

Making class debates meaningful

Jason Anderson suggests that debating can be a key part of developing speaking and writing skills.

Have you ever been in a lesson, a workshop or a seminar and been told that you're going to have a debate, then heard something like: 'this side of the class will argue for the motion, and that side will be against it'? If your heart sinks at such moments (as mine does) or if you've done something similar in your own classes, read on. There is an alternative.

Introduction

Class debates present a number of challenges to the language teacher, including the initial problem of getting the debate going and the subsequent problem of a small number of students dominating the exchanges, typically those who least of all need to practise

their speaking skills. Many experienced teachers attempt to address these challenges by putting students into *for* and *against* groups, and giving them time to prepare for the debate in these groups. This preparation stage is undoubtedly a good idea, as it helps to increase the likelihood that more students will contribute (at least during the preparation stage) and it ensures that there will be some kind of debate, inasmuch as they will have some arguments to put forward. However, it also leads to one major problem: the loss of students' own voices (their true opinions) when they are divided into groups in this ad hoc fashion. Often the points made, reasons given and objections offered are less meaningful, simply because the learners in question

don't really believe in the arguments they're putting forward. Having wrestled with these challenges in the classroom myself, I have developed a useful preparation tool called a *Cline Stand* (explained below), which ensures firstly that each learner is able to 'own' their true opinion, and secondly that there will be enough opinion difference for a debate to happen. I have found Cline Stands to be successful in secondary, tertiary (university) and adult classes, both when teaching English and when training teachers (see Figure 1).

In this article I suggest a rough template for structuring a class debate lesson involving a Cline Stand. As well as this being amenable to the typical *for* versus



Figure 1. A Cline Stand for a teacher debate on L1 use in the classroom, China

against debate, the article also suggests how a less polarised debate could take place (if preferred), one that may be more productive in the development of several higher order thinking skills: creating, evaluating and synthesising (Anderson *et al*, 2001), alongside the critical thinking that almost inevitably develops during a debate lesson.

Choosing your 'motion'

First, let's establish a context. We will imagine that I'm teaching a class of 30 secondary school learners at B1–B2 level of proficiency who share a community language other than English, and that the lesson is 60 minutes long. My learners have been looking at the impact of different forms of transport on global warming this week, and have developed relevant vocabulary and related schemata. I've chosen the following motion (the motion is the statement that debate participants agree or disagree with), presented as follows:

'Private transport, such as cars, motorbikes and taxis, should be banned and replaced with public transport such as buses, trains and electric bicycle sharing schemes.'

A useful tip when planning debate lessons is to choose a motion that you yourself see as valid, timely and interesting, and would enjoy debating. I've chosen this one because I would, and I feel my class would, too. Given

our previous lessons in this area, I'm also fairly sure that their opinions will vary enough for a good debate.

A little detail in the motion can also be useful. It can encourage thought on a range of contributing factors. In the above example, the modes of transport mentioned can prompt thought in related areas, including other forms of transport, and raise awareness of useful examples, such as the bicycle sharing schemes that are common in many cities today.

Preparation stage 1: Think, pair, prepare

First, I would begin with a brief pre-preparation stage (if that makes sense), allowing the learners time first to think about their own opinion, possibly take a few personal notes, and then share and discuss these opinions in pairs to provide an opportunity to confide in someone they should know well.

I might begin by showing the motion to the class on the board, checking their understanding of it, and then tell them to think silently on their own for a minute, considering whether they agree or disagree, wholly or partially, or whether they're not sure, stressing that it's OK to be in any of these camps at this stage. I allow them to take notes if they like, and then I encourage them to share these opinions with a partner, allowing L1 at lower levels of proficiency (when possible) to ensure that they are able to

focus on their ideas first. This stage takes only 5–10 minutes and helps to build confidence and generate ideas. Critically, because it involves pairwork, it provides an opportunity for every student to speak and share some ideas at an early stage of the lesson, which increases the likelihood of them expressing these ideas again later on – they've already rehearsed the thought patterns, and (if done in English) they will also have rehearsed some of the lexis and grammar required. If they have used mainly L1, I may conclude this stage by encouraging them to share at least one idea in English, either with their partner or their notebook.

Preparation stage 2: The Cline Stand

The Cline Stand is the secret ingredient of a good debate lesson. It's usually good fun, but a little chaotic, especially in larger classes, so prepare your instruction well and explain it fully before you allow the learners to begin moving. Tell the students first to note down where they would stand on a cline or continuum, from fully agreeing with the motion (100%) to completely disagreeing (0%). You can even get them to note down their personal percentage on a slip of paper to generate some initial commitment to this opinion. Then, tell the students to stand in a line depending on their opinion, showing them clearly where those who agree 100% should stand, then 90% agree, then 80%, etc., all the way to 0% (completely disagree). The space in front of the board is often best for this (see Figure 1 on page 35), although in a particularly crowded classroom, you may need to use a central aisle between the desks. Remind them to communicate with each other to find their location in the cline line. Give a clear time frame for this (e.g. 'You have just three minutes'), and let them start.

When they've found their location, you will be able to see both how polarised the debate will be, and importantly, how to split them into groups. Let's imagine that in my secondary class, there are seven students who agree 100% with the motion, five who agree 80%, two who agree 70%, ten who agree 50%, and the remaining six agree 30%. So no one disagrees



completely – no problem! The beauty of a cline line is that differences of opinion are nuanced – learners are not forced to see issues in black and white terms.

At this point, you have a choice. If you want to create two broad groups for the debate, split them approximately down the middle; so in the above example, you'd put the 50% and 30% agree groups together, and the rest together to create two groups of 14–16 learners each. However, a more original alternative is to create three, four or more preparation groups, which reduces group size, and thereby increases the likelihood of each learner contributing at this stage. In the lesson in question, I'd personally create four groups as shown in Table 1 – my reasons for doing this should become evident below. The fact that the group size is irregular isn't necessarily a problem, although I may split group C into two smaller sub-groups of five, depending on the maturity and confidence of the learners involved.

Preparation stage 3: Groupwork development of arguments

Note that although 10–15 minutes of my lesson have already passed, learners are still not ready to begin the debate. The new groups still need to sit down together and prepare for it – and this is often the most productive stage with regard to developing higher order thinking skills. Because they are now sitting with students of similar opinions, they should be able to feed off and scaffold each others' ideas, developing their arguments more fully. Importantly, because they are working with their true opinions and beliefs, they are also likely to be more motivated. They will be able to think of personal or second-hand examples to illustrate their points. If you think it will be necessary, designate a chair(person) at this stage, whose role it is to ensure that everybody contributes to the preparation, and that everyone has an argument they can put forward during the debate. Some teachers also designate secretaries, but I prefer to suggest that everyone takes notes on at least one or two points, which they can use during the debate. Tell them to focus on a few key arguments, and to think of one or two

Group A	Group B	Group C	Group D
seven students who agree 100%	five students who agree 80% and two who agree 70%	ten students who agree 50% (possibly create two sub-groups)	six students who agree 30%

Table 1: My hypothetical debate preparation groups

good examples for each. If there is time, also tell them to consider what arguments opposing groups may make, and to think of counter-arguments – this is a good idea for any groups who finish preparation earlier than the others.

Another useful suggestion is to tell each group to prepare a (written) 'position statement' that they will read out at the start of the debate. This will enable groups to notice any key differences in their positions when the debate starts and to focus in on these as the debate progresses.

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Stage 4: The debate(s)

While the traditional format for a class debate is to have two opposing groups, you do in fact have other options, depending on factors such as class size, student maturity and confidence in English. If you have a large class and think smaller groups would work well (which personally I do), you have several options as follows.

1. If learners have prepared in two (traditional) *for* and *against* groups, simply split each into two, and create two identical debates in different parts of the classroom.
2. If learners have prepared in several groups, you could select two groups for each debate, with group A debating against group C, and group B debating against group D.
3. You could take one or two learners from each of the groups A, B, C and D and create much smaller debate groups – this is the best way to maximise chances of each student participating, but it loses the performance aspect of a good debate that some students enjoy – we could call this a *debate jigsaw*.

If you create several debate groups, you can take a free role, monitoring the different groups and taking notes on common errors, interesting points made and possible suggestions to share afterwards.

Some teachers (and their students) prefer to organise a single, whole-class debate, which can also work well, especially if you create a few ground rules to ensure that several students do not monopolise proceedings (30-second turn limits or a maximum of three contributions each – give each three paperclips to 'use'). This may work better in smaller classes, or for teachers who prefer to manage proceedings themselves. If you have just two groups, the debate can proceed in

typical fashion, with each group taking turns to put forward arguments and counter-arguments.

However, if your debate involves three or more groups, the format for your debate can be somewhat different. Each group can begin by sharing their initial 'position statement' followed by initial questions or responses to other groups' statements, which can – and should – then lead into a more exploratory, natural debate, more akin to something we might have in the real world with friends and colleagues, or in academic seminars. This type of debate is a less polemic affair and you can explain this to the learners before it starts. Rather than seen as something to be won or lost, the debate becomes an opportunity for learners to explore and develop their opinions. You can also tell them that at the end they (and you) will be able to change their position on the cline line. As well as hopefully leading to a less aggressive type of debate, this can potentially lead to a wider range of interactions and language functions used during the debate – moving from exponents such as 'you're wrong!', 'that's simply not true' and 'I partially agree' to 'that's interesting', 'I wonder if ...' and even 'I never thought of that'. It's OK for all of us to admit that learning takes place during a debate, including for the teacher.

Stage 5: After the debate

Depending on how the debate develops and how much time you have left afterwards, there are a number of ways to conclude it and lead into further work. First and foremost, after the sometimes stressful, 'performed' communication of the debate itself, we can all benefit from reflection, either silently or in smaller, less confrontational groups. Students can revise their 'position statements', add to the notes they made at the start of the lesson, or go back into those initial pairs where they first expressed their opinions. They can note down something they learnt, explore an emotion they felt or redress their initial position – has it shifted at all? Once this has happened, some classes might enjoy taking part in a second Cline Stand, where the class as a whole can work out what the 'mean' (i.e. average) opinion is (e.g. '64% agree')

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would be the mean of the opinions in the above example) and whether there have been any changes since the earlier Cline Stand. Mid-teen learners are often reluctant to admit such changes, but not always, and if you precede this with an honest appraisal of your opinion, and whether it's changed, they're more likely to be open in this regard.

Debates naturally lead into writing work, particularly argumentative essays or opinion pieces, which can be done individually or even shared through Process Writing work in pairs (see White & Arndt, 1991). These essays can then be shared through a class blog, social media space or on a class noticeboard. This final stage can also give each student a chance to make the points they may not have been able to make during the debate itself, whether this be due to nerves, lack of time or limitations in their language resources (such as lexis and grammar in English).

Final thoughts

Depending on how much time you have per lesson, you may need to split the suggested procedure above between two lessons, possibly with a related homework task between them.

Notice also that the debate itself is only one of several stages in the lesson structure proposed. It might only take a third or a quarter of the total time. As such, it is balanced with stages where the learners work individually, in pairs and in smaller groups with shared aims. The multiple-group debate format above also encourages learners to explore ideas together, rather than to compete. These recommendations are in line with two key principles of cooperative learning; *positive interdependence* and *individual accountability* (see Anderson, 2019), and increase opportunities for everybody to participate in the lesson. They build solidarity among learners, rather than creating division, a potential issue with debate lessons.

But don't take my word for it – try out some of these ideas yourself to see how well they work in your classroom, and do share any feedback, tips or further suggestions for alternatives that seem to increase success in your context.

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