

Debate and Lower Proficiency Students

By Ediyanto Liu

Introduction

There has long been a shared belief among many educators of the pedagogical benefits of debate, some of which include improved analytical skills, academic attainment, and oral communication skills in the learner/s' first language (L1) or even in a foreign language learning context (Davidson, 1995; Nisbett, 2003; Akerman & Neale, 2011). This improvement is possibly due to the nature of the task in a debate activity where a topic is selected, two differing positions are assigned to groups of students, and an issue in the topic is explored more-in-depth through oral exchanges by both sides usually in a competitive atmosphere. Such benefits have led to the call for classroom debate to be implemented across the curriculum at both high school and college or university levels (Bellon, 2000).

In the last two decades, those pioneering the use of debate as a teaching tool have often been science teachers. Its use in the science context was investigated by Zohar and Nemet (2001) who taught a group of Israeli secondary school students how to construct arguments in a biology class on the topic of human genetics. The study showed that after the instruction, the experimental group used more factually correct content knowledge in the debate and even performed better than the control group

in the biology test that followed. These results are in tune with another study conducted on secondary students in France where Simonneaux (2001, 2002, as cited in Akerman & Neale, 2011) found improved knowledge in the same subject.

In the English as a Second Language (ESL) context, Anitha and Anitha (n.d. as cited in Akerman & Neale, 2011) observed the use of debate by Singaporean students at primary, secondary and junior college levels and found an increase in lexical accuracy as the activity focused on form and was a meaningful communicative task. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Fukuda (2003) reported a significant increase in Japanese university students' confidence in expressing their opinions. Prior to the debate, only 30.8% of students had the confidence to communicate their ideas; however, after the debate the figure increased to 56.7 percent. In another study conducted in the same country, undergraduate students expressed a perceived improvement in their English communication skills, having participated in debate activities (Inoue & Nakano, 2004).

As debate is a complex form of communication where immediate responses are expected (Lubetsky et al., 2000, as cited in Lieb, 2007), generally there is reluctance on the part of teachers to hold it in a mixed ability class. The claim made by Stewart (2003) that

75 percent of his “unmotivated and reserved” (p.1) students rated debate as their favourite activity prompted the same observation regarding two lower proficiency students in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) debate activities earlier this year.

The Observation

The two students, X and Y, whose L1 is Mandarin Chinese, took the one-year EAP Science module for sophomore students at Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, an English medium university which awards dual undergraduate degrees from the two aforesaid universities. X and Y were in two different classes and were quiet and shy. They had been attending their respective classes for four weeks when the debate with the motion ‘Provision of clean water is the most important thing to do in the aftermath of a natural disaster’ was conducted by dividing each class into two groups of five students, with a few other students being appointed as judges. To further create a formal atmosphere, the debate was recorded by using a non-intrusive digital voice recorder. After the two groups had prepared for or against the motion, each group representative was asked to present the arguments in two to three minutes before the rebuttal session that lasted between twelve and eighteen minutes began.

X’s team was for the motion and he happened to be in a group of five where the rest were all female students. It took him eight minutes before breaking his silence. During the entire 12.5-minute debate, he had two turns and spoke for about thirty seconds, with the first turn clocking nineteen seconds. The following is the transcript of his contribution:

X: Eh let’s think...what [*other students’ laughter*] let’s think what these people after the disease [disaster] what they will do they want to survive after they eh climb out the underground [*other students’ laughter*] they will do they will find some water some food to eat or drink ok? That’s the most important thing to do.

S [another student]: But this water needs to be transported, how can you do that?

X: Yes, transport is one way to find the clean

water [eh? S sounded surprised at this answer] this is only the one way maybe there are some other ways.

S: But only some people can find water; most people need help....

Y’s team was against the motion. The duration of the debate in his class was eighteen minutes and his contribution lasted one minute and five seconds. Only in the twelfth minute did he take his first turn by rebutting the point the opposing team member had made earlier:

Y: Eh maybe you said the river is pollute but the water is enough so when we can saving time to do another important thing without to eh...[unclear] clean water to other people we can saving time do another thing maybe for food maybe saving people and the when the disaster happen we have to minder [remember] one is save the people in the disaster and another to transit people is safety but the place not safety so we can’t transit people into another place it’s the same important to eh to save people in the disaster it hard maybe died I think is the eh one of the most important thing of eh and eh maybe sometimes eh more important the eh than the water.

A [another student]: You said after the natural disaster the most important thing is to ensure more and more people can save after the disaster right? But to ensure the more people alive after the disaster the most important is to provide enough water to him or her.

Y did not have a chance to respond to A as another student from his group took the turn. After a few further exchanges among the two groups, Y commented briefly on what the other team member said but his speech was not intelligible at all.

The transcription reveals X’s attempt to reiterate the importance of water by illustrating the need to first search for water in a disaster. This seemed sufficiently logical although it could be considered rudimentary. His poor language ability might have caused this. If the debate had been administered in his L1, probably this would not have been the

case. The same could be said of Y's argument. He reminded the opposite team to prioritize other factors such as finding food and moving people to safe places.

X and Y's participation in the debate was least expected, especially given their personality and ability. After the debate, further feedback was sought from X and Y through a one-to-one meeting. Several reasons for participation were mentioned in the feedback. In the case of X, the first reason was to help his group win the debate. He confided that being the only male student in the group gave him the extra motivation. Another reason he had was that he felt good working in the group; he and his group members had built a good rapport during the preparation stage. He also claimed that he enjoyed the pressure in the debate as he was challenged to think and respond immediately to other students' arguments.

Y mentioned that the reason he finally took the turn was that he had been following the debate and he disagreed with the other group's opinion. The cause for his late turn-taking was that he waited for the opportunity when the other group would make a mistake, and he would then seize upon it to prove them wrong. He further added that the fact that all his group members had made contributions also slightly influenced his decision to speak. During the preparation stage, he disagreed with one of the group members; however, this did not lessen his enjoyment of working in his group of one female and four male students.

Conclusion

The observation reveals that the two lower proficiency students in this mixed ability class were willing and able to contribute to the debate activity even though their arguments lacked complexity, possibly due to their weaker language ability. There were also various factors that affected their decisions to participate in the group debate, for instance, group composition, rapport among team members and competitiveness. However, as the observation was only made of two students and there was a very high probability of a chance occurrence, these preliminary results should be interpreted carefully. Nevertheless, they could form the basis for an extensive investigation on the ability of lower proficiency

students, especially in mixed ability classes, to contribute meaningfully to debates in order to further substantiate the benefits of debate as a teaching tool in the EFL, ESL and EAP contexts.

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