it resolved that Japan's Self-Defense Forces become more involved in the United Nations Peacekeeping Operations," or "Resolved: That Japan's Self-Defense Forces should become more involved ...." Resolutions are generally a statement arguing for a change in the status quo. The side arguing for change is known as the "Affirmative" side, the opposition, the "Negative" side. Debate propositions, especially in less formal debates, are sometimes comparative in nature, as in this lighter example: "Dogs are better pets than cats."

A debate follows a precise procedure with strict adherence to specific rules and guidelines. Both sides are allowed a certain number of times to speak, each within a fixed period of time. Furthermore, the different parts of a debate each have their own purpose or type of argument. Which parts are included in a debate depend upon the agreed upon format, and in some cases particular functions are combined at one time. A brief description of the main conventional parts follows.

Affirmative Constructive Speech – Arguments are made as to why a certain change is needed, stating clear reasons illustrating this need. The steps required to make such changes should also be outlined, demonstrating the feasibility of reform.

Negative Constructive Speech – This attack should be focused on the strongest argument against the proposition. One such argument would be a claim that a change in the status quo is not really necessary. Alternatively, they may decide that a stronger argument would be to prove that the plan, as outlined by the affirmative side, would simply not work. A third option would be for the negative constructive speech to point out the disadvantages that would come about as a result of making such changes.

Cross-examination – Questions here must relate directly to points the opposition has raised. Often the veracity of facts stated or of conclusions drawn by the opposition is brought into question. In less formal debates, the procedure may allow for a "Question and Answer" period rather than cross-examination – the difference being that questions beyond what the opposition has stated would be permitted.

Refutation – This is essentially a contradiction of what the opposing team has stated. It is an attempt to prove them wrong by providing evidence which goes against the other team’s reasoning or data.

Rebuttal – The terms “rebuttal” and “refutation” are often confused in debate, and in some formats are even combined together. In rebuttal, however, rather than trying to prove that the opposition is wrong, you are attempting to show again that your side is right, whether factually, logically or morally, by restating your main arguments. It is essentially a counter-argument and does not necessarily include refutation.

The winner of a debate is decided by a judge, or panel of judges. The criteria for making this decision will be discussed in the final section of this paper, “Evaluation.”

### **Why Teach Debate?**

In the pre-course planning stage it is essential for educators to ask themselves exactly what their purposes are in teaching debate. This is necessary in order to establish specific and realistic goals for students to achieve as well as to help determine what content and approach will work best. In most content-based EFL classes there is a balance between learning the actual content and the practice and development of language skills. It is hard to imagine a more harmonious integration of content and language skills than in the teaching of debate, however. Although it is possible to teach debate as a subject from a purely academic standpoint where content is the main focus (learning the “what is” and “how to” debate), it is likely that the overall goals of many debate teachers will include not only this, but also encompass language skills and strategies, cognitive and critical thinking skills, as well as research skills.

A closer look at the skills that can be practiced and developed through learning debate demonstrates the value and benefits of including Debate in any EFL curriculum. The foundation of learning a second language – the four basic skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing – are all naturally part of the debating process. Orally asking and answering questions, stating your opinion, speaking up in class actively and using the language to communicate in real time are all

things we encourage our students to do. The skills students learn and practice in other EFL courses, such as Speech, Public Speaking and Presentation Skills, are again central in learning debate. Carefully listening to opposing arguments, taking notes, defending a position and literally thinking on your feet are also skills practiced when debating. In preparing for a debate, students must use analytical and research skills. They need to skim and scan reading material and learn to distinguish between what is or is not relevant. They must analyze, interpret and evaluate information. They must then organize their thoughts and write logical and persuasive arguments as well as find and include supporting evidence. Debaters also need to anticipate and identify possible opposing arguments and devise strategies for attack. The writing process continues as teams edit, revise and refine their arguments, all of which involve another worthwhile skill – cooperating and working together as a team. And finally, after all the written preparation and the practice and honing of delivery skills, students take part in the actual debate. Regardless of which team “wins” the debate, both teams are winners – the whole process is a learning experience in which they gain knowledge in a new area, practice and refine language, thinking and presentation skills, and learn more about themselves, their classmates and the world around them. It is hoped they also finish with a sense of satisfaction, accomplishment, and increased self-esteem, having gained confidence in their second language and debating skills.

## **Debate Formats**

There are many different types or styles of debating. Particular formats are often specific to certain countries or regions, the level of the educational institution, or the category of competition. IDEA, the International Debate Education Association, describes the following formats on its website: Online Debate, Karl Popper Debate, Parliamentary Debate, Parliamentary Debate (BP), Legislative Debate, Lincoln-Douglas Debate, Middle School Debate, Mock Trial, Cross-Examination (Policy) Debate, Public Forum Debate and Public Debate (International Debate Education Association). Of these, the more common debating formats include Parliamentary Debate, Lincoln-Douglas Debate, Cross-Examination Debate, and more recently, Online Debate. A brief description of each follows.

The term “Parliamentary Debate” describes formats modeled after

debates in the British Parliament. The most striking difference between these and other debating formats is the limited time for preparation and the fact that teams are permitted to question the opposition in what are known as “parliamentary points.” The Lincoln-Douglas debating format is also common. It is a one-on-one debate, modeled after debates between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas during a senatorial race in the 1850s (Treadwell). Cross-examination is an integral part of many debates, although the actual name of the format and the terminology describing the steps involved vary. Essentially this means that time is allotted for teams to question their opponent between constructive arguments. Unless the debate is part of a competitive tournament or fixed academic program, however, teachers of debate are free to include whatever steps or stages they determine appropriate for their students. Sometimes cross-examination is replaced with either rebuttal or refutation. Although rebuttal and refutation are separate terms with different meanings, they are often interpreted as interchangeable, and even combined together as one stage in a debate.

Online debating is a more recent development, and while some sites maintain a more traditional academic orientation, those promoting social awareness movements are becoming increasingly popular as venues for online debating. Recently, for example, graduate and undergraduate students from the University of Tokyo participated in a global online debate sponsored by the British Broadcasting Corporation (December 1, 2015). This was the first online debate as part of the BBC’s “100 Women” series, and the topic was the “Social Expectations of Women.” Participants included students from Japan, the Philippines and China (The University of Tokyo Public Relations Office).

With all the different types and styles of debating, what does a typical debate format actually look like? Narahiko Inoue, a professor in the Faculty of Languages and Cultures at Kyushu University who specializes in communication and debate, provides the following as an example:

#### A Typical Format of Academic Debate

1<sup>st</sup> Affirmative Constructive Speech 8 min.

Cross-Examination by the Negative Team 3 min.

1<sup>st</sup> Negative Constructive Speech 8 min.

Cross-Examination by the Affirmative Team 3 min.

2<sup>nd</sup> Affirmative Constructive Speech 8 min.  
Cross-Examination by the Negative Team 3 min.  
2<sup>nd</sup> Negative Constructive Speech 8 min.  
Cross-Examination by the Affirmative Team 3 min.  
1<sup>st</sup> Negative Rebuttal Speech 4 min.  
1<sup>st</sup> Affirmative Rebuttal Speech 4 min.  
2<sup>nd</sup> Negative Rebuttal Speech 4 min.  
2<sup>nd</sup> Affirmative Rebuttal Speech 4 min.  
(10 min. flexible preparation time is allocated to each team) (Inoue, 2002, p. 7)

The above format may appear somewhat daunting to a prospective debating instructor, who might wonder how they could help students understand and learn how to adequately prepare for such a debate. It is not necessary to include all these steps, however, nor to require lengthy constructive speeches, especially in the early stages of learning how to debate. Here is a simple format I have used for students in their first in-class debate:

Affirmative Constructive Speech (2 minutes)  
Negative Constructive Speech (2 minutes)  
Preparation Time (3 minutes)  
Negative Refutation, Rebuttal and Summary (2 minutes)  
Affirmative Refutation, Rebuttal and Summary (2 minutes)

The debating format(s) you choose will necessarily depend on the needs of your students and their English ability as well as their previous experience with debating. This will be discussed further in the section on “Consideration of Student Needs and Abilities.”

## **Teaching and Learning Debate**

The type of program for students learning to debate depends on how much time is available for instruction and practice. It is possible to have an impromptu debate at any time in any course where there is contention or dispute and a desire for discussion. On the other hand, several class periods may be required to prepare for and perform an actual debate, including out-of-class preparation. Daniel Krieger offers a six-class unit plan for the teaching of debate (Krieger, 2005). This paper is

based on a full term course with fifteen, ninety-minute classes.

The teaching and learning of debate is a process, focusing on different aspects of debate step-by-step, all leading up to an actual classroom debate. Several class periods may be required for theoretical or background information, including the defining and understanding of the terminology used in debating, learning what the various phases of debate entail, and discovering what debaters are expected to do at each stage.

Before working on different speeches for the debate it can be useful to have students practice and become accustomed to the distinct vocabulary and phrases used in debating. Several of the ESL textbooks published in Japan for the teaching of debate include such practice. In the textbook entitled *Debating the Issues*, each unit ends with a section of useful expressions designed for different purposes, such as confirmation, transition of argument, and proof and quote. Included in proof and quote, for example, are: "As the data indicate ...." "According to the newspaper....," and "I would like to quote a piece of evidence to prove this" (Motegi, 2001, p. 54).

Delivery in debate is paramount. A powerful delivery with a skilled and captivating use of voice may be the factor that tips the scales in favor of the winning team. Students can begin practicing the various aspects of delivery early in the course. In addition to the specific vocabulary and expressions used in debate, some textbooks also include pro and con statements supporting arguments on both sides of the issues raised. Here are two examples from the previously mentioned textbook, *Debating the Issues*, in a discussion on capital punishment: "The threat of death inevitably deters crime because death is final; there is no second chance to kill for executed criminals," and "Capital punishment takes innocent lives by mistake and their deaths are irrevocable" (Motegi, 2001, p. 57). Memorizing and practicing their delivery with such short statements helps prepare students for presenting their own arguments in a persuasive manner. For more reserved or hesitant students reluctant to speak out in a convincing manner, encouraging them to consider such practice as role-playing can be beneficial.

Students can begin to prepare for a real classroom debate once they understand the different components of debate and what they are supposed to do in each phase. The topic for the debate and the resolution must first be determined, then the teams and which side of the debate they will argue be decided upon. In smaller classes my students have



worked in pairs – 2 students per team. In our largest debating class there were 36 students, with 6 students per team, although having a different number of students on teams is not problematic – the students themselves can decide on the division or sharing of roles.

Having a team prepare for either the affirmative or negative side is advisable in the first debates, although they will need to anticipate and consider opposing arguments as well. In 2008 I coached a debating team from Nagasaki Customs to compete in the Japan Customs National Debating Competition in Tokyo. What is unusual about this particular competition is that the teams do not know which side of the debate they will be arguing, affirmative or negative, until minutes before the competition begins. Once your students are familiar with the debating process and have participated in several debates, I would recommend a similar approach, although you might notify teams of their position several days in advance rather than minutes before. Having teams prepare arguments for both the affirmative and negative sides can result in a superior debate. Knowing the likely arguments and strategies of the opposition, they are better equipped to prepare a solid defense and strategy for attack.

In learning how to debate, students also need to become aware of the various roles of participants. In addition to the affirmative and negative teams actually debating, there is a moderator, a time-keeper and a panel of judges. Using a rotation, students not debating at the time can perform these functions. By assuming these roles they must pay close attention to the proceedings, which further augments their learning of debate.

What else can be done to help students prepare for their first debate? In an end-of-course evaluation questionnaire last year, when asked how the course might be improved, some students commented that it would have been helpful to watch videos of debate. Debating clubs from educational institutions or from debating societies often post actual debates or parts of debates online. There are also “how to” videos offering instruction on debate for instructors seeking supplementary resources.

Should you use a textbook? Many textbooks teaching debate are geared toward native speakers. Publishers in Japan offer a selection of EFL textbooks for debate, although some are not aimed at the actual “teaching” of debate. Rather, they generally offer 12 to 15 units based on controversial topics one might use for debate. The strength of some of

these texts lies is the supplementary vocabulary and expressions used when debating, as well as the clearly stated, logical arguments proposed for each side.

For general background information and the learning of debate, a search on the Internet can be fruitful for both students and teachers alike. The International Debate Education Association (IDEA) and the Japan Debate Association (JDA) websites are informative, and a search for your favorite college or university's "Debating Society" or ESS in Japan can also be helpful.

### **Consideration of Student Needs and Abilities**

What particular teaching approach works best for teaching debate? What methodology and strategies help students learn how to debate most effectively? What content should be covered in the course, and what specific debating formats should be learned? It is important to be flexible when considering these questions, and to keep in mind that we are not just teaching students how to debate, but how to debate in a second language. Our expectations and goals should reflect this. We need to be able to modify our teaching to meet EFL student needs and adapt the content of the program to match their level of English ability.

Unless we are preparing students for competitive debating, where an explicit format and set of rules must be strictly adhered to, or our goals include teaching the exact procedure of a specific debating format, we should feel comfortable in deviating from stringent guidelines and rigid formats. We should feel free to experiment with formats and time limits in order to match our students' English language abilities. For example, let us say that the format we choose includes a 2 minute period for questioning the opposition between constructive arguments. It would not make sense to silently wait out the 2 minutes if the team who has the floor has either not prepared questions or is unable to come up with appropriate questions on the spot.

We can also be more versatile in our procedural plans for the teaching and learning of debate. We need not be so lockstep when it comes to our teaching "agenda". Rather than preparing for and beginning with a full debate, I often have students start by writing and presenting their constructive arguments only. In one particular class immediate problems were obvious as these presentations began. As in other Speech or Public Speaking courses, a presentation in front of the

class to some students means going up to the front and simply reading their speech. Reading a full speech, and perhaps in a barely audible monotone, is obviously very ineffective when debating. And so in this case, rather than move on to preparing for the next stage of the debate, we worked on improving their presentation skills. Instead of three or four points of argument, students rewrote a shorter version of their constructive speech with one main point and several supporting statements. They then memorized only these statements and practiced delivery skills. Their speeches the following week were much more engaging and persuasive. We may have been a week behind in the planned schedule, but students were learning how to debate ... and enjoying it. Be flexible in your approach, and aware of your students' needs.

## **Evaluating Debates**

The criteria used for evaluating debates in an EFL context is similar to what is employed for debating anywhere, whether in one's own classroom or in an international competition, for native or non-native speakers. The difference is that EFL teachers of debate can be more flexible when choosing what factors will be considered. They also have the option of placing more emphasis or weight on certain aspects, such as the use of English and presentation skills. Following is a brief description of standard evaluation measures used in an EFL context. They do not all need to be used, and additional factors may also be considered.

Content – Do the speakers have a good grasp on the issue being discussed? Are they aware of the most compelling arguments (on both sides of the controversy)? Basically, do they know what they are talking about?

Preparation and Organization – Is it a well-rehearsed and practiced presentation? Do they work well as a team and present their findings in an organized manner?

Argumentation – Are the arguments logical and the conclusions drawn reasonable?

Delivery a) Voice – Are the speed, volume and intonation appropriate? Do they vary these factors to captivate listeners and maintain interest? Clarity – can we understand everything that is being said? Do they speak with conviction and in a persuasive manner?

b) Eye contact and gestures - Do they look at the judges and their adversaries? Do they attract and win the audience's attention? Are gestures appropriate and natural?

Cross-examination – Do the speakers attack the other team's arguments effectively? If rebuttal or refutation are part of the debate, are they used correctly and successfully?

English Usage – Were they fluent, and accurate in use of their vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation?

The above criteria are used to evaluate a debate in order to determine a winner of the competition. Student-judges use evaluation forms to assess debate performance (see Appendix) and decide on a winner. By being responsible for choosing the winner, students' attention is focused on what constitutes effective debating, which can have a positive influence on their own preparations and performance when debating. Furthermore, it frees up the teacher to do independent assessment on team and individual performance, for improving instruction and practice as well as for grading purposes.

Having students undertake post-debate self-evaluation is also valuable. After all, the learning of debate is a process aimed at improving ones debating skills. To this end, the videotaping of debates is especially constructive. By watching and reflecting on their debating performance students are able to set informed and realistic goals toward improvement.

## **Conclusion**

Curricula for EFL instruction in Japanese universities are constantly evolving. Whether mandated by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) or modified and

reconstructed through departmental dialogue, the aim is to provide the best English language instruction and practice possible. This is why Debate should be a core subject in an EFL curriculum. The language skills practiced and developed through debate are important skills for any second language learning. The cognitive and critical thinking skills applied through debate are also the skills required in higher learning programs. Training and practice in how to debate not only reinforces second language learning, but can instill in the learner a sense of accomplishment and self-esteem.

This paper has discussed the meaning of debate and the advantages of teaching this subject in Japanese universities. The practicalities of teaching and learning debate have been addressed as well as an examination of the need to take into account learner needs and abilities. An overview of the standard criteria for evaluating debates was discussed and a sample evaluation sheet for judges provided.

Beyond university classrooms the value of debate in society is unquestionable for maintaining peaceful and democratic societies; in the words of French philosopher Joseph Joubert (1754 - 1824), "It is better to debate a question without settling it, than to settle a question without debating it" (Thinkexist.com).

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## Appendix

### Debate Evaluation Form for Judges

(Note: The evaluation form below was used for judging the Affirmative team only. A corresponding form for the Negative team was printed on the reverse side of the paper)

**DEBATE # \_\_\_\_\_ Rating Scale: 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1**  
*Excellent Very good Good Fair So so Unsatisfactory*

#### Affirmative Constructive Speech

Clarity, speed and volume – How easy was it to understand?

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Persuasiveness – Was it a professional presentation and was their use of voice convincing?

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Eye contact / gestures – Were they really interacting with the audience, judges and the other team?

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Organization – Was the speech clearly outlined and well-organized?

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Use of English – Were they fluent, and accurate in use of their vocabulary and pronunciation?

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Total points \_\_\_\_\_ / **50**

#### Affirmative Refutation, Rebuttal and Summary

Clarity, speed and volume – How easy was it to understand?

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Persuasiveness – Was it a professional presentation and was their use of voice convincing?

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Eye contact / gestures – Were they really interacting with the audience, judges and the other team?

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Organization – Was the speech clearly outlined and well-organized?

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Use of English – Were they fluent, and accurate in use of their vocabulary and pronunciation?

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Total points \_\_\_\_\_ / **50**      **Affirmative Side Total** \_\_\_\_\_ / **100**

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