

Voices from the Field: Using ‘Silent’ Debate to Ease Students into Oral Debates

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Teaching Context

This activity was implemented in a Junior High School class of roughly 40 students in Japan.

Problem

The Japanese Teacher of English (JTE) in charge wanted to try a debate lesson but was unsure of how to start. The students had no previous practice or knowledge of debates, and it seemed too difficult to just have them discuss topics they have never encountered before in English.

Solution: A Silent Debate

To help the students overcome these issues, I came up with the idea of a silent debate. It has a long version and a short version.

This written debate structure gives students time to think about and write their arguments while participating in a much bigger set of topics for discussion. Topics that have worked well for my students are:

- Homework during vacations: yes or no?
- What is more important: love or money?
- Is using smartphones in school a good or bad idea?
- Digital or paper books?
- At school, which is better: uniforms or street clothes?

Long Version (60 to 90 minutes)

The class is divided into nine groups (group size may vary depending on class size). Each group receives a copy of the handout (see Figure 1), each with a different discussion topic.

1. Students talk in their groups and decide on what opinion to write in the box (e.g., agree/disagree, yes/no), including their reason (argument), in the given space.



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2. Following the rotation order (see Figure 2), groups pass their handout to the next group. Now, students focus on the topic of the new handout and the argument written by the original group. They analyze the topic and the original group’s argument. Then, they discuss and write if they agree or disagree with the previous group’s opinion. Repeat step two until each handout is returned to the original group.
3. Each group now reads what the other groups wrote and evaluate their arguments. Students select the three strongest arguments from their paper and rank them (1st, 2nd, and 3rd best). Students then write the number of the top three groups who provided the three best arguments on the spaces provided at the bottom of the handout.
4. As a class, present the best-rated groups, share the topics and the arguments, and declare a winner based on the number of votes.

Figure 1

Long Version Silent Debate Handout for Students

Group N°: _____

Silent debate

| Group topic | Homework during vacations, yes or no? | |
|-------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| | | |

Step 1

←

| Group N° | Opinion | Reason |
|----------|---------|--------|
| | | |

Steps 2 & 3

{

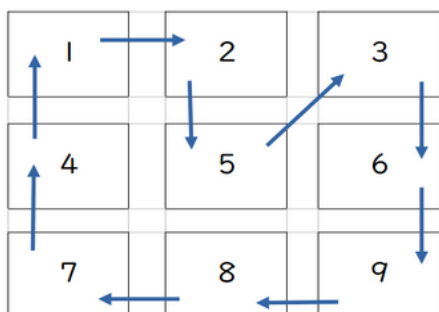
| Group N° | Opinion | Reason |
|----------|---------|--------|
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |

Step 4

←

Best argument:

1st _____ 2nd _____ 3rd _____

Figure 2*Long Version Rotation Order*Long version

Order for the rotation of the papers.

9 topic in total.

Short Version (45 to 50 minutes)

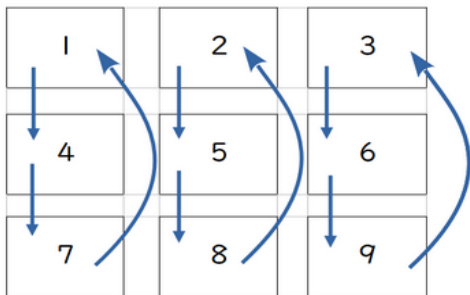
The class is divided into nine groups (group size may vary depending on class size). Each group receives a copy of the handout with a different discussion topic (see Figure 3). For the short version, use only three different topics.

1. Students talk in their groups and decide on what opinion and argument to write in the given space.
2. Following the rotation order (see Figure 4), groups pass their handout to the next group. Now, students focus on the topic and argument written by the original group. They analyze the topic and the original group's argument. Then, they discuss and write if they agree or disagree with the previous group's opinion.
3. After two rotations, each handout is returned to the original group. Now, each group reads the other groups' arguments and come up with rebuttals (if they disagree) or new ideas (if they agree) to further the discussion. The original group focuses on what the other groups wrote and replies directly to them in the given space, such as "Group 2, that's a good idea, but you forgot about..."
4. Passing the handout around again, groups can now read what the original groups wrote in response to their arguments and can choose to keep the discussion going (as long as there is enough blank space on the handout or time).
5. Once the paper returns to the original group (after two more rotations), they can evaluate if their opinion has changed or if it remains the same and what top three arguments were given by the other groups.

Figure 3
Short Version Silent Debate Handout for Students

| | | | | |
|--------|--------------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| | Group N°: _____ | Silent debate | | |
| | Group topic | Homework during vacations, yes or no? | | |
| Step 1 | ← | Group N° | Opinion | Reason |
| | | | | |
| Step 2 | } | Group N° | Opinion | Reason |
| | | | | |
| Step 3 | } | | | |
| Step 4 | } | | | |
| Step 5 | } | | | |
| | | Best argument: | | |
| | | 1 st _____ | 2 nd _____ | 3 rd _____ |

Figure 4
Short Version Rotation Order
Short version



Order for the rotation of the papers.
 3 topic in total.

Conclusion

As this activity requires students to read and write, it can take more time than expected. However, because it does not require them to speak without much time to think, it is very helpful for quieter students to have a chance to share their opinions. Depending on the students' level, discussions within each group can be carried out in either English or the L1, as long as the writing is done in English.

This activity can be carried out in one or two lessons, also depending on the level of students. It can work as a stepping stone to prepare students for a more formal oral debate. I have not been able to try the long version properly, but the short version worked very well. Students were engaged and enjoyed reading and writing responses to their peers. The host teacher was delighted and eager to try it again.

About the author

Roberto Soto Prado is currently an MA TESOL candidate and an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) in Japan. He was a teacher in Chile for 10 years before getting an MSc in Education from Edinburgh University. Presently, he is focused on teaching Junior High-school Japanese students using a communicative approach.