

# A Rationale for Using Debate Techniques in the EFL Composition Classroom

Deborah Foreman-Takano

Although it is not clearly documented, the long-time Japan residents who have participated extensively in this country's English debating tradition say that the five-member-team debate, a format unique to Japan, was created here in the 1950s (Howell 1978). The Howell article is the only one I have found on the subject. Although it deals with a very few basic points of case organization, the emphasis is chiefly on debate as speaking and speechmaking practice. Howell has commented, when we judged together at tournaments employing this format, that that is probably why the format was invented: it allowed more people to participate in the debate experience than did more conventional configurations (such as two-member teams and the one-on-one Lincoln-Douglas style). Since then, debate in English in Japan has come to follow more closely the trends in the United States but, perhaps more so than in the U.S., it continues to be regarded and treated entirely as a speech activity.

When I originally prepared to draw up a proposal for the introduction of a debate course into the college curriculum, there was not an appropriate spoken English course into which the teaching of debate could be slotted. The subject, however, is treated in the U.S. as having much broader applications (see, for example, Patterson and Zarefsky 1983). Getting debate into a Japanese col-

lege's traditional English language-learning curriculum would, it seemed, require spotlighting those applications from an EFL perspective.

Even basic textbooks for American English speakers (cf. Fryar and Thomas 1979; Wood and Goodnight 1983) mention critical thinking and organizational skills as being developed directly through serious debate study. Other non-oral skills shown to be connected to debate are researching, analyzing, and outlining. Thus it can be inferred that possession of these skills is seen by the culture as being valuable and also relevant to becoming an effective user of the language. This suggested to me that debate techniques would not only be useful also in the learning of effective writing, but would help students to integrate development of their reading and writing skills. I used this reasoning to get a debate class approved as one of the sections of the college's advanced English composition course. While I have taught it strictly as a debate course, I have concurrently examined emerging philosophies regarding writing pedagogy and considered how debate training might reconcile with them. This paper suggests how debate techniques might be applied across paradigms.

### *Overview of the Issues*

Until roughly twenty years ago, what has been termed the "current-traditional paradigm" governed the teaching of composition, to both native speakers (NSs) and nonnative speakers (NNSs) (Zamel 1982). This approach focused on end product, specifically surface elements—grammar, word order, structural and rhetorical devices—in other words, what people wrote rather than how they wrote. Mastery of these elements was the aim of composition cour-

ses and the thrust of composition textbooks. Assumptions such as writers knowing exactly what they wanted to say before they actually said anything governed such assignments as the drawing up of a meticulous outline and strict adherence to it in putting together the final product.

A landmark study in 1971 by Emig set up the beginnings of a challenge to this approach. Zamel (1982) cites this study and others in detailing the dawning recognition of writing not as the mere result of discovery, but as the process of discovery—the setting down of ideas begetting the refinement and reorganization of those ideas. “It involves,” she pointed out, “much more than studying a particular grammar, analyzing and imitating rhetorical models, or outlining what it is one plans to say. The process involves not only the act of writing itself, but prewriting and rewriting, all of which are interdependent.” (p. 196)

Practice, however, did not keep pace with research. As late as 1978, scholars were lamenting the lack of application of these research results to teaching materials; Zamel, in a 1983 report on case studies of EFL writing strategies, asserted that “instructional approaches that view writing as the sequential completion of separate tasks, beginning with a thesis sentence and outlines and requiring topic sentences before one has even begun to explore ideas, may be as inappropriate for ESL students as they are for native speakers of English.” (p. 81)

The recognition of writing as a process was followed by the identification of various strategies useful in the process. These include verbalizing aloud during composing; group brainstorming; dialogue writing (having a conversation with yourself about a topic); looping (writing quickly, without correcting, for several minutes; read-

ing it and summarizing it in one sentence; and using the sentence as the basis for another burst of writing); and cubing (taking six different approaches to a subject: description, comparison, analysis, association with other things, application to other things, pro-and-con treatment), among other techniques. The idea is that when students become familiar with these techniques, they can freely choose whichever of them are suitable in a particular situation. They constitute not rules for composition but resources for creativity.

This was not to say that attention to form and rhetoric did not belong in the composition process. It has, however, consistently received a higher priority than research has suggested appropriate, even—or particularly—among composition instructors. Zamel (1985) studies ESL teachers' responses to student writing. In commenting on the reason for her study, she says that teachers "have been found to pre-empt control of important decision-making processes" from their students, who "are thus given to understand that what they wanted to say is not as important as what their teachers wanted them to say...When teachers appropriate writing in this way, they are obviously viewing texts as products to be judged and evaluated... That texts are viewed as fixed and final products is further corroborated by the overwhelming evidence that teachers attend to surface-level features in what should otherwise be considered first drafts." (p. 81) The results of her investigation indicated, moreover, that teachers misinterpreted or ignored the content of compositions in their preoccupation with rewording and giving advice on form. In addition, much of the advice exemplified the very vagueness which the teachers were decrying in their students.

Pleasing a composition instructor may, under these circumstances, be moot in cases where a student intends to do English writing in a

practical situation. A predominant application for this activity would be academic, crossing disciplines. Relevant research in the 1980s has dealt with evaluative criteria and writing requirements for English for Specific or Academic Purposes (ESP/EAP). Some of this research has concluded that the "process" approach to writing is deficient insofar as it does not train student writers to deal with elements outside of their control, such as the demands and constraints involved in answering an essay question on an examination, or in producing a report on an experiment. Horowitz (1986) concluded, in his investigation of university writing tasks spanning seventeen departments, that "Generally speaking, the academic writer's task is not to create personal meaning, but to find, organize, and present data according to fairly explicit instructions." (p. 455)

Santos (1988), after offering to a cross-section of professors some NNS-generated compositions to comment on, made the following discoveries:

The language of the essays written by the...students was rated higher than the content; the rank order of errors in the compositions, according to the professors' ratings was (from highest to lowest) comprehensibility, irritation, and acceptability; the error type considered most serious was the lexical error; humanities / social science professors tended to be more lenient in their judgements than did physical science professors; and two variables—age and native language—were significant in the professors' ratings of some aspect of the language, but not of the content. The older professors rated the language less irritating than did the younger professors, and those who were themselves NNSs gave lower ratings to the acceptability of the

language. (pp. 81-84)

She further pointed out that, in the study, all the professors seemed to distinguish between content and language in their judgements, and the humanities / social science professors and the physical science professors were in agreement more on the content judgement. She suggested that one pedagogical implication of these results might be that composition courses should include attention to vocabulary building and lexical selection.

In the EFL classroom—particularly in cases of a single L1—contrastive rhetoric, another field of inquiry that has been pursued since Kaplan's seminal work in 1966, may have special relevance. Focusing as it does on rhetorical convention, it has faced predictable criticism by those who advocate a process approach to writing expertise development. However, the connections that have been developed with discourse analysis have considerably broadened the base and applications of this approach. (For an overview, see Leki 1991.)

#### *Debate in the Composition Classroom*

Hinds (1987) has talked about Japanese rhetoric as being "reader-responsible," drawing a comparison with a "writer-responsible" English rhetorical tradition. Whether or not one subscribes to the ideas of contrastive rhetoric, English debate of any persuasion does require the debater to make clear implications and draw clear logical connections between data, its interpretation, and proposals based on it. In this sense debaters must base their work on a consciousness of audience. In a typical contest, the audience is of three types: the designated judge of the debate, the others listening without participating verbally in the debate, and the opposing team.

Taking the audience into account when preparing and presenting a debate case thus involves three different types of considerations. In formal contests, designated judges have often submitted their judging philosophies beforehand; in these they indicate the theoretical and paradigmatic bases upon which they intend to render decisions, allowing debaters to tailor their arguments and presentation to suit them. Insofar as some judges may be consciously or unconsciously influenced by the reactions of others listening to the debate, it may behoove debaters to make efforts to affect those people as well. And of course, because the element of clash is necessary in successful debate, each team must adapt its approach to the approach of its opponent. The exercise of debate thus parallels the notion of writer responsibility, and goes further by taking it out of the abstract and involving participants not only in the cerebral but in those physical tasks—speaking, gesturing, use of body language—required to do the job. Moreover, it provides clear and immediate feedback.

To the extent that the above can be considered to correspond to surface elements, or elements of form, in writing, they are necessary to a polished final presentation, and need to be dealt with. But to that extent also, they are dependent upon skill at determining and manipulating content, practice at which begins from the very introduction of the notion of debate into the classroom.

Academic debate is focused on one particular topic, called a *proposition* or *resolution*. Its scope can be wide or narrow; when it remains the subject of all debates for an entire school year, as is the case with national high school and university forensics organizations in the United States (cf. Fryar and Thomas), a relatively wide topic allows for a greater number of approaches. Requirements are, however, that the debate resolution be controversial, focused

on one clear aim, couched in noninflammatory language, and stated affirmatively; thus its formulation must be done carefully (cf. Freeley).

Allowing students to choose a timely area of controversy that interests them, and then formulating with them an appropriately worded resolution, demonstrates—perhaps introduces—the idea of organized controversy, the necessity of care in choosing words for their effect or lack of effect, and possibly the realization that more depth might be necessary in their conceptions of what debate is and how social or political problems might be identified and defined.

Research of the topic area must begin at the early stages of debate preparation. When initial student discussion fails to elicit suitably balanced, controversial topics, it is necessary to delve into those that have been tentatively proposed, in order to make a final decision. Research has two purposes: to discover the parameters of an issue and identify main points of contention; and later, to collect the evidence necessary in the proof of assertions. The value of the first from the EFL standpoint is its potential for allowing clarification of what vocabulary is necessary and relevant, while in the process of clarifying the issue. The value of the second is the discovery of the relative merits of the different types of support that might be offered for tenets of argument. Wood and Goodnight (1983) provide a very good checklist of criteria for evaluating evidence:

- A. External criticism (How good is the source?)
  1. How *competent* is the source of the evidence?
    - a. Is it objective?
    - b. Is it responsible?
    - c. Is it relatively free from bias?

2. What is the form of the evidence?
    - a. How permanent is the form?
    - b. Did the source intend permanence and strict interpretation?
  3. Who is the author of the evidence?
    - a. Is the author an expert in the field?
    - b. Is the author relatively free from bias?
    - c. How was the information obtained?
      - 1) Firsthand observation (primary source)?
      - 2) Was the data obtained from someone else (secondary source)?
    - d. When did the author get the information?
  4. How recent is the evidence?
    - a. Does it represent the latest available material?
    - b. Have important events occurred since the evidence was written?
- B. Internal Criticism (How truthful is the evidence?)
1. What does the evidence say?
  2. On what level of abstraction is it?
    - a. Is it a factual report?
    - b. Is it an inferential report?
    - c. Is it a judgemental report?
  3. Is the evidence consistent within itself?
  4. Is the evidence consistent with other information?
- (pp. 21–22)

Section A points toward an evaluation of material, oral or written, in the context of social situation: not only what a statement *means* (even in good translation), but where it was made, what form

it took, and the relevant circumstances (political beliefs, role in society, for example) of the person making the statement. Section B encourages a qualitative analysis of the statement itself. While these exercises cannot, in and of themselves, cause students to speak or write more often or more fluently, the application of these criteria necessitates the consideration of material from a perspective broader than word- or sentence-level. It also introduces the idea of prioritization, in a real-world context. Freeley (1981), in suggesting "Questions for Audience Responsibility" to be applied to evidence, indicates the relativity of standards, and thus the possibility of variation among audiences of the persuasiveness of a particular piece of evidence.

With the development of discrimination, perspective, and the ability to prioritize, even at the rudimentary stages, the foundation is laid for building an affirmative case, a case in support of the chosen resolution. As analysis leads to an identification of the main issues and a recommendation for how the resolution can be adopted, the opportunity arises to introduce basic tenets of reasoning and inference which bridge the gaps between the interpretations and the alleged support of them in the research. The advantage of introducing the logic component at this particular point is that the teacher can draw for illustration on the material the students have already found and their perceptions of how it applies to the resolution. This can obviate the necessity of having to deal too much in the abstract, and at the same time allow the teacher to present ideas on analyzing the proposition. In the EFL classroom, where students often have a common L1 and a similar cultural heritage, the teacher familiar with English-speaking cultures may be able to stimulate new lines of inquiry this way.

Practice in outlining, with its superordination, subordination and ordering of ideas, fits in well and serves a valuable purpose here. The research and logic aspects of debate preparation can be combined and understanding tested as students attempt to construct a reasonable framework for convincing affirmative support of the resolution.

As the stage for beginning work on an affirmative case and the time for connecting issues and evidence with reasoning, this is an apt time to start students on their writing process. The five techniques mentioned previously can each play a role. A class can be divided up into groups, each of which would constitute a team to work together throughout the year. The groups brainstorm during the class period, and then each student goes home and writes up a preliminary affirmative analysis, concentrating on content rather than form. One of the writing techniques can be introduced and practiced in class following the brainstorming session, so that they can try it out as a means toward producing their first writing assignment. Examination of these assignments is for the purpose of commenting on where they can be improved as affirmative case presentations; which ideas need more or better evidence, where reasoning is inappropriate or lacking. No surface elements should be dealt with at this point; these first writings should not have been written with concern for such things as spelling, punctuation, or subject-verb agreement predominating.

Presentation of one's ideas before a group, and criticizing others' opinions or work in a classroom, could be considered by some to be threatening or uncomfortable behaviours. In the context of debate study, however, both fall into the category of teamwork. Particularly at this point in the coursework, the ideas of dispassionate

judgement and the relativity of standards have already received considerable treatment through the study of evidence-gathering. Volunteers— or people chosen at the time the assignment was made— can present the affirmative case analysis they have written, to the class as a whole or to one of the groups, for comment and suggestions by the other students as well as by the teacher. This is an opportunity for the students to begin taking devil's-advocate positions, which accomplishes three things: 1) affirmative case arguments can be improved; 2) students discover that there can be within their circle a wide range of ideas even regarding a topic they originally basically agreed upon; and 3) the groundwork is laid for the systematic development of a philosophy opposing the resolution: the negative case.

The groups teams now meet again to brainstorm about viewpoints opposing adoption of the resolution. Another of the process writing techniques can be introduced and practiced during class time, and the assignment to write a negative philosophy can be given. Again, plans can be made for the presentation of several of the students' work at the next session.

In the brief (six-month) period during which I have actually begun to combine these composition-writing techniques with debate training at a coeducational Japanese university, I have informally observed several advantages. First of all, the students are more used to writing English than speaking it, although their experience has been chiefly at the sentence level, so the idea of debate (or, for that matter, just speaking in front of a group) is less daunting when they are allowed to write things down and read them out in the early stages. Second, working on a topic which they have all chosen together, and with the complexities of a debate to prepare for, seems

to make them willing to write over and over again on the same topic. Not only are they not bored, but they seem to welcome the opportunity to improve their writing without having to deal with a different subject, a different vocabulary, and an entirely different writing style at each attempt. At the same time, they do revise and change their styles to reflect what they feel to be appropriate for the debate approach they have chosen.

Third, feedback on all of these things is immediate, and comes not only from the teacher or from another student (either of whose evaluations would be based at least partially on subjective assumptions that the writer would not find out about until it was too late—if at all), but from most members of the class, acting as a team. This seems to remove the “personal attack” element from disagreement, particularly since an understanding of both affirmative and negative arguments is necessary to be able to debate well on either side.

When it comes to the debating itself, the writing exercises have seemed to help the students systemize and organize their thoughts, their vocabulary, and their steps toward mastery of rhetoric, in both senses of the term. They seem to find that the more they know about a subject, the easier it is to talk extemporaneously about it. Of course, some can debate better than others, just as some can write better than others. But the advantages of the timed and formalized debate format for Japanese students of English include the necessity to repeatedly speak before an audience without being able to spoil the experience with gratuitous worrying. Attempts to accomplish this and the other things required in debate seem to lead to the honing of abilities identified as necessary in academic writing: to “find, organize, and present data,” and to use English

effectively within prescribed time and format constraints.

Research is needed to corroborate these observations and further test these techniques. It would also be useful to look into how specific sets of stock issues, or patterns of analysis for resolutions, can be applied across paradigms and disciplines toward the development and nurturing of effective language users.

#### REFERENCES

- Connor, Ulla. 1987. Research Frontiers in Writing Analysis. *TESOL Quarterly* 21, 4: 677-696.
- Emig, Janet. 1971. *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Emig, Janet. 1978. Hand, Eye, Brain: Some "Basics" in the Writing Process. In C. Cooper and L. Odell (Eds.), *Research on Composing*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Freeley, Austin J. 1981. *Argumentation and Debate, Fifth Edition*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Fryar, Maridell and David A. Thomas. 1979. *Basic Debate*. Skokie, IL: National Textbook Company.
- . 1981. *Student Congress and Lincoln-Douglas Debate*. Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Company.
- Hinds, John. 1987. Reader vs. Writer Responsibility: A New Typology. In Connor and Kaplan (Eds.), *Writing Across Languages* (pp. 141-152). Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Horowitz, Daniel M. 1986. What Professors Actually Require: Academic Tasks for the ESL Classroom. *TESOL Quarterly* 20, 3 : 445-462.
- Howell, F. Scott. 1978. Some Pointers for Five-Member Debate Teams. *JEFA Forensic Journal*, Vol. II.
- Johns, Ann M. 1986. Coherence and Academic Writing: Some Definitions and Suggestions for Teaching. *TESOL Quarterly* 20, 2: 247-265.
- Leki, Iiona. 1991. Twenty-Five Years of Contrastive Rhetoric: Text Analysis and Writing Pedagogies. *TESOL Quarterly* 25, 1: 123-143.
- Mohan, Bernard A. and Winnie Au-Yeung-Lo. 1985. Academic Writing and Chinese Students: Transfer and Developmental Factors. *TESOL Quarterly* 19, 3: 515-534.
- Patterson, J. W. and David Zarefsky. 1983. *Contemporary Debate*. Boston,

- MA: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Raimes, Ann. 1985. What Unskilled ESL Students Do As They Write: A Classroom Study of Composing. *TESOL Quarterly* 19, 2: 229-258.
- Santos, Terry. 1988. Professors' Reactions to the Academic Writing of Nonnative-Speaking Students. *TESOL Quarterly* 22, 1: 69-90.
- Scarcella, Robin C. 1984. How Writers Orient Their Readers in Expository Essays: A Comparative Study of Native and Non-Native English Writers. *TESOL Quarterly* 18, 4: 671-687.
- Schappa, Edward and Mary F. Keehner. 1990. The Promise of the Cross Examination Debate Association. *Argumentation and Advocacy* 27, 2: 78-85.
- Shih, May. 1986. Content-Based Approaches to Teaching Academic Writing. *TESOL Quarterly* 20, 4: 617-648.
- Sillars, Malcolm O. and Patricia Ganer. 1982. Values and Beliefs: A Systematic Basis for Argumentation. In Cox and Willart (Eds.), *Advances in Argumentation Theory and Research*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press
- Spack, Ruth. 1984. Invention Strategies and the ESL College Composition Student. *TESOL Quarterly* 18, 4: 649-670.
- Suzuki, Takeshi. 1990. A Rationale for Establishing a Value Debate Program in the Japanese Debate Community. Paper presented at the 20th Annual Convention of the Communication Association of Japan, Tokyo.
- Ulrich, Walter. 1986. *Judging Academic Debate*. Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Company.
- Vann, Roberta A., Daisy E. Meyer, and Frederick O. Lorenz. 1984. Error Gravity: A Study of Faculty Opinion of ESL Errors. *TESOL Quarterly* 18, 3: 427-440.
- Wood, Roy V. and Lynn Goodnight, 1983. *Strategic Debate*, Third Edition. Skokie, IL: National Textbook Company.
- Zamel, Vivian. 1982. Writing: The Process of Discovering Meaning. *TESOL Quarterly* 16, 2: 195-209.
- . 1983. The Composing Process of Advanced ESL Students. *TESOL Quarterly* 17, 2: 165-187.
- . 1985. Responding to Student Writing. *TESOL Quarterly* 19, 1: 79-101.
- . 1987. Recent Research on Writing Pedagogy. *TESOL Quarterly* 21, 4: 697-715.

Received September 30, 1991