

Creating an English-language Debate Course for Intermediate-level University Students

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Introduction

Although debate has existed in Japan for many years, and intercollegiate English debate contests were held in the 1950s after the end of WWII (Inoue, 1998), it was not until the adoption of *yutori-kyoiku* (“education free from pressure”) in the late 1980s (Nakai, 2012) that Japan’s English education system began a slow shift away from “exam English” and towards “English for international communication”. With this shift, many high schools and universities began to stress English debate in oral communication classes under the premise that learning how to express one’s opinion in English clearly and convincingly and developing critical thinking was necessary for keeping Japan economically strong and raising young people who could compete in the newly beginning Information Age.

Over 20 years have passed since then, and students in today’s universities are fully educated in the *yutori-kyoiku* system. When looking at them from the viewpoint of English-language learning, today’s students seem to enjoy English more than their predecessors, not hesitating to speak with native-speaking foreign English teachers, and not freezing up as often when asked questions. But their study-time has decreased, and many students are so busy with part-time jobs, clubs and sports teams, etc., that they do not take the time outside of class to review past classes and prepare for upcoming ones, or make the effort to improve their English on their own above and beyond what has been “assigned” by their professors as graded homework for their English classes.

With this in mind, how does one teach an English Debate class to a group of 20-25 third-year low-intermediate level university students? students have TOEIC scores ranging between 440 and 600 (with an average of about 530), which translates to a basic grasp of short sentences and factual information, but having difficulty in explaining and understanding the longer sentences, difficult grammar and vocabulary (TOEIC, 2015) which are used frequently in debating.

This paper looks at low-intermediate level English students in a 22-student Debate class to see what methods are effective in 1) improving the students’ English ability, 2) keeping them motivated to persevere with English to build up their “English muscles”, 3) and teaching them how to prepare and enjoy debating and developing critical thinking skills.

Intermediate-level Debate classes at YPU (Debate Ib, IIb)

The Debate class at Yamaguchi Prefectural University (YPU) has been in the curriculum since 1996, since the creation of the Faculty of Intercultural Studies. However, until 2010, there was only one level of the class, which was limited to third- and fourth-year students with over 600 on the TOEIC test; the debate class was a required course for student’s wanting to obtain an English teaching license. Students wanting to join the class were told they should have a score of over 600 on the TOEIC test, and at this level, students slowly responded to feedback and gained both English-

language and critical thinking skills to improve their performance throughout the semester, leading to exciting and challenging debates by the end of the year.

In 2011, in an effort to improve the overall English levels of more students in the faculty, the class was opened up to students who had lower TOEIC scores but were highly motivated to try debating in English. However, within a single year, it became obvious that the class would not work with students at such mixed levels of English; the lower level students were constantly looking to the higher-level students to translate and/or iterate their thoughts and opinions in English, and the higher-level students were frustrated at having to do the extra work of English translation as well as only being able to debate on simple topics rather than important national and international issues that required a higher level of vocabulary and communicative English skills.

Due to these problems, the classes were divided and from the following year, those students with a TOEIC score under 600 were directed to take the Debate Ib (first semester) and Iib (second semester) classes. The “b” classes have students with TOEIC scores usually ranging from 450 through 600, but most students are in the 450-550 range. Because it is an elective class, only students that are motivated to take the class join, and overall they are a cheerful, hardworking group of students, but many of the students are unable to express their opinions smoothly in English, and are thus unable to make themselves understood or understand the opposing team’s speech content and questions. In an effort to overcome these difficulties, various steps have been taken to make the class more accessible and enjoyable to intermediate level students.

This paper describes the overall outline of the Debate Ib and Iib (Intermediate-level English Debate) courses as they have been developed over the last few years in an effort to present ideas on how to teach debate and critical thinking to intermediate-level university students, and discusses various challenges that need to be overcome to make the class even more effective.

Semester Schedule for Debate Ib (first semester)

The first semester class, Debate Ib, is spent trying to get students talking in English to the point that they can have lively discussions and mini-debates on easy topics. It also focuses on building students’ vocabulary in preparation for debates, and teaching them how to write opinion essays, which form the basis of the opening speeches by each side in the actual debates. The main goals for the class are 1) keep it enjoyable to keep them coming to class (as it is an elective, students sometimes drop the class if it seems too difficult.), 2) keep it challenging (but not so much that it makes them stop coming to class), and 3) keep it educational (so that they feel that they are benefitting from taking the class, and building up their English-communication abilities).

In a ninety-minute classroom period, the first 15 minutes or so are usually taken up by administrative tasks (announcements, taking role, handouts, etc.) and the weekly warm-up session, followed by either role play or pair discussions, either of which should take approximately 30-45 minutes. The last 30 or so minutes of class are used to solidify the learning that the students have just finished – free writing on the topics they have covered in class, going over rough drafts of opinion papers, checking each other’s papers, etc., or working on peer-editing or writing, which has been widely recognized as having a positive effect on students’ writing skills (Mulligan & Garofalo, 2011).

At the beginning of each class, the students do a warm-up conversation, talking with a partner for 4 minutes about a topic given at the beginning of the class and changing partners 2-3 times to practice repeating their English and to get to know the other students studying in the class with them. Warm-up topics range from seasons to food, holidays, hobbies, dreams, etc., and students are encouraged to stay in English the whole time, even if they finish talking about their topic within the required time (they can talk about other things if they finish early). By having the same conversations more than once, students can both learn and practice new vocabulary as well as practice speaking English more quickly and smoothly. It also has the added effect of building up relationships between the students, something which becomes vital when actually preparing and doing debates later in the semester. These warm-up exercises can later be changed to mini-



Role Play about the Use of SNS

(SNS= Facebook, Twitter, Line, etc.- a site where many people can see what many other people are saying about something or someone.)

<p>A: A college student Who uses SNS to contact his/her friends and family</p> <p>Think of three reasons why.</p> <p>Think of reasons why people might want to stop you, and how to respond</p>	<p>B: The owner of a newly opened small business Who uses SNS to advertise his/her business.</p> <p>Think of three reasons why.</p> <p>Think of reasons why people might want to stop you, and how to respond</p>
<p>C: A college professor who is worried about the worsening academic abilities of his/her students</p> <p>Think of three reasons why.</p> <p>Think of reasons why people may oppose your opinion, and how to respond</p>	<p>D: A parent Who is worried about the bad effects of their child is using the internet too much.</p> <p>Think of three reasons why.</p> <p>Think of reasons why people may oppose your opinion, and how to respond</p>

Figure 1. Role Play Sample

JOBS DISCUSSION

STUDENT A's QUESTIONS (Do not show these to student B)

- 1) What kind of jobs have you had (part-time and full-time)?
- 2) Are there many good job vacancies for you in your country?
- 3) What is your dream job?
- 4) What jobs do you do at home?
- 5) Are there jobs that are only for women or only for men?
- 6) How many jobs do you think you'll have in your life?
- 7) Are there any jobs you would refuse to do, regardless of the pay?
- 8) Is being a rock star or sports star a job?
- 9) What do you think the job of being an English teacher is like?
- 10) Who has the best job in the world? Why do you think so?

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JOBS DISCUSSION

STUDENT B's QUESTIONS (Do not show these to student A)

- 1) Do you often check the jobs ads in newspapers or on the Internet?
- 2) What kinds of jobs interest you most and least?
- 3) Is the job market in your country growing?
- 4) What are the toughest jobs in the world?
- 5) Is being a housewife a job? Should women get paid for this?
- 6) Do you like job hunting applying for jobs?
- 7) What is the job description of your last job?
- 8) Does everyone have equal job opportunities in your country?
- 9) What's the best way to pass job interviews?
- 10) What is the best way to quit a job?

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Figure 2 Sample Pair Discussion Question List

mini-debates, where students are assigned sides, discuss their point of view for 2-3 minutes, and later switch both partners and sides and have the same discussion.

In the main body of the class, the first semester schedule is divided into thirds, and the students slowly become accustomed to expressing their opinions and thinking on issues from various aspects. For the first third of the semester, students are encouraged to practice expressing their opinions in English through the use of 4-person role plays (See Fig.1).

These role plays are on topics relevant to the students' lives (part-time jobs, SNS, owning a car, etc.), and are structured as a Jig-Saw activity so that students can build up their vocabulary and think of possible supports (supporting points) for their side before actually having a discussion. Each student takes the role of one of four parts (A,B,C,or D) and works in groups of students with only that part (AAAA, BBBB, etc) for 15-20 minutes to develop vocabulary and supports for their sides, after which they move to new groups with a student from each group (ABCD groups), thus giving each student the responsibility of representing the opinions corresponding to their particular role. This ensures that all the students are talking, but that even those who have difficulty expressing themselves in English have had sufficient time and help in preparing what they are going to say.

Once the students have begun to develop their critical thinking skills – learning to think about an issue from several different aspects at once through a series of role plays – they are ready to begin having pair discussions (See Sample Pair Discussion in Fig. 2). Again, to keep things at a suitably easy level so that they are not going above their English ability (which makes them revert into Japanese and stay there), topics pertaining to their daily lives as students or young Japanese people are used; many examples can be found on the Internet (for example, from [eslDiscussions.com](http://www.eslDiscussions.com)). For the 2-3 classes while the students are practicing speaking more intensely, discussion phrases to teach agreement, disagreement, clarification, interruption, summarization, etc. can be introduced in steps, and students can practice them by using them in their discussions. These phrases can later

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Debate IIB, Fall 2015
Essay: Part-time jobs
Due: October 13, 2015

Checklist for turning in essay papers

- Do you have a header? (Name Student Number, Faculty, Year, Date, Class name, Teacher, Homework topic)
- Do you have an interesting title? (Put it in the center, with one line open both above and below it)
- Do you have an attention grabbing opening line?
- Is your Introduction at least 5 lines long?
 - You should have 1) an attention grabbing opener, 2) 1 or 2 sentences to explain your topic, 3) a statement of your opinion, 4) 2-3 keywords to represent each of your main points
- Does each of your points have data/evidence/examples/stories to back them up?
- Does each piece of data have proper citations?:...(Wilson, 2015); According to Wilson (2014), etc.
- Is each citation in the References at the end of the paper?
- Is your Conclusion at least 5 lines long?
 - You should restate you main point IN DIFFERENT WORDS, add 1-2 sentences to further explain why your side is the right side, or why the other side is the wrong one, and at least 1 sentence to close your paper.
- Is the name of your essay file [number_name_title/topic]

- Checklist for things NOT to do
- DON'T use "I" in essays!
- DON'T start sentences with AND, BECAUSE, (and BUT)
- DON'T use the word "know" where you should use "learn"

Figure 3 Checklist for turning in opinion essay papers (eslDiscussions.com)

other group members' papers, correcting the English spelling and grammar, the format, and finally the contents. This has proven to be one of the most effective ways of improving the students' English and bringing all the students in the class up to a similar level; the pressure of having other students' read and critique one's paper, and being able to read well written papers by other students is dramatically effective in improving students' writing abilities. After doing peer-editing of several topics three times at the beginning of the semester, the quality of the students' essays has improved dramatically and they are able to transfer this knowledge into later debates.

The final third of the first semester is used for preparing and having "sample" debates. Students are encouraged to think of these debates as practice; thus, the debates are not graded, but simply used to show students how an actual debate would be prepared and executed. For a 24-person class, students are divided into 6 groups of 4 students each, and a total of 3 debates are done over a three-class period so that each student has the opportunity to experience a debate. Before this, one class period is devoted to teaching students the debate format, going over the scoring criteria in the judge's rubric, and giving students hints for how to be more effective in their debates. There is only a limited amount that can be taught in a single class period of 90 minutes, but it seems to be more effective to have students actually begin debating, and use their actual debates to teach problems in logic, expression and format.

The actual schedule for a single debate can be seen in Figure 4. Originally, the schedule only indicated the in-class debate time schedule, but students often try to do all their preparation by mail and instant messaging, dividing up the debate into small parts and assigning duties to each group member. This became evident during debates, when group members were ignorant of what each other had prepared and were unable to help each other with finding new vocabulary and effective points for rebuttal. Thus, in the handout shown, teams are instructed to get together as a group at least twice to prepare for the debate, and besides preparing their first speech and visual aids, they are highly encouraged to brainstorm points for the opposite side and consider how to give a rebuttal against those points. Also, they were told to practice having a mini-debate within their team in order to see what different kinds of defense the opposite team might devise.

Finally, both teams usually discuss their main points with the opposing team during the preparation process. For this

be used in actual debates later in the semester.

During this first two-thirds of the semester, students are also taught the basics of writing an opinion essay, with an attention-grabbing opening statement, an introduction including 3 keywords, body paragraphs giving data/examples/stories for each point, and a conclusion reviewing the points and ending with a strong closing statement. Using this kind of step-by-step process, even intermediate level students are able to write opinion papers very effectively; first, they discuss the issue with same-side and then opposite-side partners or groups, following which they do free writing for the last 20-30 minutes of class. Later, they spend time outside of class polishing their writing, putting it into the correct format for an opinion paper, and finally using a checklist (See Fig 3) to avoid common errors and correct any formatting problems. Students bring a first draft of the opinion essays to class the following week and do group-editing, in which they take turns looking at

Before Class

Prepare 1st speeches
 Prepare PP or Prezi
 Brainstorm other teams possible points and your rebuttals for them
 Do a Practice debate within your group (try once in Japanese, once in English!)

IN CLASS:

Preparation Time (10 minutes)

Give Handouts of 1st speech to opposing team, judges, teacher
 Open PP/Prezi
 Plan rebuttals to handout from opposing team

Debate Schedule (Total time: 56 minutes)

1st Affirmative Speech 6 minutes

Preparation time 2 minutes

Q&A (N to A) 6 minutes

1st Negative Speech 6 minutes

Preparation time 2 minutes

Q&A (A to N) 6 minutes

PREPARATION TIME 5 minutes

1st Negative Rebuttal 5 minutes

1st Affirmative Rebuttal 5 minutes

PREPARATION TIME 3 minutes

Final Negative Rebuttal 5 minutes

Final Affirmative Rebuttal 5 minutes

Figure 4 Preparation and Time Schedule for a Debate

		smatchphones			men & women			school lunch			violence in movies/games			anime			milk			sales tax			pet shops			my number		
Debate	O1	O2	O3	F1	F2	F3	P1	P2	P3	評価																		
Date	11月9日	11月12日	11月19日	12月3日	12月10日	12月17日	1月7日	1月14日	1月21日	1月28日																		
Class	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15																		
AFF	1	9	17	5	6	7	2	1	3																			
	2	10	18	8	13	14	4	10	9																			
	3	11	19	15	16	21	11	12	17																			
	4	12	20	22	23	24	20	19	18																			
NEG							25																					
	5	13	21	1	2	3	6	5	7																			
	6	14	22	4	9	10	8	14	13																			
	7	15	23	11	12	17	15	16	22																			
	8	16	24	18	19	20	21	24	23																			

Figure 5 Debate Assignment Schedule for Fall Semester (Each number represents one student)

level of debate, if the students do not know the opposing team's points, the focus of the two teams is often different and the debate is impossible. By exchanging main points, students are able to prepare rebuttals and questions more efficiently.

The first 10-15 minutes of class time are also used for preparation - teams trade opening speeches or slides, then they use the time to begin preparing for their rebuttal speeches. The format of the actual debate is loosely based on a revised pairwork debate format suggested by Konishi et. al (2007), in which there is a cross-examination period after the constructive speeches by each team. While asking and answering questions on the spot can be very difficult for many students at the intermediate level, it helps students to clarify points that they did not understand and keeps them fully concentrating on the debate.

Semester Schedule for Debate IIb (second semester)

The second semester of debate, Debate IIb, is used mainly for several rounds of debates in order to assure that each student can experience at least three debates and improve their performance through practice. In general, most of the students taking the class have completed the first semester Debate I class, but for students who have not taken the first semester and for those who studied abroad and have come back after a year, the first few weeks are used for mini-debates and deciding on topics and the semester schedule. Another reason for this use of the first few weeks is that until the number of students is settled, it is difficult to decide on the number of teams and the number of debates (see Figure 5).

For the mini-debates done in the first few classes while the debate topics and schedule are being finalized, students are given a topic and one of 2 readings giving an opposing view on a particular subject. As in the Jig-Saw role plays done in the first semester, students talk with students with the same viewpoint in order to expand their vocabulary and ways of thinking, then they switch into opposite viewpoint pairs or groups to argue their side. Doing readings before starting the mini-debates makes it easier for students without previously sufficient vocabulary and/or opinions to express their side's viewpoints more effectively and thoroughly, and this helps to keep them from having to rely on Japanese to express themselves.

Topic selection is usually done in the second class. After explaining the different kinds of debate topics (value, fact, policy debates) (Konishi et. al, 2007), students make a list of 1-2 topics for each kind of debate. They put these lists on the board, the teacher explains why some are not acceptable for debating (too one-sided, too controversial, not enough data available, etc.) and students vote for the remaining topics. Finally, the teacher makes a schedule before the following class to ensure a full rotation so that all students have the chance to work with different classmates for each

Judge's Name: _____
Date: _____

TOPIC: _____

Affirmative Team Members: _____
Negative Team Members: _____

1= Didn't do/unacceptable
2= Needs some work
3= Good
4= Great
5= Superior!

Affirmative Team	Opening Speech	Negative Team
1 2 3 4 5	Strong opening statement	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	Clear Points	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	Data, examples, stories	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	Strong conclusion	1 2 3 4 5
Q&A		
1 2 3 4 5	Q: Many effective questions	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	Q: Good use of time	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	A: Answers quickly and efficiently	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	A: Answers in a manner that will strengthen their side	1 2 3 4 5
First Rebuttal		
1 2 3 4 5	Rebuttes ALL of other side's points	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	Data/evidence/examples	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	Restates own points	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	Arguments, logic, data	1 2 3 4 5
Second Rebuttal (Final Speech)		
1 2 3 4 5	Reviews own points	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	Reviews other teams's points	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	Explains win/loss	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	Strong closing statement	1 2 3 4 5
Overall Debate Skills		
1 2 3 4 5	Visual aids	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	Teamwork	1 2 3 4 5
1 2 3 4 5	Preparation	1 2 3 4 5

Total Points Affirmative Team: _____ Total Points Negative Team: _____

AFFIRMATIVE ----- Which team won today's debate? ----- NEGATIVE

Good!	Comments about Affirmative Team	Needs Work
	Comments about Negative Team	

Figure 6 Rubric for Scoring Debates

beginning of class, there are about 15 minutes or so at the end of class for comments from the judges and teacher. By using the comment boxes as a format, the student judges have usually made very observant comments, and the teacher can focus on overall techniques and language problems that need to be improved for the next round of debates.

Problems with existing classes

Preparing and executing a debate class for intermediate level university students at YPU has proven to be successful, but it is not without its problems, which will be mentioned here along with suggestions for their solution.

First of all, when the debating teams use difficult vocabulary or the speakers' voices are too small, the judges do not indicate this, and the debate becomes difficult to understand. In addition, when simply filling in a rubric, the challenge to truly comprehend the debate is lessened, and students acting as judges sometimes stop concentrating on their roles. To counteract this, the classroom setup is such that the debating teams are facing the judges, not each other, and no materials (constructive speeches, data, etc.) are given to the judges to read, thus forcing them to face forward and look up at the screen on which the visuals are displayed. In addition, judges are asked to comment on the debate afterwards. While it has not been done yet in these classes, having the judges prepare their own opinion essay or help with data retrieval for that topic may also be effective.

Next, teams not preparing sufficiently has been a recurring problem. Many university students are so busy with clubs, part-time jobs and other things outside of their studies that they do not take the time to actually gather as a group to discuss and practice their debates. Even with the stress on active learning and creating an environment where students

debate, to debate on both the affirmative and negative sides of an issue, and to experience debating on a value, fact, and policy topic.

The scoring rubric for English debates is set up in a way that individual students are not scored – it is a group score (see Figure 6). This can be detrimental for other students in a group when one student has not prepared thoroughly or speaks in a voice too small for judges to hear, but these things are heavily stressed at the beginning of the semester so that students understand that the debates are a group effort, and that the team should work to support each other and practice beforehand to check for preparation, volume, etc.. Another characteristic of the scoring rubric is that below the score totals for each team, there is a line where judges can select the winning team, regardless of the scores. This is because there are sometimes debates in which the small technical debating techniques of one team can lead to a higher score point-wise, but the opposing team might have had a brilliant question or strategy that convinces the judges of that side's victory.

Finally, at the bottom of the rubric are comment boxes. By dividing them into 4 boxes for positive and “need for improvement” comments for each team, the students who act as judges naturally look for things to comment on from multiple aspects, and their comments at the end of the debates are very well thought out. The debate itself takes approximately 50 minutes, and after the 10-15 minute preparation period at the

can build up their communication abilities, students often simply divide their tasks and each person prepares their own part, thus they don't understand well enough what their own teammates are saying. This is particularly damaging in the intermediate classes, where the students usually need time to process language and formulate a response. In order to ensure proper preparation, students are required to gather together in order to brainstorm the opposing team's strategy, gather clues as to the best way to both oppose the opposite team's points, and defend their side against further rebuttals. When both teams do this preparation sufficiently, the Question and Answer time can become quite lively.

Finally, an efficient method needs to be developed to measure the change in the students' language abilities and critical thinking skills at the end of each semester. Using a standard test to measure the change in language abilities may not be effective, as the biggest change may be in the ability of the students to formulate and express their opinions on an issue in a short period of time. This might be done with a speaking test at the start of the semester and later again at the end, so that the both the students' themselves and the teacher can hear the difference in the students' abilities to express themselves. In regards to critical thinking, Peirce (2006) gives guidelines and suggestions for developing criteria for measuring critical thinking abilities, and this is something which should be considered in future classes in order to measure the effectiveness of the class.

Conclusion

The popularity of debate, both in English and in Japanese, rose quickly in Japan in the mid-1990s, and Inoue & Nakano (2004) showed that students feel it is effective for both English skills and analytical/critical skills. In addition, with the upcoming 2020 Tokyo Olympics and the new English Education Reform Plan by MEXT (2013), the Japanese government is sponsoring various programs to improve the quality of English. It is now working with high schools, universities and the Parliamentary Debate Personnel Association to encourage the incorporation of the Parliamentary Style English Debates into high school English classes (PDPA, 2015), and the First PDA High School Parliamentary Debate World Congress to be held in Saitama at the end of January, 2016 (<http://englishdebate.org/>). These changes will be reflected in students entering universities shortly – in regards to debate classes, university students will have had more experience in debating and will thus need a more challenging and exciting curriculum to keep them engaged. Further reflection and improvement of debate classes should and will be ongoing.

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