

ANALYSIS OF DEBATE CLASSES AND POTENTIAL FACTORS RELATED TO LEADING JAPANESE UNIVERSITIES' EDUCATION

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***Abstract:** This study focuses on the educational features of English debate classes in leading Japanese universities. In recent times, holding debates in English has become popular in the Japanese education system, especially at leading universities that aim to nurture students as global human resources and have set goals to develop teaching debate in classes. It was seen that after attending debate classes, students were able to fluently express themselves in English without experiencing any feelings of doubt or any pre-existing bias. Moreover, the questionnaires revealed that they felt exceedingly motivated. In this study, it was observed that attending debate classes caused the students to be (1) more assertive, (2) communicative, and (3) motivated to studying. Therefore, to improve the standards of education in Japanese universities, it is necessary to expand and develop the practice of debating in English at other Japanese universities. In the near future, this effective teaching method should also be introduced to high schools and secondary education.*

***Keywords:** debate, communication, motivation, university students, higher education*

1. INTRODUCTION

As we live in a global society, it is important to analyze the features of the ideal styles of English education. In recent years, there have been many chances for students to memorize grammatical rules and engage in daily conversation in English classes; however, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has determined that students should be more communicative in their ability to thinking critically and fluently in English. MEXT authorities argue that students should be more assertive in their communications when they want to express their opinions (MEXT, 2016; Rabahi, Yusof, & Awang, 2016).

With the upcoming 2020 Summer Olympics, which will be held in Japan, the Japanese government has set new educational goals for students in higher education, hoping that they will be able to experience in speaking in English more often. For these reasons, teachers should give students more opportunities to

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practice speaking during classes. Students must be able to speak fluently in English, in addition to being skilled enough to study English and earn high scores on paper-based school examinations. The goals and trends in English language learning have changed dramatically in recent years.

When carefully observing the reforms implemented in Japan's leading universities, such as Hitotsubashi University, Tokyo University, and Waseda University, it is clear that these institutions have already introduced debate into their English in classes, and they are pioneering its use as a learning method. This curricular innovation has led other colleges to introduce English debate, little by little, on a trial basis in their own classes.

This study focuses mainly on an analysis of recent educational activity data drawn from the universities mentioned above, and on potential factors related to debate classes as one of the most effective methods for studying English. Furthermore, the study hypothesis is that offering debate classes to students can be an effective method for ESL teaching in higher education.

2. GOAL SETTING FOR ENGLISH EDUCATION IN JAPANESE UNIVERSITIES

In light of MEXT's proposal to improve English education in Japan, it is necessary to give students the opportunity to express their opinions more often in classes than has traditionally been the case. In addition, MEXT suggests that students should be more communicative in society, which will be beneficial as worldwide communication and globalization bring together people of various nationalities and cultural backgrounds (MEXT, 2016; Jacolbia, 2016).

Japanese universities' entrance examinations evaluate students' English ability in four main areas: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In recent times, few colleges have offered speaking examinations, and many also fail to assess writing in their tests. The new demand for accurate evaluations before students enter universities has brought about changes in the schools' selection methods. In other words, excellent students who are good communicators will be rewarded in the reformed entrance exams. Therefore, college-level English education teachers should improve their students' communication skills and develop their own teaching methods, in order to nurture students as global human resources.

3. CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF JAPANESE UNIVERSITY CLASSES

3.1. Methodology

Data was collected mainly via the Internet from the websites that detailed the in-class debate activities at the universities mentioned before. In addition, some students completed interviews and questionnaires on the topic. Interviews were

conducted face-to-face style, and the teachers took notes before and after holding debate classes in 2014. Paper-based questionnaires were completed before and after the debate classes and consisted of five questions and one free answer section. All respondents were Tokyo-based college students who can be classified as ESL learners. This was the first debate class any of the students had ever experienced.

3.2. Recent Trends toward Introducing Debate Classes in Japan's Leading Universities

The Japan Debate Association (2015) was founded in 1986 with the aim of promoting debate activities and developing debating skills in Japan. At that time, debaters were almost all people who had already graduated from a university.

In recent times, the groups who most often engage in debates have been private entities and collegiate English Speaking Societies. However, MEXT supported Nakagawa's (2016) project, which has contributed to the increased circulation of debating as a concept in Japanese education. Thanks to the project, debates have become much more popular and as now seen as an effective teaching method equal to the much-favored active learning style, which calls upon students to think by themselves and take positive action with their classmates.

Now, let us look briefly at some examples of four colleges and universities that are working to promote debate classes as a part of their ESL curricula. The first example is Hitotsubashi University. There, the law faculty set an educational goal encouraging all students to learn how to negotiate and debate at a higher level, in order to prepare for Japan's role in the increasingly global society. The university has clarified that students will have to lead society in the future using English fluency, and fully specialized knowledge about debating and negotiating with other people around them will be a key skill. The university has developed new subjects in its debate education program, international communications program, and academic credits gaining program. In interviews with Hitotsubashi alumnae and alumni, respondents report that making their own ideas in an English-language debate is difficult, however, it is also challenging, and they find the skills they have developed are useful when they talk with other people.

At Waseda University, especially in the School of International Liberal Studies, the debate approach emphasizes the development of students' own abilities to consider and analyze issues from multiple perspectives and to reach their own conclusions (Waseda University, 2016). In the classes "Optional Intensive English" and "English Plus," students study how to deliver their ideas in debate and how to improve their communication skills in English.

MEXT regard the University of Tokyo as the top global Japanese university. As such, MEXT has provided funding that aims to enhance the university's students' international compatibility and competitiveness (University of Tokyo,

2016). This funded initiative, constructing a global campus model, now plays an important role in producing in-class debates as one of the effective teaching methods for developing critical thinking skills in the modern global era.

In other universities in Japan, English debate classes are gradually gaining popularity, though they are commonly offered only on a trial basis. The problem is that there are not enough teachers and researchers in Japan who have experience with English-language debating. This is due, in part, to a bias that holds that debate is too sophisticated and difficult to deal with in a classroom setting. However, some researchers have found the notion interesting and have become curious to learn more about debate's potential to improve the level of Japanese English education.

3.3. Characteristics of ESL Debates

According to the definition of debate offered by the Japan Debate Association (JDA), a debate should be conducted as outlined below.

Debate is a competitive form of communication conducted according to specific rules, where two teams - the "Affirmative" and the "Negative"-oppose each other on an issue. The affirmative team stands in a favor of the proposition, called a "resolution", and the negative team takes a stand against it, in one of several ways. Each side presents its own case based on research and analysis of the resolution, and advocates this stand throughout the debate by responding to and refuting their opponents' arguments. The primary purpose is to persuade a third party, that is, the debate judge and/or the audience. Debate is a very effective tool for making decisions in the various situations we face daily in society. (JDA, 2015).

In the schools mentioned before, in many cases, teachers divide students into groups of two to four and then start debating. In some situations, they employ a tournament style. In other cases, they choose a theater style of presentation, in which all students but those participating in the debate watch the debate as an audience or as judges.

In either position, students always participate in the class very aggressively, and they work hard during the class, beyond the concerns of winning or losing the game. Debates are often utilized in education in training programs, for instance, to help students express ideas, to investigate a certain issue, to gather specific information related to an issue, and to help students become more able to communicate in a group that is working together. In the aspect of second language learning, students are asked to give their opinions logically, through reasoned discourse. Through this process, they tend to feel a sense of accomplishment that persists long after the game has ended.

4. RESULT OF THE QUESTIONNAIRES IN COLLEGE

The questionnaires were distributed before and after the debate was held at a college in Tokyo in 2014. The students were all in their second year of study, and

the classes met for half of the school year. All students had four chances to participate in a debate. There were 38 students in all, and they worked in groups of 4-6 students. Students were given ten minutes of preparation time, and about 35 minutes were allotted to finish the debate. Students judged themselves and were asked to make some comments on the sheet just after each debate, in order to leave a record of their study. With that sheet, the teacher gave each of them some feedback.

In other classes, where students did not debate, they practiced with a partner, reading precisely with a reading textbook and telling or describing in English the noun or some situation that was written or drawn on a small card.

For the five questions in the questionnaire, students gave positive replies to all questions after experiencing a debate in English. Moreover, they added many positive comments in the free response section, as seen in Table 1. For each question, students chose a number from a 5-point Likert scale, where 5 was "the most true to me," 4 was "a little true to me," 3 represented "I have no idea," 2 meant "it isn't true to me," and 1 was "it isn't true to me at all." Table 1 indicates the percentage of students who chose "4" or "5." According to these results, it is clear that students felt exceedingly motivated by the debate. The present study indicates that attending debate classes caused the students to be more assertive, more communicative, and more motivated to study.

Table 1
Questionnaire results before and after in-class debates (2014)

<i>Questions Answered in the Affirmative (posed to 38 students)</i>	<i>Before the Debate</i>	<i>After the Debate</i>
1. Can you speak English fluently?	3%	36%
2. Can you express what you want to say logically?	11%	36%
3. Can you communicate with others very well in English?	5%	34%
4. Can you listen to what your friend is saying very carefully?	34%	68%
5. Do you want to study English more?	16%	78%

Comments: It was challenging. I want to debate again in the next class, too. / It was difficult to persuade opponents, but it was interesting. / I want to become a better English debater. / I need to study English more; especially I need to memorize more words. / I'm happy to talk a lot with my friends about our strategy to fight. / I helped other group members. I found cooperating with each other is important. / I'm happy because every member listened very carefully to my opinion unless my English was poor. I want to work harder from now on.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As the questionnaires that show, after attending debate classes, students were able to express themselves fluently in English without experiencing any feelings of doubt or any pre-existing bias. Moreover, the questionnaires revealed that students felt exceedingly motivated. The present study has been observed that

attending debate classes caused the students to be more assertive, more communicative, and more motivated to study English. Based on these results, it is clear that English-language debates have many positive factors that motivate students. It gives them opportunities to express their opinions logically in front of an audience, to listen carefully to a speaker, to give some comments or to question a speaker, to answer question from an audience, to clarify the crash point during a debate, and to gain a sense of achievement. These are the important points that all students to improve their English skills efficiently in a classroom environment.

Despite the above, this study is somewhat limited, and there is still some room to clarify more deeply the characteristics of debate classes in Japanese universities. Moreover, it can be said that more accurate questionnaire data should be obtained. Students' TOEIC results for the periods before and after taking debate classes should also be analyzed in a future work. This study will be connected with additional examinations of the features of debate classes offered in all Japanese universities.

As mentioned above, this study makes it clear that some leading universities have tackled dramatic reforms in their approach to English education introducing English language debates into their curricula.

Despite the popularity of debating and its obvious effectiveness, there remain few practical studies on debating in higher education. It is imperative that more precise studies be conducted, in order to maintain advancements in English education reform.

In addition, to improve the educational standards of Japanese universities, it will be necessary to expand and develop the practice of debating in English in other Japanese universities. In the near future, this effective teaching method should also be introduced at the high schools / secondary education level. To clarify the effectiveness of debating as a learning tool, more comprehensive surveys with broader scales will be needed.

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