

# Moving From Discussions to Debates in an EFL Global Topics Course

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## Literature Review

Debating enhances critical thinking, teamwork, collaboration, open-mindedness, communication (Goodwin, 2003), soft skills (Aclan, Abd Aziz, & Valdez, 2016), and friendly competitive skills (Amiri, Othman, & Jahedi, 2017). Twenty-first Century Skills such as critical thinking and collaboration are said to be indispensable for students who are expected to contribute to a knowledge economy founded on innovation and creativity (Kobayashi, 2021). Debating is often done in the students' first language in educational settings; however, in foreign language education, debating is rarely done as it requires a significant investment on the part of teachers to prepare and a high English proficiency for language learners to participate (Jost, 2018; Nur, 2017). Moreover, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students may find debating difficult at first and might rely on avoidance strategies; debating is best done in several rounds so that students can gradually develop compensation skills that will allow them to participate more actively in debates (Amiri et al., 2017). For debating to have the merits of

improving critical thinking and collaboration skills, teachers and students should commit themselves to debating frequently and effectively, which may not be possible if curricula are fixed and class time is limited.

Debating is assumed to be more suitable for highly proficient EFL learners (Nur, 2017). However, Wang and Kihara's (2017) study of a Japanese university student with relatively low proficiency of English demonstrated that his willingness to communicate (McCroskey, 1992) played a significant role in his success in the debate. When he could not communicate, he relied on coping or compensating strategies such as circumlocution, clarification, restating, summarizing, questioning, and referring to visual aids to facilitate communication during the debate. Although he confessed that he was tempted to use Japanese when debating, he did not use it because he felt that he had enough strategies to compensate for his low English skills. In other words, using Japanese was his last resort, when he had exhausted all of his strategies for communication. Hence, having a high language proficiency in English will undoubtedly assist EFL learners in communicating, but language proficiency alone will not guarantee their success in debates. When learning how to debate in English, students can discuss with teachers and their peers how they can overcome communication breakdowns by using various coping strategies. Accordingly, students may raise their willingness to communicate and overcome their anxiety of speaking if they are not as concerned about speaking fluently in English.

Debating is connected to the Western paradigm of student-centered learning. Students are expected to speak, ask questions, and challenge the opinions of others in student-centered learning, which may be difficult for learners who have experienced teacher-fronted classrooms throughout their primary and secondary education (Frambach, Driessen, Beh, & Van der Vleuten, 2014). Chinese international students studying at Western higher education institutions struggle with student-centered learning because they were raised in a culture that prioritizes balance, stability, and harmony over critical thinking and argumentation (Lu & Singh, 2017). Although Chinese students at Western universities are criticized for

their lack of critical thinking skills, Lu and Singh (2017) claim that this may be due to their lack of knowledge of the content, low English proficiency, and the ways in which Anglophone universities assess critical thinking skills. Therefore, they believe that Western universities should consider how Chinese students and other international students may need more support from their institutions to find their own critical voice in Western classrooms. After all, critical thinking does not come naturally to students who are not accustomed to having their own voice in the classroom (Frambach et al., 2014; Lu & Singh, 2017).

Debating requires expressing opinions, which is not commonplace in Japanese educational settings where a majority of students do not express their opinions verbally in class (Okada, 2016, p. 92). Jost (2018) suggests that EFL teachers consider adopting informal debating constructs that are less rigid and confrontational in Japanese educational settings. For Japanese students, “confrontation is an unfamiliar aspect of communication; they seek to find commonalities; and agreement can be seen as a form of compromise” (Jost, 2018, p. 34). In Wang and Kihara’s (2018) study of debating, Asian students were not asked to voice their own opinions but to play the role of a stakeholder and express views from the stakeholder’s perspective. In this way, students would neither feel that their opinions were being personally challenged nor that they were challenging their opponent’s ideas; by removing the personal element from debating and making it less confrontational, students could learn how to present opinions, come up with counterarguments, and challenge others as a critical thinking exercise than a personal attack. Therefore, debating in Asian contexts can be modified to be a more informal, less personal, and intellectual exercise for EFL learners to think about issues and appreciate the viewpoints of diverse stakeholders.

## **1. Research Design**

This is a qualitative study of 46 Japanese undergraduate students in a discussion and debate project for a Global Topics course at a private university in

the Kansai region of Japan. The Global Topics course, taught by the author, is a content course that lasts one semester and is dedicated to building students' listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills.

For the discussions, students worked in groups of three or four students and brainstormed five research questions on a global topic of their choice (see Appendix 1). They searched online for articles written in English that provided evidence and supported their opinions. During the discussion, each group member, in addition to giving his/her opinion, was assigned a role (e.g., leader, questioner, summarizer, or data provider) and were provided key phrases that would help him/her play his/her role. Prior to doing the graded group discussion, all groups participated in a mock discussion on English as a common language policies of Japanese companies such as Rakuten. Their teacher provided the data needed for the mock discussion so that students could concentrate on voicing their opinions, using key phrases to play their roles, and having a discussion in English for 25 minutes. After completing the mock and graded discussions, students participated in a debate (see Appendix 2). The debates were deliberately aligned with what students had been doing all along in English in some of their university EFL courses—giving presentations and asking questions. The main purpose was for students to engage in informal debating (Jost, 2018) and hone their friendly competitive skills (Amiri et al., 2017), without feeling as if they were personally attacking their peers.

There were second-year (n=43) and third-year (n=3) students from the business administration (n=20), humanities (n=12), law (n=8), and economics (n=6) faculties who participated in this project that took approximately five weeks to complete. On average, the students had studied English for seven to eight years prior to taking this course and were considered proficient speakers of English as a second language. Most students had done discussions in English but had limited or no experience debating in English. At the end of the project, in July of 2019, students were asked to fill out a survey (see Appendix 3) that was translated from English to Japanese by a professional translator. Patterns of meaning in their responses were identified, analyzed, and interpreted using thematic analysis

(Clarke & Braun, 2014). Their responses were translated from Japanese into English and later back translated by the researcher who is fluent in both Japanese and English.

The aim of this study was to understand how Japanese EFL undergraduate students in a Global Topics course felt about engaging in the discussion and debate project.

The following research questions were asked:

- (1) How did the students feel about participating in this project?
- (2) How could this project be improved for future students?

## **2. Findings**

### **2.1. Importance of Preparing for Discussions and Debates**

The students' overall success in this project could be attributed to the quantity and quality of preparation that they did before participating in discussions and the debate. On average, students spent one to two hours preparing for the discussions and two to three hours for the debate. They prepared for the discussion by memorizing key phrases for their role as leader, questioner, summarizer, or data provider and gathering evidence in English to support their opinions. Most of the preparation for the discussions could be done individually after the roles were assigned, which helped each student work efficiently and effectively. A student commented that having specific roles ensured that group members did not only what they wanted to do but also what they had to do. As all the students had written graded summaries of articles that provided some support for the questions they had brainstormed for their group discussion, they all came prepared with some evidence, even if their assigned role was not the data provider. Thus, the students' preparation for their roles and support for their opinions were significant contributors to their success in participating in the discussions.

The preparation they did for the debates differed from the discussions. First,

they did not need to play any facilitating role in the debates. Instead, they needed to work with their partner to prepare a persuasive PowerPoint presentation with their position, give three reasons, and search for evidence to support each reason. After they finished giving the presentation to their opponents and had listened to their opponents' presentation, they brainstormed questions to ask their opponents. Some students said they prepared counterarguments based on what they thought their opponents might ask them during the question and answer session. Moreover, they also predicted what the other side would say and thought of questions to ask their opponents in advance. Predicting what questions to ask or might be asked along with how they might be able to answer those questions was useful for students because they could respond to questions without having to spend a lot of time negotiating meaning with their partner and opponents when communication breakdowns occurred (Al-Mahrooqi & Tuzlukova, 2011).

## **2.2. Challenges Faced During the Discussion and Debate**

Many students commented that doing a mock discussion prior to their graded discussion was crucial for them to understand how they should play their role. The mock discussion was done in class, so their teacher (i.e., the researcher) could model how the discussions should be organized. To her surprise, most students did not require guidance and understood how to do the discussions right away because the topic, five questions for discussion, and roles with key phrases were prepared in advance. In their feedback, many students said that the debate should have also included a mock debate because they felt that debating was much more difficult than discussing. For future projects, students will do a practice debate before the graded debate as debating should be done in several rounds to encourage students to feel comfortable with the debate process and to find ways to compensate for when they cannot communicate (Amiri et al., 2007).

Students said that doing discussions before their debate facilitated their use of English only in this project. A majority of students said speaking in English was

cognitively challenging for them. In general, students in the Global Topics course did not follow the English-only policy in the classroom; they used Japanese in the classroom approximately 20% of the time. However, for the discussions and debates, they used English all the time. Some students admitted that they struggled with translating from Japanese to English or finding the correct word in English to convey their opinions, but most students became accustomed to using English and if not, found ways to communicate by using compensations strategies. In other words, similar to the student in Wang and Kihara's (2017) study, when they could not communicate, they used strategies such as circumlocution, clarification, restating, summarizing, questioning, and referring to visual aids, thereby raising their overall willingness to communicate (McCroskey, 1992). Several students received some help from their group members when they could not communicate, while other students offered assistance to their group members, even though a student admitted that he/she never knew how much assistance to provide without appearing overbearing. Nonetheless, students wrote that when they collaborated, there were fewer awkward pauses, making their discussions and debate lively and exciting.

Some students found it difficult to understand what others were saying during the discussions and the debate. Many students, namely those who played the role of summarizer, learned the importance of taking notes and referring to them from time to time. They said that taking notes allowed them to grasp the main ideas and stay on top of what each student was trying to say. During the debate, students used the notes they took while listening to their opponent's presentation when they asked probing questions. Most students who did take notes wrote in Japanese, revealing that they were translating what was being said in English into Japanese. Perhaps in addition to having students learn key phrases to play their role during the discussion, note-taking skills in English could have been taught to these students as it has been shown that explicit instruction in taking notes in English can improve EFL learners' listening comprehension (Tsai & Wu, 2010).

Students said that "thinking on their feet" during the question and answer

session of the debate was most challenging throughout this project. No matter how much they had tried to anticipate questions or analyzed the weaknesses in their arguments, they struggled with formulating questions and responding to questions in the debate. Although the debate was not intended to be a confrontational exercise, they were explicitly told to find weaknesses in arguments and have intellectual discussions that demonstrated their comprehension of both sides of the issue at stake. Hence, students were expected to exercise their friendly competitive skills (Amiri et al., 2017) that were considered to be suitable in EFL learning contexts in Asia that value preserving harmony and saving face (Lu & Singh, 2017). Even though students were given time to prepare questions for their opponents after the debates, they were not allotted much time to respond to questions. For future debates, it may be sensible to give students time to search for answers using online resources and discuss their answers with their partner instead of having them respond immediately to questions asked. In this way, students may feel more confident about their responses and would be able to raise their critical thinking skills by finding ample evidence to support their opinions.

## **Conclusion**

In this study, the Western model of discussion and debating was modified to suit Asian learning contexts by emphasizing the importance of showing interest, listening to multiple viewpoints, and challenging others in a friendly way (Zare & Othman, 2013). The discussions and debate gave students the opportunity to develop their English, critical thinking, collaboration, listening, note taking, and communication skills—skills that students should possess as members of a knowledge economy founded on innovation and creativity (Kobayashi, 2021). With adequate preparation and opportunities to practice, the students in this study showed that they could overcome the challenges they experienced and adapt their learning to fit within a student-centered model. For future projects, students will be given more chances to debate and allotted more time to prepare their responses to



probing questions after their persuasive presentations. The reflections from the students showed that students would have benefitted from learning how to use compensation strategies when they experience communication breakdowns and note-taking skills in English to enhance their listening comprehension skills. In their final comments, many students stated that they were pleased with their success in discussing and debating with their peers because they could think about global issues in English in an interactive and stimulating way.

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## Appendix 1: Instructions for Group Discussion

### *How long is our group discussion?*

25 minutes

### *What do we discuss?*

Your 5 discussion questions based on your global topic. Everybody should be able to answer these discussion questions and have answers prepared.

### *How do we include our research from our article?*

You need to provide evidence, examples, quotes, etc. from your articles. Use phrases like “according to....”.

### *Will we get graded?*

Yes. You will get a group grade for preparation, fluency, accuracy, data support, and playing your roles properly. You will be penalized for lack of evidence and just pressing your own opinions. **NO absences are allowed.**

<b>Roles</b>	<b>Responsibilities</b>	<b>Phrases</b>
<b>Leader</b>	Makes sure discussion starts, moves discussion along smoothly, and ends on time	<p><i>“Okay, so let’s begin our discussion. Our topic is (Olympics) and we prepared 5 discussion questions. They are.....”</i></p> <p><i>“Let’s move on the first discussion question. (Kyoko), would you like to help us get started? What was your response to question 1?”</i></p> <p><i>“Let’s move on to the next discussion question.”</i></p> <p><i>“Thank you very much for participating in the discussion.”</i></p>

<b>Data provider</b>	Provides evidence to support various opinions as needed	<i>"I read this article and found that it said (provide data)."</i> <i>"According to this article, it said (provide data)."</i> <i>"According to this (person), he/she said (provide data)."</i>
<b>Questioner</b>	Asks about 5 questions total during the discussion	<i>"I have a question."</i> <i>"Don't you think it's better to ...?"</i> <i>"Can you explain why ...?"</i> <i>"You said ....., but I think that.....?"</i> <i>"What did your article say about....."?</i>
<b>Summarizer</b>	Summarizes the main points after each question has been discussed	<i>"Okay, now I would like to summarize the main points."</i> <i>To summarize, for question one we tried to answer the question by....."</i>

## Appendix 2: Debate Instructions

### Instructions:

1. Form new **groups of 4** and decide on a **topic**.
2. Come up with a **debate prompt** based on your topic. Use “**should**” or “**should not**” in your sentence.

Example: Teenagers **should (not)** use SNS.

3. **Divide** your group up into **two** (“*pro*” and “*con*”).
4. **Prepare a small debate** (“pro” gives a presentation and “con” gives a presentation) where you need to present your arguments as a **short presentation (6 PowerPoint slides, 6 minutes)** to each other and have a follow-up **15-minute Q&A debate**.

### Example:

Slide 1: Teenagers should use SNS (pro).

OR Teenagers should NOT use SNS (con).

Slide 2: Give 3 reasons why you have your opinion.

Slide 3-5: Give some clear examples from websites, your personal life, other people’s lives, etc.

Slide 6: Write your 3 main points again.

5. Each side gives their **6-minute presentation (bring your OWN laptop OR print out each slide, 1 slide 1 A4, landscape)**.
6. After the presentation, have a **15-minute Q&A session** to challenge the other side. Take a few minutes to **brainstorm some questions with your partner** before you start the Q&A session.

### Use phrases like:

- ✧ “*I see that you gave this reason, but I think.....*”
- ✧ “*I understand your point, but I think.....*”
- ✧ “*Could you tell me why you thought.....?*”
- ✧ “*I have a question. What do you mean by.....?*”
- ✧ “*I am not sure I understand what you mean by this. Could you tell me.....?*”

7. Get a **group grade** for your **persuasive presentation** and your ability to **think about the weaknesses of the other side's arguments**.

Note: If a team member does not do his/her fair share, your teacher will lower that person's score. **NO absences are allowed.**

### **Appendix 3: Feedback on Global Topics Discussion and Debate Project [July 2019]**

**I would really appreciate your feedback on the discussion and debate project for Global Topics. Your comments will help make this project better in the future.**

What year are you in? \_\_\_\_\_ year

What department are you in? \_\_\_\_\_ department (学部)

How many years have you studied English? \_\_\_\_\_ years

#### **PART 1: GROUP DISCUSSION**

1. For the group discussion, which role did you play?
  - a. Leader
  - b. Data provider
  - c. Questioner
  - d. Summarizer
2. How did you prepare for the discussion? [Choose all that are suitable.]
  - a. I read articles that answered the group's five discussion questions.
  - b. I practiced key phrases to say for my role.
  - c. I wrote down what to say.
  - d. Other ( )
3. How much time did you need to prepare for the discussion in total *outside of class*?
  - a. 0-1 hour
  - b. 1-2 hours
  - c. 2-3 hours
  - d. More than 3 hours
4. Have you ever participated in a group discussion like this one in English before?  
YES or NO



If YES, please describe it.

5. What was most difficult for you about participating in the group discussion?
6. How well do you think YOU did in the discussion?
  - a. Almost perfect
  - b. Above average
  - c. Average
  - d. Below average
  - e. Poor
7. What, if anything, did you learn from doing the group discussion (5 questions, playing a role, providing evidence, 25 minutes, English only)?

## **PART 2: MINI DEBATE**

1. How did you prepare for the debate? [Choose all that are suitable.]
  - a. I searched on the Internet for evidence and support.
  - b. I prepared my arguments.
  - c. I thought of counter arguments from the other side.
  - d. Other ( )
2. How much time did you need to prepare for the debate in total *outside of class*?
  - a. 0-1 hour
  - b. 1-2 hours
  - c. 2-3 hours
  - d. More than 3 hours
3. Have you participated in debates in English before? YES or NO  
If YES, please describe it.
4. What was most difficult for you about doing the debate (short presentation and Q&A)?
5. How well do you think YOU did in the debate?
  - a. Almost perfect
  - b. Above average
  - c. Average

- d. Below average
  - e. Poor
6. Was doing the group discussion before the debate helpful? YES or NO  
Please explain your answer (YES or NO).
  7. What, if anything, did you learn from doing this debate project (presentation and Q&A)?
  8. Do you have any suggestions to make this discussion and debate project better for future Global Topics students?

**Thank you very much for your time.**

## EFL グローバル・トピック・コースにおける ディスカッションからディベートへの移行

マリアン・ウァン

キーワード: グループディスカッション、ディベート、批判的思考力、高等教育

### 要旨

ディベートは批判的思考力、チームワーク、協調性、寛容、コミュニケーション (Goodwin, 2003)、ソフトスキル (Aclan, Abd Aziz, & Valdez, 2016)、および友好的な競争力 (Amiri, Othman, & Jahedi, 2017) を高める。批評力を持ったディベーターとなるための準備として、EFL (外国語としての英語) を学ぶ日本の大学生たちが、実際にディベートで自分の側のディフェンスを行い相手側の視点に対して論駁する前に、どのようにして自らの意見を表明するべきかについて学ぶディスカッションに参加した。本研究の目的は、日本のある私立大学における Global Topics コースで、ディスカッションおよびディベートの能力を育成したことについて日本の大学生がどのような感想を抱いたかを把握することである。英語でのディベートに移る前に賛否の分かれるトピックについてどのように議論すべきかを学習した経験全般に対して、学生は肯定的に感じていると報告した。プロジェクトでの学生の成功の要因は、事前の準備の量と質に帰することができる。しかしながら、学生はどの時点で参加し、質問し、問いに対して応答すべきかといった様々な困難にも直面した。今後実施するプロジェクトについては、今回学生から得られたフィードバックに基づいて変更を加えていく予定である。

