



HOW TO ORGANIZE A SUCCESSFUL DEBATE IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASS

Getting students to

- **Listen to each other**
- **Speak to each other (without reading)**
- **React to what has been said**
- **Express agreement, disagreement,**
- **Show enthusiasm, doubt, approval, disapproval**

It is an all-encompassing activity for the teacher whose duty is to teach students to speak to each other, and not just to spout off alone. Unfortunately, a successful debate doesn't just 'happen' because the subject is fascinating (to the teacher), or can easily be argued about. A good debate needs a lot of preparation, and it needs even more training of students for various aspects that concern not only debate, but participating in any discussion.

Here are some ideas for activities, skills, and a progression for you to follow that will ensure a lively, rich, interesting debate, and get the students reacting in an almost authentic manner !

1. **Different Types of Debate:** First of all, you should think about what TYPE of debate you want to organize. There are several different possibilities:
 1. **A discussion board** – Two teams of students (for or against), each student will defend his or her position, the moderator keeps track of everything and makes sure that everyone participates

2. **Lincoln-Douglas debates** (taken from the two candidates who debated quite vehemently during a senatorial race in the mid-19th century)- here there are only two debaters, somewhat like a duel
3. **A Circular debate** – this can be used as training for The Real Thing.
 - a. The students are placed in a circle and there must be an odd number of students (5 is the best number).
 - b. A subject is given to the students. The first student must find an argument FOR.
 - c. The 2nd student will be against, the 3rd, For, etc.
 - d. When it is the first student's turn again, he will have to find an argument against the subject.
 - e. As there will be several groups in the classroom, they must see who can keep going the longest.
4. **Multi-polar debate** – here, a fictional happening is staged (trial, talk show, different types of meeting) gives lieu to a discussion, argument, be it heated or not
 - a. The for and against are nuanced
 - b. The roles are distributed having been defined by the teacher (or the students) beforehand
5. **Man Overboard Debate** – takes place in a canoe
 - a. Each student represents a member of society
 - b. There are too many people in the canoe so somebody has to go
 - c. Each member of society defends himself as best he can
6. **Written debate** – each student writes his point of view on a sheet of paper, and the papers are redistributed throughout the class. The next student to receive a paper reacts to the previous students writing. (A forum on internet is very similar to this sort of 'debate').

II. ATTITUDE: Whatever sort of debate is chosen, it is very important to explain to the students exactly what a debate is ! And equally importantly, how they are to behave !

1. Good behavior:
 - a. Students must not monopolize the time imparted
 - b. No one makes fun of anyone else – on the same or the opposite team
 - c. Students can criticize their peers' ideas, but NOT the person
 - d. Students must not interrupt someone constantly (unless he is repeating himself for the 3rd time)
 - e. Students MUST say if they haven't understood something
2. Communication - Students must
 - a. speak loudly enough to be heard by everybody
 - b. be careful of their pronunciation (sentence stress, intonation, new words recently learnt and repeated in class !)
 - c. be able to say the same thing differently if someone asks you to
 - d. sit correctly on their chair
3. Interactivity – listen to the others in order to be able to react (not easy !)
4. Non-verbal expression – show a feeling, an emotion without actually saying something (bang [gently] on the table, shrug your shoulders, nod or shake your head, point at someone) – this will at least show that the student has understood what was said.

5. Teams must be well-balanced
 - a. In number
 - b. In time allotted for speaking
 - c. In linguistic capacity (teachers shouldn't put all the good students on the same team !)
 - d. There must also be a balance in the number of students with strong personalities on each team

6. Each student intervenes
 - a. Each student must have something to say
 - b. Those who need it may have a help sheet (information below in III-1-c)
 - c. A stronger student (on the same team) may tutor a weaker student – this should be organized and practiced during the preparation for the debate and continued during the debate)

7. Variety of arguments – good preparation in class with group work will provide a great number of arguments. For grades 8&9 (middle school, 'collège'), for the very first time, it is a good idea for the teacher to bring in all the arguments so as to give the students an idea of what will be expected of them later, and to show them that in actual fact, whatever the theme of the debate, the arguments will always be more or less the same... too expensive, too boring, too difficult, etc.

8. Being able to explain one's point of view – the students will need to know specific expressions, an appropriate intonation, and the fact that they must look at everyone when speaking

9. Capacity to convince – the students will need specific vocabulary, the right tone, and... self-confidence.

10. Getting the entire class involved: (something for everyone!)
 - a. The moderator, Master of Ceremonies
 - b. The two teams
 - c. The jury
 - d. Students who are "counting points"
 - i. Students who observe and find arguments according to what is said
 - ii. Note –taking for one's own intervention
 - e. Students who are evaluating their peers
 - i. Listing the number of words relative to the them
 - ii. Observing the mimics , etc

11. Placing the students - everyone must be able to see everyone else easily. Students can be:
 - a. In a circle, or in two rows, facing each other
 - b. In a 'triangle' – for a debate with different roles to play, and no real team
 - c. the moderator must have a central position

III. ANTICIPATING PROBLEMS that MIGHT HAPPEN!

1. Getting the really weak students to speak
 - a. Make sure that the students understand that the first ones to speak have the 'easy' role as there is so much that hasn't been said yet!
 - b. Pair off the students in each team, a strong student with a weak student. They must help each other
 - c. Making every concession possible for the weaker student:
 - i. He is allowed a 'cheat sheet' with a few VERY SHORT minimum phrases.
 1. This cheat sheet must be prepared BY THE STUDENT HIMSELF
 2. It can also simply consist of a list of key words (maximum 10)
 - ii. The weak student either just gives the idea, which is improved upon, or his sentences can be made more complex, by the stronger student

NB – in a role play situation, this type of arrangement poses a problem, as their roles are all different, so the key to success here will lie in an excellent preparation on the teacher's part

2. The arguments
 - a. They must be found before the debate, during different classes when various aspects of the theme are studied
 - b. To better prepare, students should be asked to keep a page with three columns: **Argument, Example, Counter example**
3. Learning to Not Read one's notes : here again, it is all a question of
 - a. knowing one's subject,
 - b. mastering the new vocabulary,
 - c. having prepared both the arguments and what one thinks the adversary might say!
 - d. a quick and easy activity to help students is as follows :
 - i. students write a short text on a subject that they know extremely well (their dog, their best friend, etc).
 - ii. they 'reduce' their text to just a few key words
 - iii. using these words as a guide, they talk about the subject they have chosen
4. The role of the M.C. or Moderator – while there is only one per debate, all the students should be prepared for this role (more vocabulary, more expressions...)
 - a. Choose a student who is relatively at ease in the language
 - b. He/she will name the show, welcome the audience, keep track of time
 - c. The MC must keep things going, ask questions, call on certain students who have not spoken, etc.
 - d. At the end of the debate, the MC must sum up the arguments, list the points for and against
5. Getting ALL the students involved – who does what?
 - a. All the students should prepare all the arguments together, either in class or also as homework (checked by the teacher)
 - b. Straws can be drawn to decide which 'side' one is on
 - c. During the debate, those who aren't debating can 'count the points', be the jury, evaluate (more about that below in the Evaluation rubric)

6. Forming the teams: here there are several possibilities – should the teams form themselves, should the teacher take care of it ? However the teacher decides to do things, the key word is BALANCE (see II. - 5)
7. Rhythm : if students are aware the one of the keys to success is that the other team be able to hear them and therefore react, they'll take care of it as a team !
8. Too little interaction : students who have been well-prepared insofar as Vocabulary, Arguments, Expressions, Phonology, and who realize what the stakes are (to WIN! A good MARK) will encourage the other members of their team to participate, to argue, to debate.
9. The same is true of Silence... students can also be trained to use various expressions such as, "Did you mean that..." "Do you agree that...?"

✚ For points 8&9 it is imperative to develop TEAM SPIRIT. Everything must be clear before beginning to debate – rules, attitude, etc. The students must realize that they are to convince their peers – tone of voice, gestures, communication.

IV. EXPRESSIONS OF OPINION

In the attached annex, there are several sheets that list different ways of expressing one's opinion. It is probably better NOT to give these sheets to the students as they are – unless you explain that these are for REFERENCE. Why not suggest (in lycée) that the students choose 3-4 expressions per week, and stick to those, gradually increasing their number that they use. In middle school, it might be better to dish out a small number of expressions at a time...

V. ACTIVITIES IN-CLASS TRAINING FOR A DEBATE

One of the awful things that we, as teachers want to avoid at all costs, are those one-word answers, "Yes" or "No"! We also want more than "I agree", or "you're right". We would really like well-articulated, fairly complex sentences... how on earth do we get this far? Here are a few ideas for activities that are easy to put in place in a language class and very appreciated by students of all ages (from middle school up to technical college [collège to bts]).

1. **ADVERBS** and more – a YES/NO competition – to be done in groups of 8 (or so)
 - a. The students find ways of avoiding Yes, or NO and make a list of expressions (helped by the teacher, if necessary!)
 - b. All the students prepare a certain number of CLOSED questions at home on the theme that is being studied in class
 - c. The teacher checks the questions for mistakes if necessary
 - d. The students play the game trying to 'catch the others out'
 - After a few minutes, I often say Time Out, and introduce the extra questions, such as 'Are you sure?', "Really"? "Is that so?, etc. The students then continue.

2. **Who can speak for the longest time** ? You'll need a stop watch (or a cell phone...) and a student to work it. This can be done in groups of 3 or 4, and the students must have 3-4 topics (always on the theme that is studied in class)
3. **There are Two Sides to Every Story** – this will help students to understand that although they might have lost the debate, they are not necessarily losers, or wrong. Choose a story that involves several protagonists, for example, Little Red Riding Hood. The students then prepare and tell the story, using as many adjectives and adverbs as they can, from the point of view of
 - a. Little red-riding hood
 - b. The wolf, or her Cubs
 - c. The grandmother
 - d. The villagers, etc.
4. **PROVE IT !** In a group of 3-4, students read a sentence that is doubtful but that affects them (e.g. Coca-cola is bad for your health) – the other students contest the verity of the statement.
5. **PRACTISE** – in pairs. Students will have a discussion debate in two's – the teacher goes round the classroom, and intervenes when necessary to correct grammatical errors, unfortunate pronunciation, whatever needs correcting!
6. **Saying things differently** – this is one of the most difficult things to do for a foreign language learner. Here is an activity that can help!
 - a. Day 1: Give out the following 7 phrases to be learnt by heart
 - + You said that...
 - + You told us that...
 - + You mentioned that...
 - + May I ask you why you said that...
 - + Did you really mean it when you said that...
 - + What did you mean when you said that...
 - + You made a good point when you said that
 - b. Day 2: A debate topic is proposed. 2 teams are formed. Each team finds 7 arguments, that (one at a time) they read aloud.
 - c. The opposing team uses one of the phrases to rephrase what has been said. One point is awarded for each correct sentence.

VARIANT:

When preparing an industrial BTS class for a debate (on renewable energies) each group of 3 students, having read different (very short) articles was to present a new type of energy to the rest of the class.

- + The first student was to say one sentence.
- + The second student said, "What he means is that..." and repeated the first student's sentence. He then added his own bit of information.
- + The third student said, "So, he mentioned that..." thereby repeating the second student's new information, before adding his own contribution.
- + This is repeated until all the information has been given.

This has the added advantage of making understanding and note-taking easier for the listeners !

7. **GUESSING** a word –different techniques * (middle school);

This game will help the students to use new adjectives, and adverbs that have just been taught!

- a. There are 2 rows of students, seated opposite each other (maximum 5 students per row)

The teacher needs to prepare cards on which one word is written that corresponds to a noun that the students know.

- ✚ Team A: The first student turns over a card, and discovers the word his team must describe. E.g. coffee machine
- ✚ He says, "This machine is modern".
- ✚ Team B: A member says, "Really?"
- ✚ Team A: the 2nd student says, "Yes, this machine is **VERY** (he adds an adverb) modern and it is also practical." (and an adjective)
- ✚ Team B: next student "Is that so?"
- ✚ Team A: the 3rd student says, "Yes, this machine is very modern, and it is also particularly (he adds an adverb) practical and it is cheap." (and an adjective). ETC.

The students must remember all the sentences with the adjectives and adverbs

- b. The teacher writes several contradictory sentences containing no adverbs. Each student receives one sentence. The students sit in a row opposite each other. Since they have contradictory sentences, they must react to what is said, and add an adverb.

- ✚ *This machine is modern* => the student says, "This machine is VERY modern".
- ✚ *This machine is old* => the student seated opposite says, "No, it is EXTREMELY old."

* Thanks to Laetitia Metken, German teacher, for providing the two afore-mentioned activities.

8. **SENTENCE LENGTHENING** – for both high school and middle school.

This activity can be practised at any time really – either as a warming-up activity, or as a conclusion to an hour of class, or even as a technique for getting students to utter longer, more complicated (but still organized) sentences for a debate! If it is to be used as a training activity, here is the way to do it!

In groups of 10 - 15

- ✚ Give out small pieces of paper on which one item of information is written and correctly formulated in a phrase, not a sentence.
- ✚ Each student gets a different piece of information.
- ✚ The first student starts by introducing the topic with a short, simple statement
- ✚ A second student repeats the first statement and adds his own phrase.
- ✚ The third student repeats what he heard and also adds something.

In order to avoid too many 'ands', it is a good idea to make sure that students know how to introduce relative clauses – simply explaining to them that they don't have to add something to the end of the sentence will help. (it will also help to remove the misuse [and overuse] of 'who' for things...)

VI. EVALUATION

Ah, the painful question of how to mark a group, or even how to mark a student, who is a participant in a group... Everything depends on WHAT the student has been PRACTISING, what he has been taught and what the teachers' priorities have been ! But first the Real Question – just who does one want to give a mark to?



1. Marking the TEAM: This is definitely within the spirit of debate, as, aside from the Lincoln-Douglas type of debate, it is usually the team who wins, and not the individual. It is also important to promote team spirit in our increasingly individualistic society... So just how does one do it? Again, everything depends upon what the students have been training to do, but here are a few examples of items that can be used to build a grid for evaluation:

- All the students spoke for more or less the same amount of time
- The arguments were pertinent, and varied
- The arguments were illustrated by topical examples
- The team showed solidarity and members helped each other
- Team members were able to interrupt their adversary politely to say that they didn't understand, or to express their disagreement
- The team was able to make a logical link between their adversary's argument and their own opinion
- Arguments were proposed and also developed by different members of the team

Bonus points: the team introduced and concluded their debate very clearly

Negative points: French was spoken...

It is quite possible to mark a debate while it is happening, if all you have to do is put down ticks or crosses. In this case, simply choose a few of the above-mentioned suggestions, and put ticks in corresponding boxes on the right, as shown:

THIS IS JUST AN EXAMPLE OF WHAT IS POSSIBLE !!!

	FOR	AGAINST
The students all intervened more or less the same amount of time	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Courtesy was shown the adversary, and team members helped each other	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Students were able to react to and argue against the adversary	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The arguments were pertinent and varied	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

2. **Marking the STUDENT:** Here the criteria will be similar, but simply applied to the individual. These are just a few ideas of what it is possible to take into account. Each teacher will be able to adapt his own grid to WHAT HE HAS TAUGHT the student to be able to do!!

- ✚ The student is able to communicate efficiently
- ✚ Eye-contact with the interlocutors is maintained
- ✚ He can be heard
- ✚ His body language supports what is being said
- ✚ He can express his opinion, agreement, disagreement
- ✚ He is able to react spontaneously to an argument
- ✚ Vocabulary and expressions relative to the theme are mastered
- ✚ Basic (or advanced) grammatical structures are used correctly
- ✚ Phonology – new words, intonation, sentence stress

IT IS VERY IMPORTANT TO ONLY GIVE A MARK FOR THOSE ASPECTS THAT HAVE BEEN TAUGHT AND PRACTISED IN CLASS!

There are oodles of grids available online – simply type “debate evaluation” into your search motor, and umpteen sites will come up. They can be useful for the simple physical form of the evaluation, but it is very important to think about what has been taught, and not to just do a copy and paste... how can a student know that he should have nodded to show his approval, if he hasn't been taught it? How can a student understand that he lost points because his pronunciation of “I agree with you” was wrong, if he had read and written it, but he hadn't heard it said, and he hadn't been made to repeat it?

Students love debates, and will always be willing to participate – so take the plunge, and enjoy yourselves and let them have fun!

