Cross-Examining the News:
Building Linguistic Competence and Critical Thinking Skills in a Japanese EFL Context Through Class Debate on Controversial Issues

ニュースを問いただす
―日本の英語教育における論争的問題についてのクラス討論による言語能力と批判的思考力の構築―

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Abstract

This educational practice report discusses the content and learning outcomes of a debate course focussing on current affairs for second year undergraduate English majors at Osaka University. A profile of the learners is presented, after which the course structure and regular class procedures are outlined. This is followed by an analysis of how participation in debates and accompanying activities may help learners to improve their linguistic competence in English, drawing upon concepts from interactionist second language acquisition (SLA) theory. The final section of the paper examines the complex concept of critical thinking and then considers the ways in which participation in debate activities may help learners to develop and consolidate the cognitive skills and approaches associated with this notion.

Keywords: critical thinking, current affairs, debate, second language acquisition (SLA)

1. Introduction

While the notion that “Western logic”, propositional truth, and critical thinking, all of which are indispensable elements for effective debate, are culturally bounded concepts that are prized among Westerners but generally disdained by East Asians is an influential one within the applied linguistics literature (Atkinson 1997, Becker 1986), the author’s experiences with introducing confrontational debate activities into his English as a foreign language (EFL) curriculum seem to challenge this often repeated view. It is clear that class debates and associated activities promise a variety of potential benefits for the development of linguistic and cognitive skills in learners of EFL (Zare and Othman 2013) and previous research suggests that this also holds true in Japan (Hofmeyr 2018a). Furthermore, the potential of authentic news articles as a starting point for critical discussion and writing activities has been successfully demonstrated within an Asian tertiary-level EFL environment (Park 2012). This paper introduces a university debate course component centred on contemporary news topics

and discusses how debate-related class activities may develop the linguistic and cognitive competence of Japanese EFL learners.

The paper begins with a brief profile of the learners who completed the English language course at Osaka University that provided the context for the debates in question, which is followed by a description of the structure and content of the course. The degree to which learners participated and engaged in class activities is also discussed. The subsequent sections examine the ways in which learners' linguistic and critical thinking skills may be developed through debate activities, based on theoretical concepts from the field of second language acquisition (SLA) and on the personal observations and reflections of the author.

2. Profile of Learners

The debates and related activities described here took place within the second semester of a compulsory communication-focussed course for second year undergraduate students at Osaka University enrolled in the English Studies programme. Of the learners in the cohort concerned, all had had prior debate experience from their first-year oral communication course (see Hofmeyr 2018a) as well as training during the previous semester in presentation skills with a focus on clear, rational and coherent argumentation. With the exception of a very small number of international students from other Asian countries, all of the learners were of Japanese nationality and the vast majority completed all of their pre-tertiary schooling in Japan. With regard to English language proficiency, the lowest level learners in the cohort could be classified at the B1 intermediate level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, but most could confidently be placed at the B2 upper-intermediate level. Some learners possessed more advanced linguistic proficiency, in one or two cases closely approximating that of first language speakers of English. The number of learners in each class was limited to 25, with the average number of learners attending each weekly session numbering about 20.

3. Debate Course Structure and Class Procedures

The course as a whole spans two 15-week semesters, with a focus in the second semester on debate activities. The theme of the course is current affairs, with an emphasis on social and political issues that generate controversy within the English-speaking world or in Japan. In the first semester of the course, in which the aim is to develop presentation and argument-construction skills in addition to linguistic proficiency, learners receive an authentic and largely unedited recent newspaper article on a different topic each week to serve as stimulation and provide source material to inform small-group discussion activities and class presentations. Articles are chosen from a number of well-

respected journalistic sources, mostly British and American, representing the centre-left and centre-right of the political spectrum. In the debate semester that follows, similar newspaper articles continue to be used as the basis for group discussion and debate activities over the first ten weeks, after which learners engage in a series of final team debates that are evaluated and constitute a large part of their final grade for the course.

Discussion and debate practice activities are scaffolded to gradually introduce different aspects of a simplified Lincoln-Douglas debate format (Roberts 2012). With the exception of the first newspaper article, which is distributed at the first class meeting of the second semester, learners receive readings in advance and are expected to have carefully read them and looked up any unfamiliar vocabulary before class. In addition, learners are required to formulate and write down two comprehension questions and two discussion questions based on the readings as part of their homework. Unlike the first semester, where a new topic is addressed each week, learners spend two weeks engaged in activities relating to one article and this two-week cycle is repeated five times over the ten-week practice period which precedes the final debates.

The first session in each two-part cycle aims to ensure that learners possess a clear understanding of the content of the article, to provide learners with speaking practice on the topic of the article, and to decide on a debate resolution. The session begins with a group discussion in which each learner asks one comprehension question, followed by an instructor-led question and answer period aimed at clearing up any remaining uncertainties. Learners then return to their groups where each leads a five-minute discussion in English based on one of the discussion questions that they prepared in advance. Depending on the amount of time available, learners may be instructed to prepare a short speech based on one of their questions, with some being called on to present their speech to the whole class. Finally, groups are asked to formulate a resolution for a practice debate inspired by their discussion. These are written down by the instructor on the whiteboard before learners vote on a single resolution. Once a resolution has been determined, each learner is randomly assigned to argue for the affirmative or the negative side in the upcoming debate. As preparation for the second session of the cycle in the week that follows, learners are required to formulate three claims in support of their position and to consult at least two additional sources on the resolution topic in order to gather evidence for the debate.

The second session starts with a practice debate activity in which all learners participate and which follows the resolution chosen in the previous session. The class is divided into groups, each including at least two learners arguing for the affirmative side and at least two others arguing for the negative side. The procedure followed during the practice debate develops from one class to the next as new elements of the debate format are introduced. The first practice debate does not follow a set

structure, with learners making their claims and presenting their evidence in any manner they see fit. Subsequent practice debates start with a constructive speech on each side, followed by cross-examination sessions and later in the semester also by rebuttal speeches. After the practice debate, learners are instructed to prepare an improved constructive speech on the same resolution, with five minutes allowed for the completion of this task. The instructor then selects one learner from the affirmative and one from the negative side, along with a supporting debater for each, to present their constructive speeches and to cross-examine each other while the remaining learners watch their performance. These cycles of low-pressure and higher-pressure practice debate activities that constitute the first ten weeks of the course serve to develop in learners the necessary skills and confidence to effectively participate in an assessed end-of-semester team debate on one of the social or political topics introduced during the course. In addition to the class activities and homework assignments described above, short training sessions are also administered on practical aspects of debate preparation and participation. These include advice on locating reliable evidence, avoiding logical fallacies, preparing persuasive speeches, and asking effective questions during cross-examination sessions.

Despite the challenging nature of the materials and activities encountered in the course and the previously-mentioned notion that East-Asian learners do not perform well in confrontational activities that require explicit, rational and systematic argumentation, learners generally prepared adequately for classes and participated enthusiastically during the discussion and debate activities, with many if not all showing notable improvement in their ability to express ideas effectively in spoken English by the end of the semester. At least one learner even felt sufficiently confident to enter an international English debate contest after completing the course.

4. Development of Linguistic Competence

The debate course was designed to provide learners with intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to participate, or motivation from within and external to the individual learner (Dörnyei 1994). For example, the use of intellectually stimulating authentic texts coupled with the opportunity to express their personal opinions on self-selected topics provided learners with the intrinsic motivation to engage in class activities as well as with a sense of autonomy in their learning (Benson 2013). On the other hand, in-class monitoring of activities by the instructor, grading for participation during group discussions, and summative evaluations of individual and team performance during the final group debates created extrinsic motivation for learners to perform well. Such a variety of motivating factors may encourage learners with a range of different individual characteristics and learning styles to engage actively with challenging content and thereby maximise their production of and exposure to

the English language.

Exposure to large amounts of comprehensible linguistic input has long been recognised as an integral factor to successful SLA (Gass 1997, Krashen 1982). In the debate course, learners develop their reading skills and expand their vocabulary through the newspaper articles selected by the instructor and also through the additional reading of self-selected texts when they gather evidence for the practice and final debates. Aural comprehension skills are also developed as learners listen to the instructor's explanations of difficult points in the newspaper articles as well as to the abundant spoken output of their peers during group discussion and debate activities. In addition to linguistic input, interactionist theories of SLA stress the importance of linguistic output in interlanguage development (Swain 2005). Each learner in the debate class speaks for a substantial part of each session as they participate actively during small group discussion, deliver constructive or rebuttal speeches, or ask and answer questions during cross-examination. Not only is such speaking practice beneficial for the consolidation of linguistic knowledge, but it has also been shown to enhance fluency (Loewen and Reinders 2011) and automaticity, which refers to the ability to retrieve items from long-term memory very quickly (DeKeyser 2001). While the production of written output in English is not a major aim of the course, learners do have the opportunity to develop their writing skills through the homework activities of formulating succinct comprehension and discussion questions based on the newspaper articles as well as through class activities involving note-taking and timed preparation for debate speeches.

The negotiation of meaning and focus on form are two further elements that are often emphasised as important to SLA within the interactionist literature. The former concept refers to the modification of target language output as a result of interaction between one learner and another speaker and is believed to play a crucial role in language acquisition (Long 1996, Pica 1994). Class discussion and debate activities among learner peers are especially conducive to such negotiation, as learners may very often initially fail to convey their intended meaning or grasp the meaning of an interlocutor's utterance, forcing them to modify their output by experimenting with different linguistic forms or adopting strategies such as requesting clarification, which improves the likelihood of successful communication taking place.

Communicative language teaching and content-based language teaching, both pedagogical approaches that have influenced the development of the course, have been criticised for prioritising fluency at the expense of linguistic accuracy (Lightbown and Spada 2013). To remedy this situation, it has been suggested that communicative and content oriented second language (L2) teaching incorporate a substantial amount of focus on linguistic form in addition to meaning (Long 1991, Skehan 2003). While some class time was devoted to the discussion of grammatical structures during

the course, this only occurred on an ad hoc basis in cases where unfamiliar grammatical forms led to misunderstanding of key parts of the texts or when learners struggled to express their ideas effectively. The rationale for this minimal use of focus on form stems from the author's view that the motivational and practical benefits of a communicative, meaning-focussed approach to L2 teaching outweigh the potential disadvantage of less accurate output where learners of upper-intermediate proficiency and above are concerned. This being said, a need does exists for scaffolding activities (Ellis 2003) that gradually build up familiarity with vocabulary and grammatical structures of relevance to the topic, so that learner confidence may be enhanced during discussion. This need is met in the course by means of the homework reading activities, small-group discussion sessions based on the learners' own comprehension and discussion questions, and preparation activities for debate speeches and cross-examination.

Classroom debate activities may benefit learners in other ways too. Debaters may, for example, improve their pragmatic competence as they experiment with politeness strategies such as hedging (Brown and Levinson 1987) during cross-examination sessions or as they execute illocutionary acts such as directing their interlocutor to respond by means of a request for evidence to substantiate an aforementioned proposition (Searle 1975). Debate activities also offer learners the opportunity to acquire and practise new rhetorical skills, enabling them to articulate arguments with greater persuasive force. Rhetorical strategies that were discussed explicitly during the course included rhetorical questions, repetition of key structures, hyperbole, and analogy. Learners were encouraged to make use of these devices in their speeches and during the cross-examination, but in general only the most linguistically proficient and confident learners experimented with such techniques. A possible explanation for this somewhat disappointing result is that the increased cognitive burden (Moreno and Mayer 1999) placed on learners by such strategies may have simply been too demanding for the others, who instead chose to prioritise the meaning and comprehensibility of their L2 output over rhetorical effect.

5. Development of Critical Thinking

As is the case with much pedagogical terminology in the educational literature, *critical thinking* lacks a precise and generally accepted definition. Nevertheless, a degree of consistency may be found within the set of partially overlapping ideas that is generally employed to conceptualise the term. In an earlier paper, the author reviewed the most pertinent elements of critical thinking, arguing that the development of associated skills and approaches constitutes an indispensable part of the kind of well-rounded education required for meaningful participation in democratic society (Hofmeyr 2018b). The elements of critical thinking identified in that paper include the higher order thinking skills of

creating, evaluating and analysing, as set forth in Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill and Krathwohl 1956) and later revised by Anderson and Krathwohl (2001), logical inference based on sound reasoning and persuasive evidence (Tokuhama-Espinosa 2010), the ability to consider the individual and social circumstances of oneself and others in an objective light, and finally a willingness to question and evaluate any source of authority before accepting its legitimacy. If educators aim to nurture in their charges some or all of these cognitive skills and attitudes to learning and problem-solving, it is argued that learners will develop an increased capacity to think more critically and as a result more productively about important topics of relevance to them personally and also to society at large.

The current affairs debate course in question here was developed to address all of the above elements and thereby to stimulate critical thinking. Learners are required to create original and persuasive arguments in order to construct and defend their stance on a resolution. Furthermore, they need to first evaluate and analyse the news articles selected by the instructor and then do the same with the additional self-selected sources of information that they will refer to as they prepare their claims and evidence. The same three higher order thinking skills are also central to the cross-examination activities following constructive speeches, as debaters need to rapidly analyse and evaluate their opponents' claims for possible weaknesses and respond by creating challenging questions and also counterarguments. In addition, learners need to creatively apply the art of rhetoric in order to seize appropriate opportunities to sway the emotions of the audience in their favour. Logical inference is also central to debate, as claims need to be clearly and coherently linked to the resolution and also to each other in order to persuade effectively. Furthermore, evidence needs to be gathered and presented, with the connection between the evidence and claims made explicit. Such exercises, especially within the high-pressure context of the cross-examination, put learners in the habit of organising their ideas rationally and systematically.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of traditional academic discourse and output is a high degree of objectivity. The reasoning here is that if the observer is able to step outside of their own limited point of reference, which has been shaped by their unique individual circumstances and by their social and cultural background, even if only for a short while, they will be able to gain a fuller and more accurate understanding of the complex phenomenon or situation under investigation. Human beings have a natural tendency towards egocentric or sociocentric behaviour, with sociocentricity typically increasing during adolescence and early adulthood (Enright, Shukla and Lapsley 1980). While it may rightly be argued that it is impossible for any one view on a complex matter to be completely accurate and objective, especially where social or political topics are concerned, it is also clear that any conclusion informed by multiple perspectives, robust evidence,

and sound logical reasoning is more likely to be accurate and helpful than one which is not. The debating activities in the course may therefore be said to encourage objectivity in thinking among learners, as they are likely to encounter different opinions in the articles they read and certain to encounter many conflicting ideas during the debate itself. Debaters and audience members alike will probably encounter new arguments and evidence that they have not considered before and it is possible that their own opinions on important issues may also change as a result. In such cases, learners often need to reassess the beliefs previously handed down to them by authority figures such as parents or teachers and, if these ideas do not stand up to critical scrutiny, they may reject them in favour of more persuasive alternatives. This could require a great deal of courage on the learner's part and although it may not be realistic or even desirable to expect many learners to re-evaluate their most intimate beliefs and values as they participate in a university debate course, debates and associated activities are nevertheless likely to encourage them to consider information or ideas more carefully in the future before accepting these as truth.

Formal debate within an educational context may also provide learners with a valuable opportunity to discuss otherwise sensitive or taboo topics in an open and civil manner. As a result, they may shed some inhibitions about sharing their opinions with others and some learners may even feel inspired to participate in public discourse and to influence future public policy. Some examples of controversial issues dealt with in this particular debate course include the revision of Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, the future place of nuclear power generation in Japan, and the use of affirmative action policies to address the workplace gender gap. Throughout the course, learners were encouraged to make the strongest case possible in support of their position and the fact that debaters were randomly assigned to the affirmative or the negative side facilitated this, as they would not feel judged by their peers for choosing an unpopular stance on any given issue. The majority of learners showed an impressive amount of commitment, engagement, and at times tactful restraint during their group discussion and debate activities and, despite the confrontational nature of debate and the often sensitive subject matter discussed, interaction between learners always remained civil and constructive.

6. Conclusion

Over the 15 weeks of the debate course, learners read a substantial number of challenging and thought-provoking news articles that were selected either by the instructor or by the learners themselves. They proceeded to take part in group discussion activities and in team debates where they practised constructing coherent and well-reasoned arguments by means of constructive speeches, cross-examination sessions that involved attacking the opposing team's arguments and defending

their own arguments, and rebuttal speeches in which their main claims and critiques were summarised. The course activities and structure were designed to provide learners with intrinsic and also extrinsic motivation, encouraging large amounts of input and output and thus developing their fluency and also linguistic competence in terms of listening, speaking, reading and, to a lesser extent, writing. While meaningful communication in the course was prioritised over a focus on linguistic form, activities were scaffolded so that learners would have the opportunity to gradually acquire or reactivate the linguistic structures and vocabulary necessary to carry out an effective debate. They were also able to develop their pragmatic competence and rhetorical skills during the course. In addition to improving their knowledge of English, learners needed to develop and make use of critical thinking skills in order to successfully participate in class debates. Specifically, the course encouraged learners to employ their higher order thinking skills, which include creating, evaluating, and analysing, to draw inferences based on logical reasoning and evidence, to aim at objectivity in their reasoning, and finally to challenge authority when necessary.

One would suspect that the students at Osaka University who participated in the debate course do not in all aspects represent Japanese university students as a whole. Their choice of major and the fact that they were admitted into a highly selective programme both seem to point at greater than average motivation, academic ability, and openness to new ideas. While local cultural norms, expectations, and attitudes should not be disregarded, I would nevertheless argue that Japanese learners are often more willing to experiment with and embrace different modes of thought and communication than many EFL theorists and practitioners would give them credit for. As long as sufficient scaffolding is provided and suitable materials selected by the instructor in terms of difficulty and topic sensitivity, more typical Japanese learners at the intermediate proficiency level and above would stand to substantially benefit from and most likely also come to enjoy class debate activities in an EFL context. Considering that the above claims are themselves still up for debate, it would be interesting to see the results of further experiments in debate course design and implementation across a variety of different educational contexts in Japan and elsewhere in Asia.

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