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DEVELOPING COMMUNICATIVE SKILLS
THROUGH DEBATE IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

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Current trends in interactive ESL teaching have led to the increased awareness of the need to implement diverse collaborative practices and contextualized learning into the curriculum. Content-based instruction (CBI) involves learner-centered strategies helping students to grasp complex information through real life context leading to the formation of their intrinsic motivation. Being a part of CBI and the more general rubric of communicative language teaching (CLT), debate incorporates teaching useful language that is embedded within relevant discourse contexts rather than using isolated grammar and vocabulary. The method of debate totally corresponds to the concept of learner's active engagement in the learning process since discussion encourages students to assume active social roles and take part in negotiation, information gathering, co-construction of the argument and positive assessment [5]. Public speaking and critical thinking practices play an important role in the ESL classroom, since the teacher's task is to integrate content, language, and strategy objectives in order to assist the students in using the language in diverse social and cultural settings.

According to S. Stryker and B. L. Leaver [10], there are three vital characteristics of a CBI program: a) the core of the course is based on content; b) the course includes authentic text; c) the course is adapted to the needs of a particular group of students. Therefore, it is important for instructors to prepare for the debate setting the objectives appropriate for the particular class. The objective of the debate in the ESL classroom may range from introduction of specific vocabulary to broader conceptual content, such as development of critical thinking or public speaking skills. Public spea-

king can be delivered in different ways: informative and persuasive speeches, panel presentations, public interviews, and debates. Debate is an interactive public speaking activity that usually requires a greater degree of organization than other speech tasks.

Debates may range from flexible to highly structured discussion held with two or more students. The most common debate formats found on high school and college levels include:

1. ***The Karl Popper debate*** format: the two teams can use 8 minutes to divide and prepare for all three speeches. The debate is started by the 1st Affirmation speaker. Each team consists of three members, and each person takes both the researching and the speaking role. Roles can be assigned according to individual preferences. One student may want to handle the first cross-examination while another handles the opening speech. Debaters of a team can freely change within their team during the competition. During cross-examination rounds, the examining debater has 3 minutes to ask the answering debater questions. Questions should be asked in an «if» format to keep things moving, and responses should be brief and direct. Victory is determined by a panel of judges, and a referee will enforce time limits and all other restrictions. Time distribution for the Karl Popper debate: Affirmative Speech (6 min.), Negative Cross-Examination (3 min), Negative Speech (6 min.), Affirmative Cross-Examination, Student (3 min), Affirmative Speech (5 min.), Negative Cross-Examination (3 min.), Negative Speech (5 min.), Affirmative Cross-Examination (3 min), Affirmative Speech and Closing Remarks (5 min.), Negative Speech and Closing Remarks (5 min.) [12].

2. ***The Lincoln–Douglas debate*** format. The idea was to have a debate focused on discussing the merits of competing ethical values in a persuasive manner. A round of L-D debate consists of five speeches and two cross-examination periods. The speeches and their times are as follows Affirmative Constructive (6 min.), Cross-Ex of Aff by Neg (3 min), Negative Constructive (7 min.), Cross-Ex of Neg by Aff (3 min.), Affirmative Rebuttal (4 min.), Negative Rebuttal (6 min.), Affirmative Rejoinder (3 min.). Notice that the Affirmative has more speeches than the Negative, but both have the same total speaking time (13 minutes) [4].

3. ***Team policy debate*** consists of eight speeches (the first four speeches are constructive speeches which present the most important arguments; the last four speeches are called rebuttals, since they extend and apply arguments that have already been made). The peculiarity of this format is that the affirmative team both begins and ends the debate. The negative team has two speeches in a row: the first negative rebuttal immediately follows the second negative constructive. Each rebuttal is limited to 4 minutes, while each constructive speech is takes up to 8 minutes. There is

usually a 3-minute cross-examination period after each of the first four (constructive) speeches. Team policy debate is focused on evidence gathering and organizational ability, with persuasiveness playing a secondary role. Team policy debate resembles **National Debate Tournament** – one of the most popular forms of evidence-based debate at the college level in the USA, which involves 4 constructive speeches, 4 rebuttals, 4 cross-examination periods.

4. **Tag team debate**: each team of students (up to 5) represents one side of a debatable question. Each team has a set amount of time (3–5 minutes) to present its point of view. The issue of discussion is read aloud. Each team gets the opportunity to discuss their argument. One speaker from a team takes the floor and speaks for no more than 1 minute. The speaker may «tag2 another member of the team to pick up the argument before his or her minute is up. Team members can put out a hand to be tagged. The current speaker knows who might be ready to pick up the team's argument. No member of the team can be tagged twice until all members have been tagged once. There should be an uneven number of rounds (3–5) before the debate is concluded.

5. **Role play debate**: students examine different points of view or perspectives related to an issue by playing a «role». All stakeholders in the debate should be identified in advance. The teacher will need 3 index cards for each stakeholder role, and there should also be an index card for each student. Students choose an index card at random; students holding the same stakeholder card gather in one group. Each group formulates the arguments for their assigned stakeholder. During the debate, each stakeholder presents his or her point of view. Finally, students decide which side of the debate and which stakeholder presented the strongest argumentation [2].

Despite the great diversity of debate formats, there are basic concepts common to all of them: 1) the substance of the discussion is provided by a resolution of policy or value, its terms being defined by the first speaker of the debate; 2) there are two teams representing those supporting the resolution (Affirmative) and those opposing to it (Negative); 3) the Affirmative always has the burden to prove its side; 4) the debate closes with final rebuttals (refutation) on both sides which summarize their respective positions [11]. Used in the context of debate, the term «Resolution» means the opinion about which two teams argue, while «Rebuttal» explains why one team disagrees with the other team. Literature [6] provides four kinds of evidence: 1) *example*: from student's experience or from what they heard; 2) *common sense*: something that is conventionally believed to be true; 3) *expert opinion*: the opinions of researchers; 5) *statistics* (figures, ratings, data supporting the argument).

A sample plan of a structured debate may include: 1) *introduction* (objectives: to introduce students to some basic concepts and the vocabulary

involved; to explain the idea that there are at least two sides to every argument); 2) *expanding on the concept of debate* (objectives: to observe a live or videotaped debate; to encourage students to take part in short informal debates); 3) *analysis of the Affirmative case structure* (objectives: to gain an understanding of the Affirmative philosophy; to examine the Constructive speech of the first Affirmative); 4) *overview of the Negative strategy* (objectives: to have an understanding of Negative strategy; to understand the job of the first Negative speaker); 5) *overview of the debate* (objective: to set the first two speeches into the larger context of the debate and summarize the remaining speeches), includes Second Affirmative Constructive Speech, Second Negative Constructive Speech, Rebuttal by First Negative, and Rebuttal by First Affirmative.

According to R.Nisbett, debate is an important educational tool for learning analytic thinking skills and for forcing self-conscious reflection on the validity of one's ideas [8]. Debate helps students develop the emotional maturity to win and lose graciously; acquire the social skills necessary to work with a colleague and compete against other students; use spoken English in an increasingly sophisticated way and master different styles of communication [9].

Presenting argumentation before an audience is a highly challenging assignment, since it requires considerable oral communication competence [3]. Breathing exercises help students learn how to breathe deeply from the diaphragm. Saying and holding each of the long and short vowel sounds strengthens their voices, clarifies diction and improves projection. Presentations should contain an objective tone with an emphasis on respecting one's opponent. Students may use notes for quick reference but should not read presentations. Discussion of rhetorical devices such as metaphor and hyperbole are also believed to be helpful.

Students typically have a high degree of interest in the opportunity to present their own ideas on controversial issues [3; 5]. D. Carroll argues that it is more beneficial for students to present their debates individually, attributing it to a greater focus on individual rhetorical issues as opposed to team management concerns. Under this approach the two debaters are encouraged to study together before their debate, which improves rebuttals and allows for some bonding between the students.

De-emphasizing the competitive aspect of the debates creates a friendlier atmosphere that is encouraging to students who have doubts on their abilities to speak in front of a group. The form also includes non-interruptible time slots in which each debater presents [3]. This helps ensure that low-confidence students will have an opportunity to fully express their views without interruptions from the opponent or class members. The research of McClain [7] also supports the idea that debate should be seen as a cooperative rather than a competitive endeavor.

Research proves that students benefit from debate by boosting their academic vocabulary through meaningful input of authentic material, improving their listening, writing, skimming and scanning skills, note-taking skills, in-depth searching for information, developing their critical thinking, improving public speaking and communication skills, as well as promoting positive assessment. The interactive nature of debate makes it especially valuable for the development of oral communication skills through autonomous and collaborative learning.

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