Debate: A Tool for Language Learning

Kira G. Morse  
Texas A&M University – Corpus Christ

Abstract
Debate clubs flourish in high schools all over the United States and abroad. However, the idea of using a structured debate for language learning is quite innovative. This paper will discuss the debate program itself, with a particular emphasis on the format of the Karl Popper debate, used most commonly in international settings. Then the specifics of debate in bilingual, ESL, and EFL settings will be covered, including its benefits in developing speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills, as well as increased student motivation, self-confidence, and critical thinking. Since debate has been used in Klovska Lyceum of Foreign Languages in Kyiv, Ukraine, as one of the tools for English language instruction, the examples from the experience of the teachers and students from this school will be used as illustrations for the paper.

Introduction
Karl Popper once said, “You may be right and I may be wrong but with an effort, together we may get nearer the truth” (http://www.idebate.org/debate/what.php). Based on this principle, debate clubs flourish in high schools all over the United States and abroad. By participating in debate club activities, students develop their public speaking skills and critical thinking. However, the idea of using a structured debate for language learning is quite innovative. Although numerous guidebooks and manuals have been proposed for the development of debate clubs, the materials that describe debate as a part of the second or foreign language learning curriculum are extremely limited. This paper will discuss the debate program itself as well as the format of the Karl Popper debate, used most commonly in international settings. Then the specifics of debate in bilingual, English as a second language (ESL), and English as a foreign language (EFL) settings will be covered, including its benefits in developing speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills, as well as increased student motivation, self-confidence, and critical thinking. Since debate has been used in Klovska Lyceum of Foreign Languages in Kyiv, Ukraine, as one of the tools for English language learning, the examples from the experience of the teachers and students from this school will be used as illustrations for the paper, including the interviews that I conducted with the teachers and graduates of the Lyceum (the names of interviewees are preserved with their permission). Sample debate-related exercises and debate topics, which may be utilized in language learning, will be presented in the appendices to the paper.

Debate Format
Human mind is constantly occupied with a wide range of concerns and problems. In order to make sense of what is going on around them, people have tried to take certain standpoints and resolve the concerning issues. One of the best ways to do so is to calmly consider opposing opinions and then draw conclusions. All too often, people come to conclusions without weighing the arguments for and against the issue, which often results in miscommunication and disappointment and, in more serious cases, may lead to disasters. In other instances, we see ourselves in the
statement by Samuel Johnson, “You raise your voice when you should reinforce your argument” (McCutcheon, Schaffer, & Wycoff, 1994, p. 414). Thus, the proper format for debate is essentially important in order to properly develop our minds and make educated decisions.

Debate clubs are becoming increasingly popular in education settings, and most commonly as extra-curriculum activities. In such clubs, students debate given topics by looking for supporting and opposing arguments. McCutcheon et al. (1994) explain debate: “We set the different alternatives against each other to see which will win. In this way we find the best solution” (p. 416). Driscoll (2000) says, “When students argue both sides of a resolution, they learn that both sides are worthy of serious consideration – even if, in their own hearts, they favor one over the other” (p. 05). Although the process of debate may seem unorganized when used in informal settings, it follows strict rules at the formal debate tournaments.

Depending on a program, debate tournaments include a wide range of debate formats. Such formats define a number of people participating in the tournament, the structure of the debate itself, and the judgment of the winning and losing arguments. However, each debate has common characteristics – the preparation process, arguments of support or rebuttal of the issue, and cross-examination.

Although some formats of debate may require spontaneous decision-making, preparation is vitally important for debaters. Just like the prewriting step in process writing, debaters should prepare for the debate. Hensley and Carlin (1994) emphasize the importance of understanding the topic itself: “A team can’t debate, or even research, without a basic understanding of the topic and its issues” (p. 28). Other steps in preparation may include the research of the issue, discussion of the topic with other team members, and writing of their speeches and questions.

Since official debate is more than an argument between friends, debaters must create strong statements in order to support or rebut the issue. Using a variety of public speaking techniques, debaters may form their arguments using evidence and reasoning. During the actual debate, the debaters are separated into affirmative and negative teams of one, two, or three students on each team, depending on the particular format of the debate. The role of the team is to prove that they are correct and their opponents are wrong. From my personal experience, the most challenging part sometimes is to overcome your personal feelings and beliefs, if you are on the team that opposes what you personally believe to be true. At the same time, it is a great exercise in learning to see both perspectives on the issue and, thus, become a more interesting opponent in the debate, since you will already know what opposing arguments to expect from the opponent team.

Cross-examination is one of the more challenging but exciting parts of debate. The teams get to ask each other questions in order to point out each other’s inconsistencies, questions each other’s reasoning, and further prove their own points. “Cross-examination (…) ultimately provides a better test of a case’s strength” and add “interest, clarity, and clash to debate” (Hensley & Carlin, 1994, pp. 213-214).

Although a wide range of debate programs exist, this paper focuses on a particular format that is best suited for inclusion in the instruction of English as a second or foreign language – Karl Popper Debate. Designed to promote teamwork, its three-to-three style encourages students to work together both in the preparation and the activity itself. The goals of Karl Popper Debate Programs are to “focus on the core elements of controversial issues, emphasize tolerance for multiple points of view, emphasize the development of analytical thinking skills, instill in participants an appreciation for the value of teamwork, and provide students with the opportunity to debate many kinds of resolutions” (http://www.idebate.org/standards/ruleskarlpopper.php). The format of the ac-
tual debate includes two teams – affirmative (A) and negative (N) – each including three students. The following chart shows the order of the debate itself:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Order</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Speaker</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affirmative Constructive</td>
<td>6 minutes</td>
<td>1 A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st Negative Cross-Examination</td>
<td>3 minutes</td>
<td>1 A answers / 3 N asks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Constructive</td>
<td>6 minutes</td>
<td>1 N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st Affirmative Cross-Examination</td>
<td>3 minutes</td>
<td>1 N answers / 3 A asks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affirmative Rebuttal</td>
<td>5 minutes</td>
<td>2 A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd Negative Cross-Examination</td>
<td>3 minutes</td>
<td>2 A answers / 1 N asks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Rebuttal</td>
<td>5 minutes</td>
<td>2 N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd Affirmative Cross-Examination</td>
<td>3 minutes</td>
<td>2 N answers / 1 A asks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affirmative Rebuttal</td>
<td>5 minutes</td>
<td>3 A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Rebuttal</td>
<td>5 minutes</td>
<td>3 N</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Adapted from http://www.idebate.org/standards/ruleskarlpopper.php. Please consult the source for detailed description of each step of the Karl Popper Debate, as well as further rules and regulations.)

**Debate in Bilingual, ESL, and EFL Settings**

Using debate program and ideas in bilingual programs, as well as in ESL and EFL settings, provides opportunities beyond traditional teaching methods. Students are focused on the content, rather than on the details of grammar or tests in writing. This focus takes away from the possible lack of second language confidence. In fact, it encourages native and non-native speakers alike to work together in achieving particular content goals. By working together, students nonetheless improve their language skills using a non-threatening environment. While developing their language ability, the students also increase their critical thinking and self-confidence, as both represent the result of individual and cooperative research and presentations.

In my communication with teachers and former student participants of debate program in Ukraine, I could clearly see how this particular program affected students’ motivation, self-confidence, critical thinking, as well as the development of their English language abilities. Since English is only taught as a foreign language in Ukrainian schools, students are using their foreign language for debate preparation and competitions. Furthermore, participation in debate activities fosters students to take on graduate education and careers which are encouraged by the skills they acquired in their debate program. Katya Yablochkova, now a Doctor of Philosophy as well as a debate coach in the European Debate Movement, says that “coaching peers in the debate club helped me realize I wanted to become an educator.” She also makes an interesting observation about her current circle of friends: “Having graduated from the university, I now realize that most people I can call my friends or close acquaintances are former debaters. Not school classmates or university groupmates, but the people I got acquainted with during debate tournaments. This, I think, is because these people never stop educating themselves.”

Another former student, Sasha Andrusik, has become the President of European Youth Parliament Ukraine, earned a Master’s Degree in Philosophy, was selected among best thinkers and speakers at the European Youth Conference, and presented many times in different interna-
tional conferences. In her reflections about the role of the debate in her English language learning and development of other skills, she says, “I think it influenced my life critically. I won English Olympiad thanks to debate, although I never even qualified to go to district competitions before the eleventh grade. My critical thinking certainly developed. I’m not sure about career, but I only got involved with EYP (European Youth Parliament) thanks to debate and EYP implications to my life are rather evident. I’d say it opened a whole new world of civil society to me.”

Zoya Gulko, the English as a foreign language teacher from Klovsky Lyceum of Foreign Languages in Kyiv, Ukraine, provides a number of conclusions regarding the effects of using debate as a tool for English language learning. She notes that speaking English becomes absolutely free of stumbling blocks; thus, her students are not afraid to make mistakes. In her lessons, she gives more attention to the content of speaking than to the form of it, which she finds to be a useful technique in providing less threatening atmosphere for language learning. At the same time, she notices a great development of critical thinking skills among her students and often even, what she calls, a “change of a personality” – the students get involved in many international issues, become very communicable and friendly, develop quick reaction and the ability to work in a team (personal communication, 2007).

### Motivation, Critical Thinking, and Self-Confidence

Valuing both sides of each debatable issue provides an essential role in developing the skills like motivation, self-confidence, and critical thinking. “[Arguing] both sides,” says Driscoll (2000), “has considerable educational value. It forces students to recognize that in everyday life, there is no monopoly on truth. A given individual may hold a belief with a passion that is founded on careful and serious thinking” (p. 05).

Dörnyei (2005) says that “[without] sufficient motivation, even individuals with the most remarkable abilities cannot accomplish long-term goals, and neither are appropriate curricula and good teaching enough on their own to ensure student achievement” (p. 65). Similarly, other scholars have shown the importance of student self-motivation. According to Sullo (2007), “Student motivation is the most important issue in education today” (p. 154). He insists that no matter how extravagant the curriculum and teacher training may be, the actual learning only takes place when the students have internal motivation to learn. “The good news,” he further continues, “is that we can create learning environments that foster the motivation that makes education a joyful enterprise” (p. 156).

A number of motivation factors comprise using debate in educational settings. Such factors include participation in regular as well as national and international tournaments. Students get excited about the opportunity to use their knowledge and skills and actively participate not only in the preparation stage of the process, but to actually compete with each other. Since debate program is widely used throughout the world, student teams may participate in international tournaments and in this way travel and meet their peers from all over the world. Another motivation factor is awards and prizes. Although some may argue the significance of the reward system in such setting, the students are still motivated by seeing the symbolic results of their work. Often, winning a competition leads to participation in a difference competition, possibly on a different level. As mentioned in the first motivation factor, the winning students may be awarded with the opportunity to participate even in the international competitions and thus visit other cities and possibly countries. Apart from traveling, students are motivated by communicating with other peers in different locations. In order for this communication to occur, schools do not need to look for financial sponsors – simple letter
writing, phone or e-mail communication, or participation in the internet-based debate tournaments does not cost money, but brings excitement of communication with their peers. If the debate program is organized as an extra-curricular club activity, students enjoy feeling accepted into a club of their peers. At the same time, if debates are used as a part of the curriculum – whether as a part of the language instruction or as a separate subject – students still feel accepted into a team effort. Such acceptance is often essential not only for students’ motivation, but also for their self-esteem.

Speaking about self-esteem and confidence, Brydon and Scott (1994) state a significant point: “you don’t have to be paid to speak in order to your self-esteem to be positively influenced” (p. 8). Carlin & Payne (1995) look at a larger picture of how public speaking affects self-confidence: “To a large extent, success in life depends on your ability to feel good about yourself. Succeeding as a public speaker can give your self-confidence a tremendous boost” (p. 10).

Another important skill, developed by debating, is critical thinking. Carlin & Payne (1995) explain that “[public] speaking skills and related listening skills provide valuable tools for the critical analysis of ideas” (p. 9). Talking about the role of critical thinking in education, Moulton (1966) says, “Although education as a whole sometimes falls short of providing an ideal setting for the development of creative thinking and the informal faculties, a start can be made in the argumentation and debate classroom” (p. 15). While this statement was made forty years ago and many changes took place in the school system, creative thinking is still an important issue that is not commonly developed as often as it should be. Thus, debate still plays a great role in fostering critical thinking among students.

Developing Language Skills

In regards to her English language ability, the former English student and debater, Katya Yablochkova, says, “I'm constantly being asked whether I've lived for a long time in the US to get such accent. The truth is I only spent one week there this summer. It's all due to constant debate practice.” Another former student, Katya Shynkaruk, says, “Debate activity in English has greatly influenced my English language as well as general rhetoric skills, it has significantly widened the scope of my interests and even mental outlook. The memories of my participation in the debate club activities are among the brightest memories of my school years and gained experience is definitely among the most helpful ones.” After her high school years, she earned a Masters degree in international relations and won a grant from US government to participate in the international program of school exchange.

Speaking is one of the major skills developed by using debate in the language teaching classroom, since the debate competitions are usually help in the oral form. Students further their speaking skills by use of monolog and dialog speech. Such activities as oral brainstorming and public speaking are examples of monolog skills development. As a part of the dialog development, students are involved in cross-examining each other (using both questions and answers); discussions during the preparation for a particular debate or even during the short time-outs at the debate itself; and in interviewing other students and adults in preparation for the debate materials.

Specific debate-related events further foster the development of speaking skills. Debate program offers a number of limited preparation events, such as impromptu speaking and extemporaneous speaking. Impromptu speaking implies the opportunity for students to deliver a speech “on the spur of the moment” without time to prepare for speaking on a particular topic. Extemporaneous speaking activity provides students with a limited preparation time before they are asked to deliver their speech. Both of these types of speaking activities can be easily used in a classroom setting.
The topics for these speeches can be taken directly from the textbooks or other materials covered in the class. There is also a wide variety of public speaking events that can be used in a language learning classroom – including prepared speeches on various topics, as well as questioning exercises and group presentations (http://www.idebate.org/teaching/debate_formats.php).

According to Brydon and Scott (1994), “Critical listening (…) is absolutely essential to your development as a speaker” (p. 9). Carlin & Payne (1995) also support this thought: “Speaking and listening go hand in hand” (p. 10). Indeed, speaking and listening skills are very closely connected. However, debate in particular has special significance for developing listening skills. Carlin & Payne continue, “You will also learn how to listen to other speakers in order to hear all the key points” (p. 10). Quoting a Greek philosopher Epictetus, McCutcheon et al. (1994) say, “Nature has given us one tongue, but two ears that we may hear twice as much as we speak.” They continue by talking about a very important attribute of listening: “What you get out of listening depends on what you put into it” (p. 52). Listening proves to be one of the key skills necessary for debating and, thus, developed by debate. In a language learning classroom, debate-related listening includes teamwork and group discussions, were students need to listen to each other, in addition to present their own ideas. Listening to speeches or presentation of other students and listening to the opponent’s arguments are most essential in debate. Students must pay close attention to the points made by their opponents in order to find ways to refute them. Other listening activities can be more technology-related – such as listening to mass media sources, like television, radio, as well as digital recordings on DVDs, CDs, etc.

Just like speaking and listening, reading skills are included in debate instruction for language learning. It is true that most debates are performed orally; however, reading is widely used in the preparatory stage for a particular debate. While reading, students practice skimming and scanning techniques, as well as reading aloud for their team. Students perform a lot of informative reading from encyclopedias, newspapers, magazines, deport, and debate-related materials in order to collect background information and facts for their arguments. In fact, reading activities encourage students to make good use of the school as well as other public and private libraries, showing them the importance of using libraries for their research. Although most debate activities are introduced in junior or senior high school levels, students are already learning about conducting academic research, which greatly benefits them in their further college education and careers.

Although debate may seem at first as primarily a speaking activity, language learners definitely develop their writing skill through debate. Relating public speaking in general to writing, Carlin & Payne (1995) state, “Many of the skills you use to compose good speeches are the same as those you need to write well. The practice you gain preparing speeches will improve your ability to express your ideas on paper. You will learn how to get your audience’s attention, how to organize clearly, and how to support your ideas” (p. 9). Among writing activities for debate-related language learning, students practice speech writing and presentation notes. Speech writing involves the development of process writing and research writing skills, both of which are immensely important for language development. While preparing to present, students also put together presentation notes. Such activity helps them put their thoughts in a concise manner, often forming their individual style of presenting.

In addition to the traditional speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills, students also develop their interpreting and translating skills, while using debate in the process of language learning. The materials for their topics may be available in a number of languages – not only in the target language. In fact, most topics will include materials in the students’ native language or even a third
language. Thus, students are able to use several languages at the same time, while finalizing their arguments in the target language. Moreover, they polish their grammar and vocabulary during such activities, which definitely helps them in their language study. Interpreting and translating can both be beneficial to students not only at the time of studying, but also for their future careers, especially in the areas where the target language is becoming more popular in professional settings.

Conclusion

This paper discussed debate program as a tool for teaching a second or foreign language in a classroom setting. Many schools around the world use debate mainly as a public speaking activity, often offered as an extra-curricular club. I have described the way for this program to be implemented in a language learning environment as a part of a school curriculum, with examples from a particular school in Ukraine, which used debate in its EFL instruction. As evident from the research of literature, as well as my own findings, debate fosters the development of a variety of language-related skills, such as speaking, listening, reading, and writing, as well as interpreting and translating skills, which are becoming more popular and essential in the professional field. Debate also encourages the development of student motivation, critical thinking, and self-confidence, which are vital in aiding the students to accomplish their goals and achieve higher level of knowledge. Specific suggestions of language learning activities, provided in this paper and in the appendix, will help educators implement debate and debate-related activities in a variety of bilingual settings, as well as their teaching of a second or foreign language.
Reference


Appendix A

The following are sample exercises, adopted from www.idebate.org (used with permission of the webmaster), which can be used in a language learning classroom. Please refer to the above website for additional ideas, techniques, examples, and exercises. (Please note: the following exercises were originally accessed on May 2, 2007; the database offers a constant flow of submissions and the posted exercises are often revised.)

TEACHING DEBATE - ARGUMENT ASSEMBLY

Goal of Exercise:
To have students understand the process of putting ideas together so that they follow a logical pattern, so they are understandable, and so they sound the most persuasive.

Method of Exercise:
Take an organized argument, perhaps one prepared by an experienced debater and used on a previous topic, and cut it up so that each idea and each quotation appears on a separate sheet of paper.

Then have students, either working individually or in small groups, re-assemble the argument.

Following this, the instructor can lead a discussion on the various solutions, taking note that there may be several good ways to structure the argument, some of which may be even better than the way the argument was originally structured.

TEACHING DEBATE - ARTICULATION DRILLS

Goal of Exercise:
To work on promoting clear speech, the ability to hear each syllable distinctly.

Method of Exercise:
Every language has its tongue-twisters.

The following are some of the favorites in English:

- Toy boat
- Red leather yellow leather
- Rubber baby buggy bumpers
- The lips the tongue and the teeth
  (Longer drills also exist.)

Repeating one of these phrases over and over again, with increasing speed and with an attempt to keep every sound separate and correct, can improve articulation.

Don’t ask what it means, just say it fast.
TEACHING DEBATE - AUDIENCE ANALYSIS

Goal of Exercise:
To encourage students to think about audience analysis as an essential component in creating arguments in public situations.

Method of Exercise:
Select a situation in which students have recently made or will soon make an argument to a particular person or group

Then ask them to:
1. Think of at least three strategies you could use to find out information about your audience’s values and attitudes
2. Decide how you would incorporate the information you would gather into the planning of your message;
3. Decide which strategies you could use to appear credible to this audience.

The instructor and students can then discuss ways to adopt to an audience and how this might be different from simply molding your own opinions to fit your audience’s.

TEACHING DEBATE - BRAINSTORMING

Goal of Exercise:
To get students up and thinking, to demonstrate techniques of brainstorming.

Method of Exercise:
Present students with the following scenario: The largest paperclip factory is for sale and you have the option to buy it. You must justify the purchase to your investors. Number your ideas as you go along. Use as much paper as you need.

Now encourage teams of students to get to work, following several rules about brainstorming:
1. Don’t judge ideas yet – don’t decide which are good ideas and which are bad ideas, just write down all of the ideas
2. Wild or unusual ideas are acceptable
3. Go for quantity - try to have as many ideas as possible
4. Don’t be too serious - if you aren’t laughing then you aren’t doing it right
TEACHING DEBATE - DICTIONARY CHALLENGE

Goal of Exercise:
To acquaint students with the use of dictionaries as a means of clarifying the debate.

Method of Exercise:
If you have access to several dictionaries, pick one resolution and challenge the students to find as many different definitions as possible. Have students present their definitions to the class and give awards for several categories: most reasonable, most unexpected but still reasonable, most distorted, most useless, etc.

The instructor may also want to stage a mini-debate on definitions by having two students argue over which definition is more reasonable.

The goal in such a debate would be to emphasize that students should give brief, clear reasons why their definition would lead to better debate, and to emphasize that such a definitional dispute would never characterize an entire debate, but may characterize a moment in a debate.

TEACHING DEBATE - POST DEBATE ASSESSMENT

Goal of Exercise:
To encourage students to think about a debate after it has ended and to focus on future improvement

Method of Exercise:
Debaters may wish to forget a debate once it ends, but to avoid repeating the same flaws over and over again, it is important to encourage debaters to focus on improvement while the debate is still fresh in their heads.

Sitting with a coach after a round, debaters should specifically review what was said and discuss the specific questions like
- What was the strongest argument that we made?
- With what argument of theirs did we have the greatest problems?
- In what ways could we fix our own arguments so that they are clearer to the judge or more resistant to attack?

If it is not possible to have coaches sit with each team after a round, it is possible to create a post-round questionnaire on paper which asks debater to answer the same sort of question. Coaches can review the answers at another time.
Appendix B

1. Selected debate topics from www.osi.hu/debate/motions1.htm -

2. Government that governs least governs best.

3. The spirit of the law ought to take precedence over the letter of the law.

4. The restriction of civil liberties for the sake of combating terrorism is justified.

5. When an elected representative puts the opinion of his constituency above his personal judgment he fails to serve the public interest.

6. Citizens ought to have the right to bear arms.

7. Competition is superior to cooperation in achieving excellence.

8. Human rights ought not be sacrificed for national security interests.

9. A government owes no duty to protect the welfare and rights of citizens of other nations.

10. Affirmative action to remedy the effects of discrimination is justified.

11. The best way to achieve gender equality is to recognize the differences between men and women.

12. The public’s right to know outweighs a candidate’s right to privacy.

13. School censorship of academic material is harmful to the educational development of high school students.

14. The school’s right to search students and lockers is more important than a student’s right to privacy.

15. Capital punishment is justified.

16. Terminally ill patients have the right to die.

17. Risking human life to gain greater scientific knowledge is unethical.

18. The artist does more for society than the entrepreneur.

19. We treasure what we earn above what we are given.