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Literary Debates: Introducing a Literature-based Approach to Teaching Critical Argumentative Skills in a Tertiary-level EFL Context

大学英語教育における文学を使用した批判的論説スキル教育の提案

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Abstract

This educational practice report outlines the rationale for creating an original English oral communication skills course that combines the study of literature with formal debate. It includes a detailed breakdown of the regular class procedures used to prepare students for a weekly practice debate and also an overview of the course structure, showing how students acquire the skills and confidence to debate persuasively in front of an audience of their peers by the end of the course. The paper concludes with an overview of the English language skills as well as other academic competencies such as critical thinking and argumentative skills that the course aims to develop in students.

keywords: critical thinking, debate, EFL, literature

1. Introduction

For the 2017 academic year at Osaka University, I was asked to develop a course to improve the oral communication skills of first year students in the English programme. As the study of literature is one of the main focus areas of the four-year degree programme, I opted to experiment with an original approach that merges traditional English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom activities, which focus on the acquisition of specific language skills, with an analytical approach to English literature typically found in courses aimed at first-language speakers. In order to maximise in-class speaking opportunities and to encourage the development of critical thinking and argumentative skills, I also chose to include formal debate among the class activities with the course culminating in a series of final small team debates in which all students participate. After outlining my rationale for introducing literature into a foreign language course in a little more detail, this paper will present a brief overview of the progression of speaking-focussed activities within each regular class session and of the course structure as a whole. The paper will conclude with a discussion on the desired outcomes of the course in terms of language and academic skill

acquisition.

2. The Benefits of Literature in an EFL Context

While numerous scholars in the field of applied linguistics have pointed to the benefits of studying literature as a means of developing foreign language skills (McKay 1982, Moi 2003, Oster 1989), in my experience this is not an approach commonly followed by EFL educators in Japan today. One reason for the apparent reluctance of teachers to include literature in their curricula may be a trend in EFL towards emphasising more learner-centred classroom activities, the result of an influential pedagogical philosophy that aims to prioritise the choices and actions of learners in the classroom as opposed to those of educators (Nunan 1988). This outlook stands in opposition to what is often called a teacher-centred or text-centred approach (Moi 2003), with which traditional literature studies is often associated. Nevertheless, there are good reasons to believe that the study of literature integrated into an EFL curriculum would benefit students, even at lower proficiency levels. Perhaps the most obvious benefit of literature in the foreign language classroom is its effect on learner motivation. By the time Japanese students reach university, they have typically completed at least six years of formal English language education at the junior and senior high school levels. However, due in no small part to the strong emphasis on preparing students for standardised testing that pervades the secondary education system in Japan (Aspinall 2013), students often have no or very limited experience of reading authentic English texts when they commence their undergraduate studies. After having put a great deal of effort into memorising vocabulary and learning the technicalities of the grammar, it can be an immensely satisfying experience for a student to finally read and comprehend a poem, short story, play or novel that the student knows was originally written for an English-speaking audience. A course that encourages students to take this step and to put their linguistic competence into practical use can provide a significant boost to their confidence and motivation as far as language learning is concerned.

In addition to increasing student confidence and motivation, including literature in an EFL curriculum may benefit learners in other ways too. Most reading activities expand the reader’s general knowledge, but works of fiction also often act as a mirror to the society and circumstances in which it was authored or alternatively it may also direct the reader’s gaze towards a society different from the author’s own. Intentionally or unintentionally, valuable insight is often provided into the social attitudes and concerns prevalent at the time of writing. When readers are not of the same cultural background as the author, such as is often the case with students of English in Japan, the fictional work could be conceptualised as a window through which life in a different society may be observed and a better understanding of that society’s values and norms at a certain point in

history gained. Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, for example, paints a vivid picture of the life experiences of many in 19th-century London, while Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* performs the same function for life in Depression-era America. By reading fictional texts such as these, a reader gains not only a deeper historical understanding of the society in question, but also a sense of the historical narrative that helps to shape the national or social identity of members of that society today. Furthermore, exposure through literature to ideas and related experiences that are different from or even in opposition to readers' own conceptions and values may lead them to scrutinise and reassess their own ideas and prejudices in a more critical light. Many great works of literature also satirise aspects of a certain society or of human nature in general and in doing so may point our attention to hypocritical or unjust situations that would otherwise have gone unnoticed. This kind of literature is especially suited for academic study, as it encourages students to ask more questions and to develop a greater sense of general critical awareness. For the reasons discussed above, literature can be an excellent catalyst for critical thinking and, as long as suitable texts are chosen, it can be put to very productive use in the EFL classroom.

3. Class Procedures and Course Structure

This section contains a description of the class procedures and course structure followed for the literature studies semester of my oral communication skills course for first-year students specialising in English. While the entire course spans two semesters, the focus in the first semester is on oral presentation skills and students are not required to read a substantial amount in preparation for classes. During the second semester, students are required to prepare sections of a prescribed text before each class and this reading forms the basis for class discussion and debate activities. Since only this second half of the course involves a significant literary component, only the procedures and structure followed during this semester will be discussed here. The prescribed reading text that I selected for this course is George Orwell's satirical novella *Animal Farm*. At a length of just over one hundred pages and written in a very accessible style, I considered this text to be appropriate for a first-year university EFL course with most students falling within the B1 or B2 CEFR English proficiency range. Furthermore, the variety of pertinent and interesting themes present in the book and the multiple levels of analysis to which the work lends itself make it well-suited for discussion and debate.

For the 15-week duration of the semester, I meet with students once per week. Each week they are expected to come to class well prepared for the in-class activities. Preparation typically involves reading one chapter from the text, roughly ten pages long, writing a short paragraph summarising the main events of the chapter and preparing two questions related to the chapter for group

discussion in class. Students are asked to prepare open-ended discussion questions, as opposed to narrower questions of comprehension. As some students find it challenging to formulate productive discussion questions at first, this distinction between discussion questions and comprehension questions is explained at the hand of example questions elicited from the students themselves.

Over the course of the first few meetings, students are gradually introduced to the various types of class activities and to the phases of a formal debate up to the point where a regular class procedure is established. This regular pattern of class activities may be divided into eight stages. The first stage involves a warm-up discussion in which small groups of three or four students each review the main plot events of the chapter that was assigned as homework reading. This is an opportunity for students to refresh their memories and also to confirm their understanding of important developments within the story. This activity continues for about ten minutes and throughout this period I monitor each group's progress and answer questions regarding language or content as necessary. The second stage also involves small group discussion activities, with students now taking turns to lead a group discussion based on one of the questions that they prepared before the class. While discussions on different text-related topics take place simultaneously across groups, I keep time and every five minutes announce that it is time for a different student to lead the discussion starting with one of their questions. For this activity, certain students are eager and able to express their opinions clearly from the outset, while others require more encouragement. Some groups may also feel that they have exhausted a topic after two or three minutes of discussion, in which case they may be advised to take the discussion in a different but related direction using follow-up questions. This activity lasts a little over twenty minutes if most groups contain four students who each leads a five-minute discussion. The goal is not only for students to practise speaking and listening, but also to gain a more thorough understanding of the relevant events and themes of the chapter, as this will facilitate the preparation of claims and evidence for the upcoming debate. Due to the importance of this scaffolding stage, I make a point of conspicuously evaluating students' participation during the activity in the hope of encouraging everyone to come to class well prepared and to play an active part in the discussion.

The aim of the third stage is to decide on a resolution for the class practice debate, which consists of a normative statement that some students will argue for and other students will argue against. An example of a viable resolution might be 'Senior government officials should receive much higher salaries than the average citizen.' Students are asked to propose resolution ideas based on the group discussion of the previous stage. I then write three or four of these resolutions on the whiteboard, improving the wording if necessary, and have the class vote on the resolution they would most like to debate. Deciding on a resolution in this way ensures that students find the debate

topic relevant and interesting. Once a resolution has been chosen, each student is assigned to either the affirmative side, meaning that they agree with the resolution, or to the negative side, meaning that they disagree. This is the fourth stage of the procedure. Sides are assigned randomly in order to balance the number of affirmative and negative debaters. An additional benefit of assigning sides randomly is that students often feel less pressured to argue for what they believe to be the popular view, as their peers cannot hold them accountable for supporting an unpopular stance in the debate. They may thus feel less inhibited to express controversial or unorthodox views that have the effect of enriching the debate and encouraging greater critical thinking among students.

During the fifth stage, students work individually to each prepare three claims stating the strongest reasons they can think of to support their side in the debate, along with any evidence and examples that strengthen their three claims. Students need to work quickly, as they are only allowed five minutes of preparation time and are expected to be ready afterwards to make a two-minute constructive speech that clearly lays out their argument. While this may seem very challenging, students are generally able to produce satisfactory speeches, as they have already practiced speechmaking with minimal preparation time in the first semester of the course and are also likely to be familiar with many points of view on the issue in question following the earlier group discussion stage. Only at the sixth stage, after students have been assigned sides in the debate and have prepared their claims, is the class divided into practice debate groups. Each group consists of four core debaters, with two students on each side. If the total number of students in the class is a multiple of four, the division is straightforward. If not, the remaining students each join a different group, resulting in one or more unbalanced teams.

The seventh stage is the practise debate, which takes place simultaneously across all groups. The debate format combines elements from both the team policy debate and the Lincoln-Douglas debate styles, with adaptations made to ensure effectiveness in the EFL classroom environment. The first speech in the debate is the affirmative constructive speech (AFF CS). Students may be asked to play a random selection game such as rock-paper-scissors to decide which member in each team of two will make the constructive speech, as this student will have the advantage of greater familiarity with their claims during the debate and also of having a speech pre-prepared. After the AFF CS, the negative team members pose questions to the affirmative team in order to clarify certain points and to reveal weaknesses in the arguments of their opposition. This is known as the negative cross-examination (NEG CE) and lasts for about four minutes in the practice debate. The cross-examination tends to be the phase of the debate with which students experience the most difficulty, as many are not yet able to spontaneously phrase clear and effective questions in English and some may also feel uncomfortable with the confrontational nature of asking challenging questions. For

this reason, it is helpful to give students an extra minute to prepare before the cross-examination if time allows. As the affirmative side have now argued their case and have been interrogated, a student from the negative side presents their constructive speech (NEG CS), also after a random selection game. Again this is followed by a cross-examination, this time by the affirmative side (AFF CE). The final phase of the debate consists of the rebuttal speeches, in which each side reiterate their main claims and also point out weaknesses in the opposing team's arguments. Rebuttal speeches on each side are made by the student who did not make the constructive speech and two minutes of preparation time is allowed prior to the speeches for team consultation and planning. Each team may take up to three minutes to deliver their rebuttal speech, with the negative team presenting first (NEG RS), followed by the affirmative team (AFF RS). The entire practice debate takes approximately thirty minutes of class time, as feedback is typically provided and strategies discussed after each phase. In addition to the instructor keeping time and managing the transitions between debate phases, speeches and cross-examination sessions need to be monitored and advice provided to individual students as required. The fast-paced nature of the activity can make this a challenge for the instructor, but it becomes much easier with practice. Finally, the eighth stage of the class procedure involves the selection of a particularly strong debate group or debater to perform part of their debate or to make a speech from the debate to the class. This last stage is optional, as there might not be any class time left following the practice debate.

Stage	Activity	Duration
1	small group discussion of main plot events	10 mins
2	students ask their own discussion questions in small groups, each leading a 5-minute session	20 mins
3	students propose debate resolution ideas based on group discussions, then vote on one resolution	5 mins
4	sides (AFF and NEG) are assigned randomly	5 mins
5	students prepare three claims each for their own CS	5 mins
6	instructor assigns students to groups (core groups: 2 AFF x 2 NEG, remaining students spread out)	5 mins
7	practice debates, consisting of a CS, CE and RS on each side, take place simultaneously	30 mins
8	front-of class debates or speeches (optional)	-

Figure 1 Summary of regular debate procedure

Clearly it takes time for students to acquire the skills and familiarity with formal debating conventions that are required to participate successfully in the class activities described in this section. As mentioned earlier, new activities and debate elements are therefore introduced gradually over the initial weeks of the semester with the aim of reaching the regular class procedure towards

the middle of the semester. Over the first weeks, students spend time in class building up their skills and confidence in activities not described in the regular procedure above, for example by presenting their constructive speeches in front of the whole class. Over the final two weeks of the semester, all students take part in a series of assessed final debates. Students are placed in small groups similar to those of the practice debates, after which groups are given a list of resolutions related to the set text to choose from and allowed several weeks of preparation time. For the final debates, they are expected to prepare longer speeches and to research their topics independently in order to present a more persuasive case with stronger claims and evidence. Unlike the practice debates that take place simultaneously, final debates are scheduled one at a time, with students performing in front of their peers. In order to encourage them to argue as persuasively as possible, audience members are asked to vote via secret ballot after each debate for the team they think presented the strongest case. Both debaters of each winning team are then awarded bonus points in the final assessment.

4. Learning Outcomes

The primary goal of the course is to develop students' oral communication skills in English and to this end, class activities are designed to maximise the time students spend speaking and listening. Each student would ideally speak for several minutes in total over the two small group discussion activities that make up the first two stages of the regular class procedure. Core debate members, constituting all or almost all students, also deliver a debate speech during the debate practice session that forms part of the regular procedure and everyone participates in cross-examination questioning and answering. Furthermore, students practise speaking in front of a larger audience when they are selected to give a speech to the class during stage eight or when they participate in the final debates at the end of the course. When students are not speaking English in class, they are usually listening to it. An additional and significant advantage of basing an EFL course on literature is that students also gain a significant amount of reading practice. Students in this course read one chapter of approximately ten pages per week and in the process increase their reading speed, reinforce their grammatical knowledge and expand their vocabulary. Finally, while writing skill development is not a priority of this course, students acquire skill in summarising a text by means of regular homework paragraph writing and also in note-taking when they participate in cross-examination sessions and preparation activities for constructive and rebuttal speeches.

Aside from the above four language skills often emphasised in EFL education, the course also offers students the opportunity develop other competencies that are of relevance to academia and beyond. Reading and discussing literature are good ways of developing critical thinking and so too is debate. While the course familiarises students with the basic conventions shared by most styles

of formal debate, a more important aim is for students to develop their argumentative skills, which are invaluable for academic work, particularly in the humanities and social sciences. Such skills include the construction of strong rational and evidence-based arguments, the presentation of these arguments with persuasion and rhetorical skill, the identification and exposure of weaknesses in opposing arguments and the defence of one's own arguments in the face of criticism. While I have not yet gathered any data to objectively illustrate the results of this approach on students' learning progress, I am satisfied that most students who have completed the course were able to express their thoughts and opinions markedly more clearly and confidently in discussion and formal debate by the end of the course than they were able to do at the start of it.

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