

# Teaching Debate in Japan: A Review of Resources and Materials to Meet the Demands of Teaching Japanese English Learners

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## ディベートクラスの指導法： 日本人英語学習者に適した指導を行うための教材とは

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the teaching of Debate in EFL/ESL content-based contexts. Primarily a review of textbooks (debate and debate topics) and other resources, discussion of the demands of teaching debate (debate structure and rhetoric, content and background research, language issues) is also included. Most of the resources available are not well suited for non-beginning debate classes, but there are many different options for instructors wishing to develop debate curriculum. This paper helps to identify useful resources and aids in selecting preparatory texts. However, unless students are of a very high English skill level, intensive customization is advised to suit class and student needs. Debate topic books reviewed may be useful for practicing debate, which is the most effective way to teach it.

**Key words :** teaching debate in Japan, debate textbooks

(Received September 28, 2007)

### 抄 録

本稿は、日本のコンテンツベース英語教育で行うディベートクラス指導法を考察する。市販のディベート関連教材分析を行い、それらの教材を使ってどのような指導が行えるか、今後、どのような教材開発が必要とされるか述べる。教材分析の結果、ディベート初心者用教材はほとんど存在しないことが判明した。従って既存教材を使用して初心者への指導を行うには、教材の内容やレベルをアレンジすることが重要である。また、既存教材は、ディベートの方法を学ぶといったことには適せず、実際にディベートを行うために使用することを目的としている。今後は、ディベート初心者、更には英語レベルが低い学習者に対しても使用できる教材の開発が望まれる。

**キーワード：**ディベートクラス、既存教材

(2007年9月28日受理)

Teaching debate presents a unique combination of challenges, especially in ESL/EFL contexts. More so than most other classes, debate is a philosophical enterprise. As in other classes, students are taught class content, but in debate, rhetorical skills and the combination of real-time critical analysis and logical persuasion must also be taught. In essence, students must be taught how to think. Beyond the teaching of how to think, debate also focuses on the topic under debate and requires students to learn as much as possible on the policy under consideration, from all perspectives. Expert knowledge is required to successfully debate a topic. In an ESL/EFL context, potential fluency limitations of the students are always an issue, as well as differing linguistic and cultural norms regarding discussion styles and the application of logical rules and critical analysis in communication (Nisbett, 2003).

In light of these challenges, when tasked with introducing a English based Debate II course at a Japanese college, I collected a range of materials that addressed the first of these issues, the structure of formal debate. This article introduces, summarizes, and reviews these texts and resources from the perspective of teaching debate in a content-based EFL curriculum in Japan, i.e. for debate classes taught in English to Japanese college students studying English. After introducing the materials, I will cover each item independently.

Of the three primary challenges to teaching debate in an EFL context (debate structure, knowledge of topic, student fluency), student fluency is the least capable of being directly addressed by the curriculum. In a content-based curriculum, students study in the target language but are not directly taught about the language and thus, in debate, there is no instruction about English beyond debate-related vocabulary. Student linguistic ability is relevant only to the extent that the pace of the class and expectations regarding student linguistic output may need to be modified accordingly.

Similarly, the topic under debate is subject to wide variation, dependent on instructor and student desires as well as class goals. If the purpose of the class is to field a team of debaters capable of debating at international collegiate debates, official debate topics are advisable, with the associated research necessary to understand the topics in-depth. Conversely, if the goal of the class is to familiarize students with debate structure or if linguistic ability precludes in-depth research of official policy topics, easier, non-policy topics are more appropriate. Three books of topics with background information are review here: *Pros and Cons: A Debater's Handbook*, 18th edition (Sather, 1999), *50 Debate Prompts for Kids* (Daley & Dahlie, 2001), and *The Debatebase Book*, revised and updated edition (IDEA, 2004).

Most of the teaching in a debate class is about the structure and method of debate, including the function of the turn-taking in a debate as well as the development of logic-based rhetoric and critical analysis that lies at the heart of formal debate. The majority of texts in this review are debate texts and range from middle school level (ages 12-15) to collegiate texts. There are many different forms of debate (parliamentary, Lincoln-Douglas, Karl

Popper, value/policy), all of which entail slight differences in the structure of the debate itself (e. g. teams vs individuals, the presence of cross-examination opportunities). There are also regional and association differences in the timing of debate turns, but in general the structure of debate is consistent and can be adapted as needed. Some of the texts address a range of formats while others are more focused on one over another.

- *Code of the Debater: Introduction to the Way of Reason* (Snider, 2001)
- *The Middle School Debater* (Davidson, 1997)
- *Influencing Through Argument*, updated edition (Huber & Snider, 2006)
- *Discover Debate: Basic Skills for Supporting and Refuting Opinions* (Lubetsky, LeBeau & Harrington, 2000)
- *Basic Debate*, 4th edition (Phillips, Hicks & Springer, 1997)
- *Many Sides: Debate Across the Curriculum*, revised edition (Snider & Schnurer, 2006)
- *Speak Out!: Debate and Public Speaking in the Middle Grades* (Shuster & Meany, 2005)
- *Discovering the World Through Debate: A Practical Guide for Educational Debate for Debaters, Coaches, and Judges*, 3rd edition (Trapp, Zompetti, Motiejunaite, & Driscoll, 2005)

Texts alone do not suffice and important internet resources are also briefly discussed, including videos of debates at various levels and in various languages.

- IDEA: International Debate Education Association
- World Debate Institute: Debate Central
- World Debate Institute: Watch a Debate
- World Debate Institute: Critical Advocacy video series
- Planet Debate
- Wake Debate: Wake Forest University Debate Team resources and links

In almost all cases (the exception being *50 Debate Prompts for Kids*, *Discovering Debate*, and *Speak Out!*), in an EFL context, the materials reviewed in this paper are best suited for preparing a class, not as actual texts for the class. Most of the books are collegiate level and contain in-depth discussion of philosophy that is likely to prove difficult for all but advanced EFL learners. It is up to each teacher to adapt the materials appropriately for the goals of the class and level of students.

## Debate Content Books

*50 Debate Prompts for Kids* (Daley & Dahlie, 2001) is the most elementary of the books reviewed here. Explicitly aimed at grades 5 and up (ages 10 years and beyond), the book offers 50 debate prompts, generally in a question form of “Should example policy be adopted?” The policies proposed for debate are simple and relevant to a general audience, yet do cover serious as well as more mundane or even superficial topics. Animal testing, punishment of teen crime, and drug testing in professional sports are examples of the former while teen loitering policies at shopping malls, rules at beaches, and the ethics of seeing someone cheating on a test represent the latter.

Following the presentation of the question is a short explanation that provides some background on the question and situates it in such a way as to make the Yes/No solution easier to identify. Then both alternatives are offered with a single paragraph support for it. Students are thus presented with a questions, background information, and two answers with supports from which they must choose. Each debate prompt concludes with a writing activity encouraging students to think about the options with activities including making lists of relevant personal habits and considering arguments for the opposing viewpoint.

As a debate teaching text, this book offers little that others do not provide. However, as an activity manual in an EFL classroom, its simplicity and cohesiveness make it an adequate tool, especially early on in the class when students may be more reticent about expressing opinions or speaking out. Each of the prompts is on a single page, making it easy to use as a handout or homework, and they may be useful as daily warmups. Each topic also has a short glossary of new vocabulary that may also be useful to second language learners.

*Pros and Cons*, 18th ed., (Sather, 1999) is an advanced book of topics that includes substantial (but incomplete) arguments for both affirmative and negative positions on the topics. *Pros and Cons* was originally published in 1896 and has been continually updated to provide relevant topics and evidence. It includes a concise and easily understandable introduction to debate with explanations of the fundamental process of associating evidence with arguments in support of a position related to the proposition. It is a UK-centric tome and assumes British parliamentary style debate, but the topics are generally applicable to any debate format.

The introduction to *Pros and Cons* provides concise reminders of the elements and structure of debate but is not intended to replace specific texts for teaching how to construct arguments in support or opposition to a proposition. The concise explanations are a good reference and the advice on note-taking is explicit and easily understood. The real strength of this book lies in its lists of arguments for/against a variety of topics.

130 topics are arranged in eight categories (Philosophical/Political theory; Constitutional/

Governance; Politics and Economics: National (i.e. UK); Politics and Economics: International; Moral and Religious; Education, Culture, and Sport; Law and Crime; Health, Science, and Technology). Each topic has 2-5 paragraphs of evidentiary support provided, but the author clearly states that the contents of the book alone do not suffice to fully prepare one for a debate. Possible motions are provided as well as additional resources recommended for further research.

As a class resource, the topics and evidence are sufficient to support debate practice in a variety of forms. A high level of English used in the book and intermediate students likely would only be able to read with assistance. However, the material provides a good starting point for additional research and *Pros and Cons* is likely to find a place in any debate curriculum. The content related to domestic and foreign affairs primarily relates to the United Kingdom but the other topics have wide applicability.

*The Debatabase Book* by the editors of IDEA (2004) is the best offering in the category of debate topics books. Structurally it is very similar to the format adopted by *Pros and Cons*. There are 128 topics covering much of the same ground as *Pros and Cons*, conveniently organized alphabetically instead of categorically. There is considerable overlap in topics, as is to be expected. *The Debatabase Book* also provides possible motions to adopt when discussing the topic as well as additional resources. IDEA also hosts an online debatabase (see below) with much of the same content.

*The Debatabase Book* always provides at least a few sentences of background to situate topics; *Pros and Cons* only provides a list of pros and cons for some topics. The introduction to *The Debatabase Book* has a substantial discussion about how to debate adapted from Trapp et. al.'s *Discovering the World Through Debate*. This is a high level explanation of debate that uses specialized technical terms and presumes familiarity with the fundamental principles of reason and logic. *The Debatabase Book* is published in the United States, intended for US competitive debate (Lincoln-Douglas or team-based policy debates).

*The Debatabase Book* generally provides more information on topics than *Pros and Cons*. It is a physically larger book, taller and wider, but thinner. This is not to say that *Pros and Cons* is incomplete; there is simply more material provided for each topic in *The Debatabase Book*. Although highly technical and thus perhaps not of immediate use as a direct teaching aid, the introduction is thorough and likely to be more useful a reference in the long run.

All three of the debate content books mentioned here offer usefulness in a Debate II EFL/ESL classroom. *50 Debate Prompts for Kids* is most useful for practice illustrating the general form of debate and could easily be used in an introductory debate classroom. *Pros and Cons* and *The Debatabase Book* provide a wide variety of topics (controversial and mundane) with sufficient support for both pro/con positions to be used in any classroom. None of the books reviewed here, or available for that matter, suffice to replace the need of debaters to

personally research and learn about the topic, but they are excellent for content to be used in practicing the form of debate.

### **Debate Texts**

In spite of the complexity of the form of debate and reason which lies at the heart of debate, debate is not something that should be taught as much as it is something that must be learned. By this I mean to say that the best way for students to learn how to debate is to do a lot of it. Instructors must introduce the format and provide guidance on the implementation of analysis and presentation. Instructor input is also needed for research and organization. But debate classes should be structured more around debating than learning about debate. Accordingly, most of the books available about debate are not intended as textbooks on the subject as much as they are guidebooks for debating.

Phillips et al.'s *Basic Debate* 4th ed. (1997) is the only pure textbook. It is a USA high school level textbook, divided into 3 parts and extensive appendices. Part one introduces debate and the skills needed for it (analysis, research, and reasoning). Part two, *Debate: Winning Decisions in Arguments* explores more of the fundamentals of competitive debate such as presentation, strategy, affirmative case construction, negative analysis, and cross-examination. The final part of the text switches to focus on legislative debate via a discussion of student congress. Student congress procedures, mechanics, and strategy are explained as well as preparation for student congress and the responsibilities associated with being a member of student congress. The appendices explain more about competitive debate including participating in, judging, and hosting debate tournaments. An extensive glossary concludes the book.

As an explanatory book, *Basic Debate* is very good. But this strength is also its weakness, as it does not move beyond discussing what debate to actually debating. Chapters conclude with questions for discussion and activities, but these are formulated around confirming comprehension of the chapter material. It is as if the authors adopted the form of a history textbook and substituted debate related content. That may appear to be a harsh criticism but *Basic Debate* is not without merit. The glossary is very approachable and may be useful to second language learners. In general, however, *Basic Debate* is probably not well suited as a class text to be used in an EFL/ESL environment (or any class, for that matter). It is best used as a source for instructors who then craft the information as needed to first help students understand how to debate but ultimately to become debaters. *Basic Debate* will help teach students what debate is, but it will not teach them how to debate.

As far as textbooks go, one of the best for actually teaching debate is Lubetsky et al.'s *Discover Debate* (2000). *Discover Debate* is more of a workbook than a textbook and provides simplified explanations in a progressive manner, employing the analogy of debate

as a building (foundation, pillars, roof corresponding to evidence, reasons, and propositions respectively). *Discover Debate* is the best text for teaching these fundamentals (structure and reason) and thus serves introductory debate classes the best. For secondary debate classes, *Discover Debate* remains useful as a reference but is probably too rudimentary to employ as the main text.

In spite of the author's explicit claim that *The Middle School Debater* (Davidson, 1997) that the book was not written for debate teachers, it is an excellent transition text from the basics introduced by *Discover Debate* and the advanced manual, *The Code of the Debater*. Davidson suggests the textbook is best used in social studies classes, but applies formal debate terminology and structure (Proposition, Issues, Argument, Evidence; 1AC, 1NC, 2AC, 2NC, rebuttal). More rigorous than *Discover Debate* (which excels at the use of mundane or even frivolous topics to teach the fundamentals), *The Middle School Debater* includes instructions for the use of debate cards. Stock issues are presented as easy to comprehend questions instead of the arcane terminology (topicality, inherency, etc). Some sample topics are included but they are very US centric and reflect the author's intent that the text be used in social studies classes. For example, Indian affairs, the Monroe Doctrine, the Vietnam War and the US government's relationship with the United Nations are included. The biggest problem with *The Middle School Debater* is its availability. It is published independently by the now-deceased author's own publisher, so stocks may be unpredictable.

One of the best texts for debaters is *The Code of the Debater: Introduction to the Way of Reason* (Snider, 2001). This online text (available as a single PDF file or in multiple HTML pages) is a manual of sorts, written by Alfred Snider of the World Debate Institute (see below). *Code of the Debater* is written in a very approachable tone (but the arcane terminology of debate is likely to stymie all but the most advanced second language learners). Each stage of a debate is analyzed with advice on how to prepare for and execute affirmative and negative constructions, rebuttals, and cross-examination. Stock issues are explained and analyzed and various strategies are introduced, examined, and implemented. The text is full of advice ("DON'T LET THEM WIN THE CASE WITHOUT A DEBATE! KEEP ARGUING NO MATTER WHAT!" p 29) clearly aimed at debaters. Everything is covered in this document, from research preparation to analytical skills to affirmative/negative strategy to physical presentation and speech. The biggest obstacle to adopting this text in an ESL/EFL classroom is the terminology and abstract explanation that is inherent in an explanation of the rhetorical basis of debate. Individual instructors will have to determine if their class level is capable of handling such terminology and explanation. It is quite a step up from language and presentation of *Discovering Debate*, but is an excellent resource and many students are likely to be able to use it.

*Discovering the World Through Debate: A Practical Guide to Educational Debate for*

*Debaters, Coaches, and Judges*(Trapp, et al., 2005) is the best text among all reviewed, with the caveat that it is a collegiate text. Part one focuses on argumentation theory, part 2 on applying argumentation theory to Karl Popper debate (which is very similar to other standard debate formats except that it has 3 person teams and associated changes in each person's role), and part 3 covers debate skills (research, style and presentation, cross-examination, etc). In part one, the elements of argumentation (evidence, warrants, claims and proposition, quality of arguments) are each given their own chapter with highly theoretical dissections. Useful bubble diagrams are provided and explanations progress from simple to complex. Even at its simplest, the presentation is advanced. Part two emphasizes constructive arguments for three types of claims, cause and effect, value, and policy, each of which is covered in independent chapters. Refutation and rebuttals are treated in the last chapter of part two. The most relevant chapters of part three deal with cross-examination, research, and delivery, but there is a (very) short chapter on debating in an international setting. Unfortunately little more is mentioned than acknowledging the challenges of debating in a foreign language. Most disappointingly, cultural variation in the application of logic and reason and the implications this poses for international debate are not even mentioned. This shortcoming notwithstanding, this book is a highly recommended text for instructors. It is likely beyond the grasp of most students in ESL/EFL programs however.

*Speak Out!: Debate and Public Speaking in the Middle Grades* (Shuster & Meany, 2005) begins as a public speaking text but quickly (as of chapter 2) settles its aim on debate. Written for the middle school public debate format, (1AC, 1NC, 2AC, 2NC, NR, AR), *Speak out!* coherently explains the process and structure of debate, use of arguments and refutation, and research. Chapter 6 covers research that begins with a research agenda and moves progressively through more advanced research sources (tv news, newspapers, magazines and journals, the internet). The final section applies the skills and introduces strategies and actual debate competition.

*Speak Out!* is published by the International Debate Education Association (IDEA), the same publishers of *Discovering the World through Debate* (Trapp et al., 2005), *Many Sides* (Snider and Schnurer 2006), and *Influencing through Argument* (Huber and Snider, 2006). The expertise of this organization is clear in the presentation of the text. As it is aimed at middle school debaters, the language is much easier to understand than *Discovering the World through Debate* but the expertise of IDEA keeps the text from bogging down in descriptive explanation that *Basic Debate* suffers from. The clarity of the explanations makes this the best candidate for an in-class textbook for ESL/EFL learners but the sheer amount of text may still preclude this from being adopted in many classrooms. It is essential that students spend more time practicing debate than plodding through text explaining debate (unless the class aims to emphasis reading skills development over actual debate skill).



Two final texts that bear mentioning in this paper are *Many Sides: Debate Across the Curriculum* (Snider and Schnurer, 2006) and *Influencing Through Argument* (Huber and Snider, 2006), both of which have been recently updated. *Many Sides* is intended less as a debate class text as much as it is a pedagogical guide to using debate throughout a curriculum. The governing theory here is that debate is a learning tool that teachers can employ to help students understand a variety of topics. *Many Sides* discusses issues associated with introducing debate into a classroom, including preparing students for debate and structuring classroom debates in a way that incorporates audience (i.e. classmate) participation. With regard to its intent, *Many Sides* is an excellent resource and much of the discussion about using debate in a classroom can be applied to an actual debate class. But as this information is also available in other texts, *Many Sides* is not recommended as a debate class text here.

*Influencing Through Argument* (Huber and Snider, 2006), is an updated version of the 1964 classic textbook. The original, long out of print, had been available online for free, and proved to be of such continued interest that it was updated and republished. *Influencing through Argument* is a theoretical treatment of argument and is a collegiate text. Highly technical, it is perhaps the most authoritative college text on the subject but as such is inappropriate for teaching debate in ESL/EFL contexts.

### **Internet Resources**

There is no shortage of debate related resources on the internet. Astute readers will have noticed the recurrence of Alfred Snider's authorship in the texts as well as the prevalence of the International Debate Education Association (IDEA) as a publisher. Snider is the founder and director of the World Debate Institute which hosts Debate Central (World Debate Institute, Debate Central). This is a comprehensive website with a vast array of resources for debaters of all levels, coaches, judges, and teachers. Many videos of debates are provided, including collegiate competitions, high school level debates, introductory debates with slower paced speech, and even debates in foreign languages, including Japanese (World Debate Institute, Watch a debate). The resources on this web site are probably better suited for high level English speakers; competitive debaters typically speak very rapidly to take advantage of the limited time available to make their points.

Debate Central also hosts a 13-part video lecture, Critical Advocacy, that presents a full spectrum of professional instruction about what debate is and how to prepare and conduct debates (World Debate Institute, Critical Advocacy). Each lecture is roughly 45 minutes long and thus is not well suited for the classroom. The Debate Central website is best utilized by coaches and teachers in developing curricula for teaching and refining students' debate skills. Debate Central is one of the largest and most comprehensive debate sites on the internet, but it is not to be confused with Debate Central: Resources for high school students (Debate

Central). The latter is found at [debate-central.org](http://debate-central.org) and is a fine resource for high school debaters, but lacks the depth and thus relevance of the World Debate Institute's site, hosted by the University of Vermont.

The International Debate Education Association (IDEA) publishes many of the key debate textbooks and resources and also has a useful website (IDEA: International Debate Education Association). IDEA provides information on current debate events and activities in addition to teaching resources. The summary of different kinds of debate is the most concise I've found. As a teacher, the most useful portion of the IDEA website is the Debatabase (IDEA, Debatabase). Hundreds of debate topics and associated arguments are provided freely. Many of the topics are the same as in the book by the same name (IDEA, 2004; see above) but in many cases additional resources, books, and links were not always the same. Additionally, the online Debatabase allows for reader submission of topics and arguments for topics, providing an active and ever-evolving corpus of material that can be used in classes.

Other major debate websites include the Wake Forest University debate team's and Planet Debate (Planet Debate, 2006). Planet Debate is a commercial site that sells subscriptions to its evidence database and appears to be a substantial resource. As I lack a subscription I was not able to actually evaluate the materials. Subscriptions are sold on an institutional basis and thus are not limited to a single user. The Wake Forest webpage is primarily about the Wake Forest debate team but they do have a useful page of links to various other websites including debate organizations, high school resources, and collegiate debate information (Wake Debate, 2007). Of course, [wikipedia.org](http://wikipedia.org) also has useful introductory articles regarding different types of debate and explanations of debate process and terminology.

## **Conclusion**

The intellectual challenges embodied in formal debate makes it an ideal class for EFL contexts. It is not an easy topic due to its complexity, but the combination of reason, logic, analysis, public speaking, research, and overall rigor provide tremendous opportunities, especially among higher English levels. Proper topic selection is key: too arcane and students may lose interest but too generic and research benefits may be squandered or evidence may be limited to pure opinion.

Debate requires some explicit instruction as to the order and role of constructive or rebuttal speeches, but debate as an activity is best taught through experience. A majority of the texts here are best used to help instructors refine their understanding of what debate is, discern what options are available for different types of debate, and assemble course content that best suits the needs of students. But the most important thing is to have students practice debate: they should debate more than be taught what debate is. The debate topic books covered here should provide plenty of material to be mined for use in class. As for the other

books, much of the decision on which to use lies on the type of debate an instructor wishes to employ in addition to the skill level of students.

Due to the nature of debate (highly variable in form, content, reliance on reason, language skill of learners), it is nearly impossible for any one text to fit all needs. The challenge to debate instructors then is to sift through the variety of materials and topics and create a curriculum that address the needs of their students. As an introductory text, *Discovering Debate* is the best workbook available, and for secondary classes, *Speak Out!* is the best of the options. Even at its best though, *Speak Out!* still requires a considerable amount of reading and thus may result in students spending more time reading than debating. When teaching debate to non-native speaking students, instructors are recommended to consult the material and adapt content as needed, while always keeping in mind the need to have students learn debate by actually debating, not just reading about it.

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