

A Short Introduction to Formal Debating

(Competitive debating)

Extracted mostly from:

Dorottya Holló - Márta Szálka: Let's Discuss It - Using Debating In Developing Oral Skills (1994, Budapest: Soros Foundation)

Debating, which has long-standing traditions in English speaking countries, is a framework for the structured discussion of various topics. Two teams put forward their arguments and counter arguments in order to try and convince the adjudicator of their point and their rhetorical expertise. Learning the techniques of debating, therefore, provides an excellent opportunity for the learners to acquire language and communication skills.

Debating develops:

- logical and critical thinking
- skills in organizing one's thoughts
- oral expression
- rhetoric skills
- empathy and tolerance for different views
- self-confidence
- the ability to work in a team
- the ability to research a topic
- the ability to focus on the core of issues rather than irrelevancies
- one's manners in a public performance

Using debating in teaching a foreign language, it also gives extra practice in:

- oral activities
- the conscious use of the foreign language for a real purpose
- language development
- fighting inhibitions
- appropriacy

All in all, debating helps to become effective communicators.

The only skill that is essential in real life negotiation and that is not overtly practised in a debate is the ability to establish a compromise. However, as the participants will have to analyze the debated topic thoroughly during the preparation, they will have to weigh the different interpretations and implications of the subject matter. In an indirect way this can even contribute to developing the readiness to compromise.

One of the most important skills to be developed through debating is critical thinking. If people learn to use this mental process they also develop the following abilities and will be able to do the following things:

- consider the strengths and weaknesses of opposing points of view and are able to put themselves in the place of others;
- realise that their feelings are their response to a situation, and they know their feelings would be different if they had a different understanding of the situation;
- recognise the limits of their knowledge and are sensitive to their bias and prejudice;
- face and deal fairly with unpopular ideas or beliefs;
- recognise the need to struggle with confusion and unsettled questions over time to achieve deeper understanding and insight;

- scrutinize generalisations and probe for possible exceptions;
- understand concepts and know what kind of evidence is needed to justify applying a word or phrase to a situation;
- understand the importance of evaluation and be aware of the values on which they base their judgements;
- use everything available to them to solve a problem, and look for the best solution, not just for getting their way;
- welcome good questions as an opportunity to develop a line of thought;
- take ideas apart and put them together again;
- distinguish their observations from their conclusions;
- distinguish relevant from irrelevant facts;
- recognize contradictions;
- assess the consequences of actions, beliefs and ideas;

Although debating as such is a popular competitive or pastime activity in itself, it also prepares people to:

- act, vote or participate intelligently in society;
- serve in leadership positions;
- take long-term personal responsibility for increasing their knowledge and ability through the short-term aim of winning a decision at a debate;
- investigate, research and analyze significant contemporary problems;
- synthesize knowledge;
- work closely with colleagues;
- learn effective speech writing and delivery skills;
- achieve higher standards academically;
- make prompt analytical responses;
- be critical listeners;
- make mature decisions;
- develop courage, a sense of security and self-confidence;

Debating comes in many shapes and forms. Competitive, parliamentary and extemporaneous debates are just a few from the wide range. The number of participants also varies from 2 to 4 in a team. In some debates the speakers are only allowed to deliver their speeches, while in others they are also given the opportunity to cross-question. The rules vary from type to type. The general rules of competitive debating are as follows:

The participants are:

THE CHAIRPERSON - who announces the motion (title, proposition), introduces the teams, and directs the debate by calling the debaters to present their speeches or stopping them if they exceed the time limit.

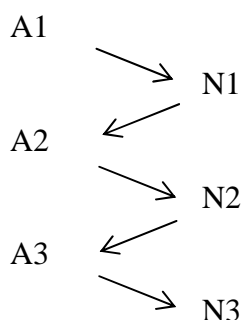
THE TIMEKEEPER - who keeps a record of the time each speaker uses and after giving a warning at 30-60 seconds before the allocated time runs out signals when the speakers must finish speaking.

THE ADJUDICATOR - who decides which team has won the debate.

At important competitions a board of adjudicators are present (3-5) while at training sessions there is usually one adjudicator. Giving a justification for the decision is an important task as this helps the speakers in their preparation for further debates.

THE TEAMS - 3 members in both teams. The team defending the motion is the **AFFIRMATIVE**, the team refuting the motion is the **NEGATIVE**.

The speakers appear in the following order:



The roles and time limits of each speaker are as follows:

A1 *6 minutes* introduces and defines the proposition, explains key words, gives subject analysis, introduces the team's speakers and allocates the aspects of the line to them, develops his/her argument, explains and gives examples, summarizes the team's argument;

N1 *6 minutes* has to accept the definition, cannot redefine unless A1's definition is utterly wrong. Beware of definition debates. Gives subject analysis, states their argument/line, refutes the Affirmative line, allocates their themes/aspects to his/her speakers, refutes A1's points, develops his/her aspect of the argument and gives summary

A2 *5 minutes* re-examines definition if necessary, rebuts the negative case and N1's arguments, reinforces the Affirmative line and develops his/her arguments, gives summary

N2 *5 minutes* rebuts A1 and A2's arguments, reinforces the Negative line, develops his/her aspect of the argument and gives summary;

A3 *5 minutes* refutes the arguments and evidence of N2 and the Negative line, gives a final contrast of the cases to reinforces and proves the Affirmative case;

N3 *5 minutes* refutes the arguments and evidence of the Affirmative line, gives a final contrast of the cases to reinforce and prove the Negative case.

ATTENTION: While expected to put forward new evidence, A3 and N3 must not present new arguments.

The time limits can be halved for young debaters and beginners.

The motion is traditionally formulated as :

(The motion is) "That the pen is mightier than the sword "

This is the case to defend or attack. The subjects may:

- depend on key words or phrases:

That we watch too much television

That strike is no longer a fair weapon

- involve some form of comparison:

That we need more freedom
That publicity is a better salesman than quality

- turn on "should":

That we should speak our minds
That we should count up to ten

- concern the truth of the proposition:

That life wasn't meant to be easy
That we wish to be deceived

- require interpretation:

That the grapes are sour
That you never can tell
That the trees are full of galahs

- be light:

That only mugs work
That the more the merrier

(These are perhaps the most difficult ones in a foreign language debate.)

- be controversial:

That zero population growth should be enforced
That strikers are the enemies of the people
That capital punishment should be re-introduced

Keeping these possibilities for interpretation in mind, it is essential to remember that the definition should not be narrowed down to a very specific meaning otherwise the whole activity becomes a definition debate and as such is invalid. ("That we should build more bridges" - bridges=human relations or actual bridges in a particular city?) This approach is adopted by the negative when they dispute the Affirmative's definition instead of the case that was built on it.

A similar error on the part of the Negative side is committed by questioning the right of the Affirmative to put their case forward at all. ("That democracy is on trial" - Neg.: It never existed!)

By creating an unrelated line the case also becomes invalid as this would divert the debate from its real contents. ("That we think about our rights when we should be thinking of our responsibilities" - by contending that we should be thinking of our wrongs)

The Affirmative, too, can create an invalid case by denying the Negative any possibility of entering the argument. ("That there are no more statesmen" - by saying that there never were any.)

When setting up a case the slogan should always be: "Never make it easy for the other side". The Affirmative should try and guess how the Negative would refute their points and they should prepare in advance to combat them. If they find that their points are not challenging enough they should discard them for lack of interest. They should give an opportunity for the Negative to refute but, of course, should fight to defend their views. The Affirmative win if their points (arguments) are not successfully refuted, while good refutation will bring victory to the Negative.

The Negative can also prepare but may have to discard their prepared case if it turns out to be unrelated to the Affirmative case.

The four standard Negative approaches are as follows:

Straight negation: not normally advocated, only when unusual pressure needs to be put on the Affirmative in cases like: "That society can survive without the family" or "That we should stop smoking". As this way the teams are heading for a debate of absolutes, they should be careful to avoid prejudice.

"Not generally true": This approach is often practised as it puts the affirmative under a lot of pressure because they, in turn, have to prove that their case is more often true than not.

Proving the converse: By doing this the original proposition is disproved as both cannot be true. ("That girls are more deceitful than boys")

Changing the direction of the argument: This is only to be done if a relevant variation of the topic is possible. ("That variety is *the* spice of life" - *a* spice... or: "That intolerance is more dangerous than ignorance" - both are, maybe ignorance more so....this also gives it a twist towards the "proving the converse" method.)

All arguments require proof even if not total proof (as no such thing exists). The proof should be significant, capturing and serve as a good illustration of the case. Quotations are welcome but they must be exact and in close relation with the topic. They should not dominate the argument, after all, the speakers have to prove that they have something to say themselves.

The preparation takes place well in advance. (The only exception would be "instant debating".) The members of a team work together. They first have to decide on how to define the topic and which aspects to talk about. The issues have to be well researched so that the arguments and the supporting evidence should be relevant. With the exception of A1's speech - which has to be a master piece - the speeches cannot be written up. However, detailed notes should be made and alternative tactics should also be prepared. This is especially vital for the Negative, who may have to discard everything they had thought of if their case is not related to the Affirmative. Making and passing notes to other members in a team is allowed and even encouraged during the debate for both teams.

Once the speeches are delivered they are adjudicated on the basis of the 3M-s:

- Matter (i.e. content)
- Method (i.e. organisation)
- Manner (i.e. presentation)

Common errors of Matter:

- **re-stating the subject instead of proving it**
- **stating belief rather than evidence**
- **unclear or wrong definition**
- **shifts of theme** (This results from bad preparation or strong pressure from the other side. If the first two speakers' themes are not connected the third speaker will have a hard time trying to summarize the team's line.)
- **irrelevancies** (No arguments should be used if it does not help the case.)
- **false analogies** (These are sometimes far fetched and therefore dangerous: popular election of parliament vs. pupils choosing their teachers.)
- **trivialities** (These are irrelevant and a waste of time.)
- **attacking the person instead of his/her argument** (disrespectful, invalid)
- **confusing words with things** (Words are not arguments or evidence, they only evoke emotions and sometimes create false analogies by labelling things rather than describing them.)
- **excessive quoting** (The speakers should say what they think and use other people's thoughts to support their case. Quotations should be brief and to the point.)

- **wrong interpretation of language items** (To illustrate this let us see the example of "is" in English. This word can refer to various aspects of time: recent past, present, continuous present and future. E.g.: "That it is "afterwards" that counts"; "That job-sharing is the answer"; "That profit is not without honour"; "That we are not doing too badly"... In the definition a reasonable meaning must be established.)
- **wrong deductions** ("The history student's error" - History is not bound to repeat itself, so a deduction about the present on the basis of the past can be false.)

Common errors of Method:

- **illogical forecasts**
- **faulty conclusions**
- **allocation failures** (i.e. The speakers do not fulfil their roles)
- **misplaced or illogical development** (This refers to the development of arguments.)
- **doing things in the wrong order**
- **speaking undertime or overtime**

Common errors of Manner:

- **careless deportment**
- **negative personality**
- **over assertive personality**
- **wrong language use**
- **excessive use of slang**
- **monotonous speech**
- **mumbling**
- **reading one's speech**

When deciding which team has won the debate the evaluation of the 3M-s goes together with the overall judgement of which team has proved their case, whose arguments were stronger and better supported.

=====

General communication skills that are useful in debating, too:

- appropriate body language
- use of voice quality
- eye contact
- fighting stage fright
- listening to others
- concentration
- reacting appropriately
- empathy
- thinking and speaking spontaneously
- backing up all the above mentioned with thorough knowledge

=====

General rhetoric skills for debating and public speaking:

- keeping up the listener's attention and interest
- logical argumentation, development and conclusion
- directing the listener's attention by giving a preview at the beginning and a summary at the end
- clear structure

TYPES OF SPEECHES:

Speech to inform (expository speech): These often follow the composition types and structures outlined below. They often describe or develop events, processes, methods, concepts, etc.

Speech to persuade (persuasive speech)

The effects of persuasion:

1. changing people
2. developing or giving people new ideas
3. retaining or reinforcing people's own views

Methods of persuasion:

A. two-sided versus one-sided presentations

- use one-sided (i.e. do not talk about the counter arguments) if you think your audience is inclined to accept your point of view already.
- use two-sided (i.e. mention and refute the counter arguments) if your audience is opposed to your view, or more educated

B. Features of a good persuasive speech:

- 1., **Credibility**, - based on the speaker's knowledge, competence, sincerity, style, etc
- 2., **Arguments & Evidence**: powerful arguments supported by examples, statistics, testimony, references
- 3., **Reasoning**: drawing conclusions based on evidence.
 - a. deductive, i.e. general to the specific (*E.g. People who study harder get better grades. You want to get better grades. Therefore, you should study harder.*)
 - b. inductive, i.e. specific to the general (*E.g. My grammar class was boring last semester. Joe's grammar class was boring. Mia's grammar class was boring. Grammar classes are boring.*)
 - c. causal- - relationship between causes and effects
 - d. analogical--What is true for the one, is true for the other.
- 4., **Emotions**: make the listeners feel sad, angry, guilty, afraid, enthusiastic or proud.
[This should not be emphasized in academic speeches.]

Persuasive speeches focus on:

1. **question of fact** - Speeches based on questions of fact are similar to speeches to inform but they reflect the speaker's opinion. The goal is to present one view of the facts as persuasively as possible.
2. **question of value** - Goal: to change the audience's values and thinking about moral and ethical issues.
 Caution: This should not be a speech on a personal opinion based on a whim. The speaker's opinion must be well supported. The speaker's notions of "correct", "legal", "ethical", "right", "wrong", "ideal" etc. must be clarified.
3. **question of policy** - Goal: to gain passive agreement or immediate action from the audience
 Caution: Clear and specific recommendations must be made.
 Organization:
 - 1., show the need – Convince the audience that the problem exists and is relevant.
 - 2., present a plan – What is your solution to the problem?
 - 3., show practicality – Preview how the new policy will work and how it will solve the problem.

A possible structure for speeches:

INTRODUCTION

attention getter (anecdote, rhetorical question, statistics, quotation, topicalisation, reference to the topic,...)

transition ("This reminds me of...", "This is almost as if... ", "This is similar to the case of... ")

defining the topic

justifying the importance of the topic

preview (tell the audience what we are going to tell them, logical grouping of ideas)

BODY (Tell them what you want to say.)

thesis (argument)

supporting evidence

illustration

CONCLUSION

Summary (Tell them what you have told them.)

effective reinforcement

leave-taking

The above is but a basic model but has to be observed especially because in English speeches are linear and keep to the point.

Definition

The key concepts/words of propositions have to be defined in order to ensure that their meaning is clear to all participants.

Types of definition:

logical definition (short, clear, objective)

figurative definition (usually based on a metaphor)

extended definition (detailed, lengthy)

Things can be defined by:

listing their characteristics

listing their components

contrasting or comparing

giving examples

stating their purpose

a combination of the above

Definitions are necessary to clarify our statements or propositions. Statements would be meaningless if they stood alone. **Arguments** are needed to justify statements and propositions. However, arguments, too have to be reinforced by **supporting evidence**.

Arguments can be:

generated from a definition

generated from a cause and effect relationship

generated from a situation or circumstances

based on an analogy

"a fortiori" (If humanity is powerful enough to send people into space, it should also be able to feed every human being.)

based on evidence

Research skills are essential:

- using a library
- using the Internet, finding relevant and trustworthy sources
- using reference books, newspapers, magazines, periodicals
- browsing with a purpose
- approaching a topic from many angles
- taking and making notes
- documenting correctly

Once the necessary information is gathered debaters will have to hold a **brainstorming** session and **select the most relevant ideas**.

Then an **outline** must be written of their case. This is followed by the actual **writing of the speeches** - as much as possible. Actually it is only A1's speech that can be written completely, but the others, too must have a very firm outline. Writing a speech does not mean that the speaker has to stick to every single word, it is meant to focus and fix their attention to the development of the case. The writing stage is then followed by **oral practice**, the purpose of which is to get rid of stage-fright and become more confident in **delivering the speech**.