

The Debate on Labelling: A Debating Skills Exercise in English for Special Education Classes

ANDRÁS BERNÁTH

Department of Modern Languages, Juhász Gyula Faculty of Education, University of Szeged

bernath@jgypk.szte.hu

1. Introduction

The development of communication skills in general and speaking skills in particular is vital in a broad spectrum of education, on various levels and in various ages and fields, both in the mother tongue and in foreign language learning. Debating skills form a special set of communication and speaking skills, which are particularly important and useful for various reasons. On the one hand, debates can occur in all walks of life, therefore teaching and practising debating skills can prepare students for real life situations, in addition to having a number of tangible benefits, including improved communication and speaking skills, as well as critical thinking and various other learning skills. These have been discussed in a number of studies, and will be described in Section 2.1., below. A general problem of education is how to involve and engage students and how to promote active learning. Debates or debating can be particularly useful in overcoming such problems, too.

On the other hand, debating can also enhance foreign language learning. Added to the advantages of debating that can already be noted in the mother tongue, it can also develop communication and speaking skills in the target language and provide an opportunity for the active use of the vocabulary of a particular topic. The benefits of debating in foreign language learning have also been studied by scholars; these will be discussed in Section 2.2. Debating can be used not only in general language classes, with adequate exercises that provide the necessary information for the debate. By carefully selecting the topics, it can be particularly useful in content and language integrated learning (CLIL), for instance, in bilingual education, where certain subjects are taught in the foreign language. However, debating can also be used in various foreign language courses for special purposes, for instance, English for Business, or English for Special Education, which are taught at colleges or universities, including the University of Szeged, Hungary, and will be described in Sections 3 and 4, below. In addition to a review of the benefits of debating in education and foreign language learning, the

main purpose of this article is to describe a debating skills exercise in English for Special Education, an EFL class for Hungarian students of special education needs, which has also proved useful for international students of general education and various other programmes, and might serve as a model for similar exercises in other courses or programmes, too.

2. The Benefits of Debating in Education and in Foreign Language Learning

2.1. Debating in Education

“A debate is a structured contest over an issue or policy” (Beqiri 2018). According to Beqiri, debating itself is an important skill in various “aspects of life, from winning political seats, to negotiating new contracts, to personal development”. Accordingly, debating has a number of benefits, for instance, “allowing you to think about aspects and perspectives you may not have considered” or “learning how to create a persuasive argument.” However, perhaps most importantly, it is particularly useful in “improving public speaking skills.” Organised, formal debates usually have a fixed structure, including a *topic* chosen for the debate, which is also called a *resolution* or *motion*. Within the overall topic, this can be a specific statement, policy or idea. A debate involves two teams with several speakers, normally three speakers each, both in the *affirmative* and the *negative* team. The speakers of the two teams take turns, expressing and arguing for their views, and also responding to and arguing against the views of the speakers of the other team; this is called a *rebuttal*. In a formal debate, the time allowed for the speakers is usually fixed, and finally the debate is judged.



Figure 1. Debating event at the Oxford Union. Photo: VirtualSpeech (Beqiri 2018)

Because of their benefits, debates and debating are highly esteemed in Western democracies, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon culture, and debating skills are taught both in schools and universities; various debating contests are also held. One of the most famous debating societies is the Oxford Union (Figure 1), but debating events are organised for schoolchildren, too. Experts like Bequiri provide guides to debating and improving debating skills, and debating and its benefits have been studied by a number of scholars. Among others, Kennedy argues that in-class debates provide a “fertile ground” for active learning and the cultivation of critical thinking; she also highlights its benefits on “oral communication skills” (Kennedy 2007, 183).

Jerome and Algarra examine the place of debate within secondary schools, in particular students and staff involved in a debate competition in London secondary schools; they consider “debate as a teaching method, to clarify the role of debate within a pedagogy for democracy” (Jerome and Algarra 2005, 493). This study analyses the English Speaking Union’s London Debate Challenge, and finds that teachers’ role is very important in developing students’ public voice. At college level, D’Souza has studied the value of debating among third-year undergraduate students, and finds that while “not all students reflect a positive attitude to debating,” “learning through debates” significantly develops critical thinking and communication skills, and it also facilitated learning, providing “motivation, intellectual challenges and learning in depth” (D’Souza 2013, 538).

2.2. Debating in Foreign Language Learning

Whereas all the above studies confirm that, among other benefits, debating is highly useful in developing communication skills, virtually at all levels or ages already in the native language, it can also enhance foreign language learning. Alasmari and Ahmed describe the use of debate in EFL classes, and argue that “debating in English, the debaters get involved into a challenging and thrilling activity; moreover, they find themselves well-conversant in the aforesaid language” (Alasmari and Ahmed 2013, 147). Their article covers not only numerous aspects and benefits of debating, including various skills it can develop, but it also offers many suggestions and examples, although only briefly.

Krieger also suggests that “debate is an excellent activity for language learning” and he offers a six-class unit to provide “a step-by-step guide that will give teachers everything they need to know for conducting debate in an English class” (Krieger 2005). From the first

class or lesson, “Introduction to Debate”, Krieger gradually guides teachers as well as students to “Class Six: The Debate”, in effect teaching debate to ESL students in a detailed way. While this is very practical and informative indeed, the problem is that unless the whole course is actually concerned with debating, there are rarely six ninety-minute classes available to finally arrive at a debate in a usual college course, as such a schedule can involve half a semester, if there is only one class a week of the given course.

Cinganotto studies “debate as a teaching strategy for language learning”, particularly in Italian secondary schools, where debates are used widely, also in content and language integrated learning (CLIL) (Cinganotto 2019, 107). Drawing on Rybold (2006), she also emphasises the development of speaking skills through debate, and points out that “regular practice of debate will improve fluency, pronunciation and vocabulary” (Cinganotto 2019, 109). Highlighting the link between debating and CLIL, Cinganotto notes that “with debate used as a teaching and learning strategy, students are led to reflect on the use of academic language, in particular the vocabulary and language structures relevant to express the specific cognitive discourse functions (Dalton-Puffer 2013, 2016) linked to the topic of the debate” (109). Cinganotto presents the results of a survey on “teachers’ and students’ perceptions on the use of debates in an EFL class” (112), “which highlight the added value of debating as an effective and engaging teaching strategy,” and concludes that “the use of debate should be promoted in the EFL classroom” (120). Her study provides valuable insights into these perceptions, citing and analysing interviews and questionnaires, with very positive and encouraging results on the use of debate, but it is not concerned with describing a particular debate or debates in detail.

A highly informative and useful study on debating in the ESL or EFL classroom is offered for “the development of speaking skills in intermediate and lower level university classes through the simplified format of debates” by Lustigová (2011: 18). She cites Harmer (2007: 84), who explains that “simplified debates concentrate the content of the ESL/EFL learner’s speech, thus allowing the students to focus on improving their skills by using knowledge already grasped” (Lustigová 2011: 22). Her article provides a detailed description of the formats and methodology of the simplified debates, which focus on topics or resolutions like “Smoking should be banned in public places”, “Being part of the EU helps us live better on a daily basis” or “Love is more important than money” (23). In fact, Lustigová lists some two dozens of

debate topics, and explains that most students “continued into a second semester and thus had the benefit of participating in debate sessions for an entire academic year” (*ibid*). She also points out that “with an increasing number of debates, students began to form their opinions accurately” (22). The “mini-debates primarily focused on language use at the given level of the students” (21), and Lustigová also provides a very useful vocabulary for the debates. Her results were “significantly benefiting the students in terms of speaking ability, specifically-measurable verbal communication and critical thinking skills” (25), and she concludes that “both students and teacher found such teaching – learning tool very useful and highly effective” (28).

To conclude the above review of literature, while all these studies confirm that debating is highly useful in education in general and in the development of communication and speaking skills in particular, both in the native language and in foreign language learning, they tend to be concerned with debating as a regular activity, a frequently repeated practice, which evidently yields significant results over time. However, I believe that debating, particularly in a simplified format, can also be incorporated as an occasional teaching method or activity; its considerable benefits can be utilised not only in regular debating events or classes, but at times also in a range of courses across the curriculum, including specialised subjects and foreign language learning.

3. English Communication and English for Special Purposes: Special Education Needs

3.1. The contexts, objectives and students of the course

The course “English Communication and English for Special Purposes: Special Education Needs” is an optional special course at the Faculty of Education of the University of Szeged; in short it is called “English for Special Education”. It is offered primarily for Hungarian students of special education, who usually have a certificate of intermediate level (B2) language exam in English, according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), but this is not a prerequisite. Therefore, the groups usually consist of students with different language skills, which can pose challenges: some are on pre-intermediate level, while some have already passed the advanced level exam (C1). Students can take the course in any semester; therefore, they can have various amounts of knowledge and experiences in the field of special education. In addition, the course is also offered for international

students, usually Erasmus students from the EU, Turkey and Israel, visiting the university for a semester, who also have various levels of English and varying familiarity with special education, as they are not necessarily students of special education. They can also be students of general education, the arts or social sciences and the humanities; sometimes they attend other faculties, like the Faculty of Economics, but are interested in the field. These international students have sometimes poor speaking skills in English and no prior knowledge of special education, but occasionally they can be native speakers of English with considerable experiences in the field: for instance, there was an Israeli-American student who was born and raised in New York, but was a special education student in Israel, with extensive experiences. The ratio of Hungarian and foreign students also varies, from all-Hungarian to all-international groups; the mixed groups provide the opportunity to share their considerably different perspectives.

The course has two main objectives: the general aim is to improve the English language skills of the students in possibly all areas, including reading, writing, listening and speaking, but the focus is on communication, particularly on the topics of their own field, special education. Therefore, the specific and most important objective is to introduce students to the special language of special education or special needs education, hence the short name “English for Special Education”. This is done mainly by reading, analysing and discussing the literature on the subject, some articles published in international journals and an introductory yet fairly comprehensive textbook on special education (Heward 2014). Thus the course also offers an introduction to special education in English; therefore, it can be taken by any international student interested in the field. This introduction involves in fact two courses, as the field and the textbook itself include a great number of topics, but some students, including the international ones, attend only the first. The debating skills practice, which will be described in Section 4 below, is in this course.

3.2. The main topics of the course and its connection to debating

The reading assignments and the communication topics include extracts from selected chapters of the textbook: (1) “The Purpose and Promise of Special Education”, (2) “Planning and Providing Special Education Services”, (4) “Intellectual Disabilities”, (5) “Learning Disabilities”, (6) “Emotional or Behavioral Disorders”, (7) “Autism Spectrum Disorders” (Heward 2014). These chapters consist of various

types of materials, including personal accounts by featured teachers, definitions and characteristics of the disabilities, discussions of current issues, and methodological suggestions on teaching and learning. The debating skills exercise is based on Chapter 1, and particularly its section on labelling exceptional children (Heward 2014: 9-13). This raises an important issue already at the beginning of the textbook, serving as a useful introduction to the field and as an excellent tool for a debate, both for native speakers of English and for language learners, who are already at an intermediate level or above. If an actual debate is arranged based on this text, non-native speakers can improve not only their debating skills but also their foreign language skills through the exercise, actively studying the topic.

As has been mentioned, this American textbook is not designed for language learning; it is intended for students of special education, or students and readers interested in the field. However, it provides material that is very useful for debating, not only for native speakers of English, but also for language learners, as it describes a widely debated issue with sufficient information, which can be processed with some preparation by language learners too, particularly if assisted by a language teacher. In short, the text includes both content and language for debating and argumentation, with a highly important and interesting topic and a number of points to discuss and argue for or against. The language aspects can be explained by the teacher, if necessary, together with the rules or guidelines of the debate, and they can also be covered and practised in group work, in the preparation stage for the debate, where the more proficient speakers can also help their peers.

4. A Debating Skills Exercise: The Debate on Labelling

4.1. Labelling: The Context and Topic of the Debate

Before describing the actual debate, it may be useful to explain its context in the field and the textbook. The section “Why Do We Label and Classify Exceptional Children?,” serving as the basis of the debate, is preceded by the sections “Who Are Exceptional Children?” and “How Many Exceptional Children Are There?” (Heward 2014: 7-9). The latter includes a table with the “number of students ages 6-21 who received special education services under the federal government’s disability categories (2009-10 school year).” The first two sections thus cover some basic terms and their definitions, hence also some special

vocabulary of the field; these are given as a reading assignment to students and are also discussed in class before the debate session.

The third section, the actual reading assignment for the debate, explains that these disability categories, like “learning disabilities” or “visual impairments”, can be regarded as labels, which are widely debated for various reasons. There are also other labels that are now outdated and politically incorrect but were widely used in the past and are still used by some, for instance, “mental retardation” for the current “intellectual disabilities.” Moreover, such derogatory words like “dunce”, “imbecile” or “fool” were also applied to these people. More recently, some euphemisms have been used that are intended to be politically correct but are also arguable as labels. These are covered in “Current Issues: Future Trends. What’s in a Name? The Labels and Language of Special Education,” in the last part of the section entitled “Alternatives to Labeling and Classification”. The author here refers to a protest against labelling, recalling that “big yellow and black buttons” were worn by many attendees at an annual convention of the Council for Exceptional Children, proclaiming “Label jars, not children!” (Heward 2014: 12).

In the first part of the section used for the debate, entitled “Labeling and Eligibility for Special Education”, it is pointed out that “to receive special education services, a child must be identified as having a disability (i.e., labelled),” nevertheless, some educators are against labelling. The next part of this section is entitled “Possible Benefits of Labeling and Classification”, where seven points are offered that argue for labelling, while the following part, “Possible Disadvantages of Labeling and Classification”, includes nine points arguing against it (see Appendix). These points can serve as the backbone for an in-class debate: if the debating teams rely on them, a quick debate can be arranged based solely on this text. Students can certainly express other ideas and can also search for other sources in the preparation stage for the debate, but the most important or most common points on labelling, both pros and cons, are already provided here by the author. This can considerably facilitate the preparation and reduce the necessary time, allowing more time for the actual debate. Of course, from the general topic of labelling exceptional children, or people with disabilities, a more specific debate “topic”, a statement, “resolution” or motion must be formulated before the debate. This could be defined somewhat differently on every single occasion in the particular groups, from “Labelling children with disabilities is necessary and useful” to “Labelling exceptional children is harmful and should be discontinued”.

4.2. The Debate: A Simplified Debate Format and its Methodology

As mentioned above, Lustigová suggests a simplified debate format and methodology as a learning tool in EFL (2011: 21-24), which I have found very useful, but have adapted, as the given course is not only a general EFL class. It is in part also CLIL, where the content is particularly important, but it is primarily English for special purposes, focusing on the specialised vocabulary of a particular field. As for the simplified format of the debate, whereas Lustigová suggests “two teams of two or three members” and nine points or steps from the (1) “Affirmative team speech” and the (2) “Opposing team speech” (or negative team speech) to (9) “Teacher provides constructive feedback”, generally allowing one minute for one speech in the mini-debate, I have found that an even more simplified and less rigid format can also be useful, which is sufficiently flexible and can be adapted for the particular group and the actual debate.

As the emphasis is on a possibly free and smooth language and communication practice, focusing on the given topic, I do not always fix the number of speeches and rebuttals in advance, nor do I find it necessary to limit the time allowed for the speeches. These and the number of team members can be tailored to the size of the group and the actual flow of the debate. In case of a bigger group, more than three members can make up each team; I normally divide the group into two teams, and there can be more than three speakers in each team, so that as many students are given an opportunity to speak as possible. Of course, the debate must be terminated at a certain point, taking into account the time-constraints of the class itself. On the other hand, if there are only a few students in a particularly small group, allowing only a couple of speakers in each team, they can give more mini-speeches. A similar arrangement can be made in the odd situation when there are only two students present; in that case one student can represent the affirmative team, and the other one the negative team, even though the students then have to prepare their speeches on their own, or with the help of the teacher, not in an actual teamwork. In short, the main point or general rule is that the speakers of the two teams take turns with their mini-speeches or arguments, which can be very brief, but always to the point, and they also have to respond to the speeches or arguments of the other team, offering sufficient rebuttals, even if briefly.

As for the methodology, the preparation stage for the debate is crucial, and I find Lustigová very useful in this again, from the “topic definition”, the “reading” and “comprehension questions” to the

“vocabulary review of useful debate phrases” (Lustigová 2011: 22). In the vocabulary of the debate phrases, she draws on and cites McCarthy and O’Dell (2008: 68-108), which is also a useful reference work, but I should add that in the present exercise, the specialised vocabulary of the topic or subject needs to be covered in particular detail too. In the actual preparations for the debates, as has been noted, the team members can also help each other, both with content and language: the more experienced students in the field could offer practical explanations and contribute valuable personal points, while the more proficient language users could help their team members with various aspects of the language. As for the text itself, it was also used in various ways: in the debate some students relied on the points of the text very lightly, merely as a basis, offering mostly their own points, and only partly referring to the text, freely commenting on it, while others relied on it more closely, both in content and language. As mentioned, students could use the text in the preparation, which proved to be a great help, but they were asked to use their own words in the debate, apart from some specialised terminology, which they acquired in the preparation and could practise actively during the debate.

4.3. Students’ Responses

Similarly to the students of the above cited studies, students found this activity highly interesting, enjoyable and meaningful, amounting to one of the most valuable and successful classes of the entire the semester, even if it was only a single debate in this format in the course. Students reported that they could better understand and internalise the topic through the debate that followed a preparation in group work or pair work. They found it useful that they had to consider different views, and they found it particularly stimulating if they had to argue for a view that was actually different from their own, or argue against a point that was in fact very close to their own. Students tended to regard the topic itself very important and interesting, but the debate was even more exciting or often indeed thrilling. It was much more motivating to study the topic in this way than merely to read and discuss it as usual, even if the discussions of the other topics were also often fruitful and engaging, as the methodology tended to include group or pair work on other occasions, too.

5. Conclusion

After reviewing the literature on debating in education and in foreign language learning, this paper described a debating exercise in EFL, which can also be regarded as CLIL, but more specifically it is English for special purposes: learning and practising the special language of special education through a particular exercise. On the one hand, the study confirms the earlier findings of the literature that debating is particularly useful to practise and improve communication and speaking skills, not only in the native language, but also in EFL, CLIL, and English for special purposes. The exercise provides an opportunity for active learning and thus internalising and deepening knowledge, in addition to developing reading and critical skills, as well as listening skills, since students need to listen to each other within their team and to the debaters of the opposite team. On the other hand, whereas most studies are concerned with debating as a regular activity, this study further suggests that debating can also be incorporated occasionally in certain courses, yielding similar results and benefits, particularly in language classes focussing on communication. Such activities can enhance studying by developing various skills, including communication and speaking; therefore, they could be used in other courses too, even if only occasionally.

Appendix

Extract from *Exceptional Children: An Introduction to Special Education*, the reading assignment serving as the basis of the debate (Heward 2014: 10-11)

Possible Benefits of Labeling and Classification

- Labeling recognizes meaningful differences in learning or behavior and is a first and necessary step in responding responsibly to those differences. As Kauffman (1999) points out, “Although universal interventions that apply equally to all . . . can be implemented without labels and risk of stigma, no other interventions are possible without labels. Either all students are treated the same or some are treated differently. Any student who is treated differently is inevitably labelled. . . . Labeling a problem clearly is the first step in dealing with it productively” (p. 452).
- A disability label can provide access to accommodations and services not available to people without the label. For example,

some parents of secondary students seek a learning disability label so their child will be eligible for accommodations such as additional time on college entrance exams.

- Labeling may lead to a protective response in which peers are more accepting of the atypical behavior of a child with disabilities than they would be of a child without disabilities who emitted the same behavior.
- Classification helps practitioners and researchers communicate with one another and classify and evaluate research findings (e.g., National Autism Center, 2009).
- Funding and resources for research and other programs are often based on specific categories of exceptionality (e.g., Interagency Autism Coordinating Committee, 2011).
- Labels enable disability-specific advocacy groups to promote specific programs and spur legislative action (e.g. Autism Speaks, <http://www.autismspeaks.org>).
- Labeling helps make exceptional children's special needs more visible to policy makers and to the public.

Possible Disadvantages of Labeling and Classification

- Because the labels used in special education usually focus on disability, impairment, or performance deficits, they may lead some people to think only in terms of what the individual cannot do instead of what she can do or might be capable of doing (Terzi, 2005).
- Labels may stigmatize the child and lead peers to reject or ridicule the labeled child.
- Teachers may hold low expectations for a labeled student (Beilke & Yssel, 1999; Bianco 2005) and treat her differently as a result, which may lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy. For example, in one study, student teachers gave a child labeled "autistic" more praise and rewards and fewer verbal corrections for incorrect responses than they gave a child labeled "normal" (Eikeseth & Lovaas, 1992). Such differential treatment could impede the rate at which a child learns new skills and contribute to a level of performance consistent with the label's prediction.
- Labels may negatively affect the child's self-esteem.
- Disability labels are often misused as explanatory constructs (e.g., "Sherry acts that way because she is emotionally disturbed").

- Even though membership in a given category is based on a particular characteristic (e.g., deafness), there is a tendency to assume that all children in a category share other traits as well, thereby diminishing the detection and appreciation of each child's uniqueness (J. D. Smith and Mitchell, 2001).
- Labels suggest that learning problems are primarily the result of something inherently wrong with the child, thereby reducing the systematic examination of and accountability for instructional variables as causes of performance deficits. This is an especially damaging outcome when a label provides a built-in excuse for ineffective instruction (e.g., "Jane's learning disability prevents her from comprehending the printed text.").
- A disproportionate number of children from some minority and diverse cultural groups are included in special education programs and thus have been assigned disability labels (Sullivan, 2011).
- Classifying exceptional children requires the expenditure of a great amount of money and professional and student time that might be better spent in delivering and evaluating the effects of early intervention for struggling students (L. S. Fuchs and Fuchs, 2007).

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Source of Illustration

Figure 1. VirtualSpeech. <https://virtualspeech.com/blog/guide-to-debating>. (Downloaded: 11/5/2020). Reproduced with permission.