

Developing academic debating skills in the process of learning a foreign language

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Annotation. This article examines the role of academic debates in the process of foreign language learning and how debating activities contribute to students’ language proficiency, critical thinking, and communication skills. Integrating academic debates into language curricula provides learners with authentic opportunities to practice speaking, listening, and reasoning while expanding their vocabulary and mastering formal discourse. This study outlines methods for implementing academic debating in foreign language classrooms, highlighting practical strategies and key challenges. The article concludes by emphasizing the long-term benefits of debate in fostering confident and articulate language learners.

Keywords: Academic Debating, Foreign Language Learning, Critical Thinking, Communication Skills, Oral Proficiency, Language Education, Speaking Skills

There is no simple answer to the question how one can enhance one’s language skills, but they can get different tools and devices on this matter. The acquisition of foreign language skills goes beyond learning grammar rules and vocabulary; it also involves developing communicative competence and the ability to use the language in real-life contexts. One effective way to achieve this is through academic debates, where students engage in structured arguments on relevant topics. Debating not only strengthens oral proficiency but also enhances critical thinking, persuasive communication, and the ability to analyze diverse viewpoints—all essential skills for language learners⁶.

Academic debating requires participants to formulate arguments, support them with evidence, respond to counterarguments, and present ideas logically, all within a time limit. This process encourages learners to move beyond passive language use and engage actively with complex topics. In addition, debates offer opportunities to practice listening and speaking in an academic context, which prepares students for more formal communication in both academic and professional environments. This article explores how debating activities can be integrated into foreign language instruction to improve students’ linguistic, cognitive, and interpersonal skills.

Methods

Integrating academic debates into language classes requires thoughtful planning to ensure they align with learning outcomes. Teachers can design debate activities based on students’ proficiency levels and gradually increase the difficulty.

- **Beginner Level:** Focus on familiar and simple topics, such as “*Is homework necessary?*” or “*Should students wear uniforms?*” Debates at this level emphasize basic language structures and vocabulary.

- **Intermediate Level:** Introduce more abstract topics, such as “*Is technology making us less social?*” or “*Should animals be used for scientific research?*” Students are encouraged to use transitional phrases and modal verbs (e.g., “*I believe,*” “*It seems to me,*” “*In my opinion*”) to express opinions clearly⁷.

- **Advanced Level:** Debates at this level cover complex topics such as *global warming policies* or *the ethics of artificial intelligence*. Students practice academic discourse, complex sentence structures, and formal vocabulary.

⁶ Bell, R. (2017). *The role of debate in language learning: Enhancing critical thinking and communication skills*.

Journal of Language Teaching and Research, 8(2), 345-352. <https://doi.org/10.17507/jltr.0802.12>

⁷ Carrell, P. L. (1984). *Schema theory and ESL reading: Classroom implications and applications*. *TESOL Quarterly*, 18(2), 283-294. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3586675>

2. Developing Key Skills Through Debate

Debating activities promote multiple skills necessary for effective foreign language use:

- **Speaking Skills:** Students practice fluency and pronunciation by presenting arguments in front of an audience, enhancing confidence and public speaking ability.
- **Listening Skills:** Debaters must actively listen to opponents to respond effectively, developing comprehension skills critical in real-life conversations.
- **Vocabulary Acquisition:** Each debate introduces specialized vocabulary and phrases, expanding learners' word bank⁸.
- **Critical Thinking:** Formulating arguments requires students to evaluate evidence, detect biases, and anticipate counterarguments, enhancing reasoning skills.

3. Classroom Debate Formats and Techniques

Teachers can implement different debate formats to accommodate students' needs and promote engagement:

- **Team Debates:** Divide students into teams, with each group presenting arguments for or against a motion. This format encourages teamwork and collaborative learning.
- **Lincoln-Douglas Debates:** Focus on one-on-one debates where two students argue opposing sides of a topic. This structure fosters individual accountability and deeper preparation.
- **Round-Table Discussions:** Conduct less formal debates, where each student contributes an argument or perspective. This approach allows shy students to participate in a low-pressure environment⁹.
- **Impromptu Debates:** Present students with unexpected topics and give them limited time to prepare. This technique develops quick thinking and adaptability, simulating real-life situations.

4. Creating a Supportive Environment for Debating

A positive and supportive classroom environment is essential for the success of debate activities.

- **Encouraging Participation:** Teachers should ensure that every student, including shy or less proficient learners, feels comfortable speaking. Pairing confident speakers with less experienced students can foster peer learning.
- **Feedback and Reflection:** Teachers should provide constructive feedback on both language use and argumentation. Reflection sessions after debates help students identify areas for improvement.
- **Error Tolerance:** Debating in a foreign language involves making mistakes, and teachers should emphasize that errors are part of the learning process¹⁰.

5. Assessment of Debating Skills

Assessment criteria for debate activities should focus on both language proficiency and argumentation skills.

- **Language Use:** Evaluate students on fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary usage, and grammatical accuracy.
- **Argument Structure:** Assess the clarity, coherence, and logic of students' arguments.
- **Engagement and Responsiveness:** Measure how well students engage with their opponents' arguments and respond to counterpoints.
- **Use of Evidence:** Evaluate the students' ability to support arguments with facts and examples, demonstrating effective research and critical thinking.

⁸ Coyle, D., Hood, P., Marsh, D. (2010). *CLIL: Content and language integrated learning*. Cambridge University Press.

⁹ Dees, K., McKenzie, J. (2019). *Engaging students through debate: A practical guide to integrating debate into the curriculum*. *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, 46(1), 47-58.

¹⁰ Hargreaves, E. (2017). *The impact of debating on language acquisition: Evidence from a study of EFL learners*. *Language Learning Journal*, 45(3), 324-335. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09571736.2017.1282179>

Teachers can use rubrics to provide students with clear expectations and structured feedback. Peer assessments can also encourage students to reflect on their own performance and that of their classmates¹¹.

Conclusion

Integrating academic debates into foreign language learning offers multiple benefits for students. It enhances not only their speaking and listening skills but also their critical thinking, persuasive communication, and ability to engage with complex topics. Debates provide a dynamic and interactive environment where students practice using the target language in meaningful ways. Additionally, they develop the confidence to express ideas clearly and respectfully, both essential for academic and professional success.

While the method presents challenges—such as managing anxiety or ensuring equal participation—these can be mitigated by creating a supportive classroom environment and offering constructive feedback. Overall, academic debates are a valuable tool for language educators seeking to promote communicative competence and higher-order thinking in their students.

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¹¹ Kahn, S., O'Rourke, J. (2016). *Debate as a tool for developing higher order thinking skills in language learners*. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 78, 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2016.04.001>