

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.



Soto Prado, R. (2022). Voices from the field: Using ‘silent’ debate to ease students into oral debates. *TESOL Working Paper Series*, 20, 65-69.

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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.