



Teaching English Through English

Module 9

Facilitating Discussions and Debates

Table of Contents

<i>Module 9: Start Here</i>	2
<i>Explore</i>	3
9.1. Watch.....	3
9.2. Read	13
9.3. Search	29
<i>Do</i>	30
9.4. Think	30
9.5. Create	31
9.6. Share	32
9.7. Apply	32
9.8. Reflect.....	33
<i>Module 9 Checklist</i>	34



Module 9: Start Here

"If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his own language, that goes to his heart."

– Nelson Mandela

Language is what unites people. Whether it is through brief interactions or deep conversations, communication comes in many forms. In this module, you will explore how discussions and debates can strengthen students' language proficiency and confidence. These are two forms of communication that also encourage critical thinking and build intercultural competence.

By the end of this module, you will be able to:

- describe the benefits of communicative language teaching through discussions and debates and how to use them in the EFL classroom
- explore various cooperative learning and interactive language tasks and strategies that build language proficiency and a classroom discourse community
- develop higher order thinking questions that encourage critical thinking in the classroom
- design ways you plan to integrate and manage learning activities that support a communicative approach for language learning in your classroom

Explore

9.1. Watch

Explore ideas for facilitating discussions and debates by watching three videos.

- **Video 1: Discussion Activities**

- This video will introduce you to some ideas for stimulating discussions and setting expectations for these activities in your language classroom.
- Click [here](#) for the PDF of the script for Video 1.
- Link to YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Is2Occp53nk>



- **Video 2: Debates in the Language Classroom**

- This video will introduce you to some ideas for organizing and facilitating debates in the language classroom, such as Bucket of Prompts and Mock Debates.
- Click [here](#) for the PDF of the script for Video 2.
- Link to YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NBf3pkHwY1Y>



- Video 3: Higher Order Thinking Questions

- This video will introduce you to the steps for developing higher order thinking questions that encourage critical thinking.
- Click [here](#) for the PDF of the script for Video 3.
- Link to YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FE8wW9jLk3g>





Teaching English Through English Module 9 Video 1 Script Discussion Activities

Hello English teachers! Are you ready to power up your English class? Here are some tips for using discussion-based activities in your class. Getting students engaged in language learning through cooperative learning activities and interpersonal, interactive tasks can help build their proficiency levels. Also, students can be motivated to develop their communication skills. Discussions are a natural way for students to communicate and develop their language and critical thinking skills through effective questioning techniques.

With so many types of interactive language activities to choose from on the internet and in textbook resources, it can be overwhelming to know which ones will work best for your students. What can really help them learn the skills needed for communicating with others in English? I will share a few examples with you that have been shown to be effective strategies for engaging students in discussions.

One activity for stimulating discussions is called **Tower Build**. This conversation-based discussion activity gives students the opportunity to negotiate meaning and encourage one another to stay on the same topic. Put 3-4 students in one group to optimize participation and engagement. Give students cubes, such as Legos or another sort of stacking item, which they use to build a tower as they contribute to the conversation. When they add an idea, agree, disagree, or ask a question to a group member, they will add an item to their tower.

One member of the group starts the conversation with a statement or question about a topic. Topics can be prepared in advance. The goal is to keep the conversation going until no one has anything else to say. Each member will add a cube to the tower for contributing to the conversation. Students can be assigned a specific-colored cube and encouraged to use targeted vocabulary, grammatical structures, or expressions to add additional cubes to the tower. This activity can also be used as a formative assessment as a visual representation of students' participation for their contribution to the tower they build. At the end of the activity, you can see whose tower is the highest in the class!

Before implementing discussion activities, teachers must first set clear expectations, classroom norms, and goals for students to use the English language grammar skills and vocabulary they are learning in class. Some examples may include: *Be polite and courteous to others. Listen attentively. Be respectful and supportive of peers. Speak clearly, slowly, and loud enough to be heard by the group. Maintain good eye contact.*



Think about the following questions before you begin your next discussion activity in class: *How will you explain the instructions to your students in a comprehensible way? What activity materials need to be prepared in advance? How will you monitor student performance? How will you check for student understanding? How will you manage transitions during discussions and/or debates in your classroom?*

As a side note, when incorporating discussion-based activities, like these, your classroom climate may seem louder and more chaotic than usual. However, there are many ways to manage your classroom and still have students participate in discussions in an organized way. As language teachers, we know that students must have opportunities for authentic interactions with others to practice their language skills. Discussion based activities are important for language learning and teachers must be willing to give them a try so students can develop interpersonal communication skills.

Thanks for watching and learning. Now, let's go do it!



Teaching English Through English
Module 9 Video 2 Script
Debates in the Language Classroom

Hello English teachers! Are you ready to power up your English class? Here are some tips for using classroom debates. What do you imagine when you think of the word “debate”? Maybe you felt as if this is an activity you would never consider using in your language classroom. Why is that? Let’s take a moment to think through what participating in debates *could do* for language learning.

Debates are another style of discussion-based activities that focus on presenting a claim and supporting it with evidence. In a typical debate, there are two sides or claims for the topic of discussion. For classroom debates, you can divide the class into two teams, or you can select individuals to participate on opposing sides of the topic. Each side presents their claim in an opening statement and supports it with reasons and evidence. Then, each side has an opportunity to provide a counter argument or a statement of opposition. To conclude, each side presents a closing statement that summarizes their perspective and opinion on the issue.

Debate Format

1. Opening statements
2. Present claims
3. Support with reasons and evidence
4. Counter arguments
5. Closing statements

Depending on the language goals you have set for your students, debates can also include making a decision after all sides of the topic have been discussed. You could even incorporate a classroom vote to determine the outcome of the popular opinion of your students. These are some ideas to initiate your thinking on possible topics for debates. Let’s continue thinking about these ideas as I give two suggestions for debate style activities that you can try.



The first activity is called **Bucket of Prompts**. For this activity, create a list of 10-20 topics to debate. There may already be many topics embedded in your textbook and curriculum that make for excellent debate topics. Take a look and find some!

For example, many language curriculums include the topic of schools and the rules for dress code and uniform requirements. This is an engaging and relative topic to students in high school because they likely have an opinion about a particular school rule being enforced. Topics of celebrities, entertainment, and fashion can also be used as natural topics of debate for gathering opinions, particularly at the secondary level.

Next, tell students to draw a prompt from the bucket to debate in front of the class. Encourage them to offer their opinion with a particular stance on the topic, which may include evidence or reasoning. Then, offer time for the other students to pose a question or state an opposing opinion of the topic. Your students can also create their own topics to place in the bucket of prompts. Creating the topics as a class activity can lead to more student input, which would help you design the topics toward their interests. A modification to this activity could be dividing the class in groups instead of two teams so that more students have the opportunity to talk.

Now, let's take a look at a second activity called the **Mock Debate**. A mock-debate is a simulation of a real debate but situated in the classroom. You may decide to randomly divide students in two groups or have them select which side they prefer to represent. You could even assign students to the opposing side, so they are challenged to think of outside perspectives. Let's use a graphic organizer to plan what students might say in a classroom debate.

Using a graphic organizer, students can plan out their claim, reasons, evidence, counter arguments, and closing statement in advance. For example, if we were to debate the topic of school uniform requirements, then we would start out by writing our opening statement either for or against this topic. Let's take a look at an example:

Mock Debate - Graphic Organizer

Topic: Should schools require students to wear uniforms?

Team A	Team B
Opening Statement (Claim) <i>Yes! Schools should require students to wear uniforms.</i>	Opening Statement (Claim) <i>No, schools should not require students to wear uniforms.</i>
Reasons/Evidence <i>Wearing uniforms gives a sense of community among students. Also, students don't have to</i>	Counterclaim <i>There are many other ways to create community in a school, like joining clubs</i>



<p><i>worry about what clothes they are going to wear each day.</i></p>	<p><i>and organizations. School uniforms are uncomfortable too, especially if you have to wear them every day.</i></p> <p>Reasons/Evidence <i>For many students, selecting their own clothes provides a sense of personal identity.</i></p>
<p>Counterclaim/Refutation <i>When all students wear the same uniform at special events, it makes it easier to identify everyone in the club or on a team. Also, wearing school uniforms can help families save money on the expense of buying new clothes each year.</i></p> <p>Closing Statement <i>Schools should make life easier and less expensive for students and families by requiring students to wear uniforms.</i></p>	<p>Closing Statement <i>Schools should not require students to wear uniforms because it takes away personal freedoms of choice and comfort.</i></p>

To conclude, give students time to practice the debate format. This could be done through an impromptu discussion using a different topic, but it allows students to participate in the flow of a debate by presenting a claim, stating reasons and evidence, countering the opposition, and giving a closing statement. This could also be done in small groups.

Good luck and have fun with debates in your language class! You could even collaborate with the history or science teacher on topics to debate.

Thanks for watching and learning. Now, let's go do it!



Teaching English Through English
Module 9 Video 3 Script
Higher Order Thinking Questions

Hello English teachers! Are you ready to power up your English class? Here are some tips for developing higher order thinking questions. These are also known as HOT questions. The success of every class discussion all depends on the development of effective questions.

The key to stimulating discussion in the language classroom is to develop questions that spark students' depth of knowledge, rather than ones that can be answered with one or two words. If our intentions as language teachers are to lead students in successful class discussions or debates, then "How do we develop higher order thinking questions?"

HOT questions should be developed so that opinions can be formed, and points of view can be shared. There is certainly a place for asking questions that elicit recall of foundational knowledge, comprehension, and application on a topic. For example, "yes/no" questions are suitable for novice language learners when they are learning new vocabulary and grammatical structures. However, asking and answering "yes/no" questions can only get one so far in developing a discussion because they do not promote further conversation. Even at the novice level of language instruction, students can deepen their own development of asking and answering HOT questions that promote critical thinking and opportunities to express their perspectives and opinions.

Now, let's engage in an activity together where we can practice developing rich discussion questions. You could also do this activity in any level of your language classes to help students understand the function of effective questioning skills and give them an opportunity to practice developing their own HOT questions.

First, we will need to start with a topic. Let's talk about food, as we can probably all agree is a motivating topic that we can discuss. You can also pick from any topics in your curricula or textbook, as long as you make sure it is a topic that will promote discussion. Now, what about food will promote discussion?

The next step is to form into groups to develop questions on this topic that will promote discussion so that people's opinions and perspectives can be shared. For the purposes of this video activity, you will work on your own, but I will guide you through the exercise as if you were a member of a group in your class.

For the first part of the activity, everyone in the group will create three discussion questions about the topic being studied. Take a moment to write down three questions about food that



you think will prompt discussion. If you need more time, you can pause this video and resume when you are ready.

Welcome back! Now that everyone has written down three discussion questions, let's take a closer look at the types of questions that you developed. I will use some examples for you to consider and compare with your own.

The way in which we structure questions can determine the ways in which responses are given. In a way, questions set the stage for responses. In a communicative language classroom, designing questions that elicit and prompt discussion is essential for students' development of language proficiency skills. It also develops their confidence in communicating. Take a look at these question examples.

Question Examples	Definitive Responses OR Extending Discussion
Do you like food?	<i>definitive</i>
What kinds of food do you like?	<i>definitive</i>
Why do you like x (food)?	<i>Minimally extending</i>
If you had to choose between x (food) or x (food), which would you choose and why?	<i>Moderately extending</i>
You have been asked to host a dinner event for a group of exchange students from around the world. What food selections would you make for the event? Justify your rationale for each choice.	<i>Maximum extension</i>

Which of these questions might stimulate the most discussion? Notice how the first two elicit a short response, maybe a “yes or no” or a one- or two-word response. Neither of these questions will likely extend discussion beyond the short response. Let's take a look at the third question. The third question extends the response a bit further because by asking a “why” question, the response encourages an explanation. How do you think this question could be improved to be a better discussion question?

Now, let's take a look at the last two questions. Would you consider these higher order thinking questions? Why or why not? The last two questions seem to invite the response to become more developed and extensive because more context is given, and the questions elicit a two-part response.

Keep in mind that higher order thinking questions are developed using the three upper tier levels of Bloom's taxonomy. The performance actions at these levels push learners toward analyzing, evaluating, and creating.

Bloom's Taxonomy



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When doing this activity with your class, the ideal group size is four people. Understandably, you may need to work with the class size that you have and make modifications for your classroom context.

Now, what kinds of questions did you create in the Brainstorm at the beginning of this video? I invite you to share them with your colleagues and consider doing a similar activity with your students to engage in what effective discussion questions look like. You can create a similar activity, have students share their questions about a topic, and then discuss them as a class as to whether they are HOT or not!

Thanks for watching and learning. Now, let's go do it!



9.2. Read

Explore ideas for facilitating discussions and debates by reading at least two articles.

- **Article 1:** [Navigating Discussions and Debates in the EFL Classroom](#) by Kelley Webb
 - This article describes the purpose of discussions and debates in the English language classroom. Strategies for successful implementation are included.
 - Source: Webb, K. (2021). Navigating discussions and debates in the EFL Classroom. *Teaching English through English: English Speaking Nation for Uzbekistan Program*.
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1uEuXBHaggpDB0pNxAtZtZspryKfELm7Gf/view?usp=sharing>

- **Article 2:** [Critiquing Questions](#) by Lynn W. Zimmerman
 - This article describes the teaching technique of developing stimulating discussion questions for the language classroom. Step-by-step instructions and a copy of the activity worksheet is included.
 - Source: Zimmerman, L.W. (2015). Critiquing questions. *English Teaching Forum*, 53(3), 32-34.
https://americanenglish.state.gov/files/ae/resource_files/06_etf_53-3_6_tt_zimmerman.pdf

- **Article 3:** [Bring it On: How to Get Students Fired Up about English with ESL Debates](#) by Vicky Papadopoulou
 - This blog post shares practical information about using debates in the English language classroom.
 - Source: Papadopoulou, V. (n.d.). Bring it on: How to get students fired up about English with ESL debates. *FluentU English Educator Blog*.
<https://www.fluentu.com/blog/educator-english/esl-debates/> (Click [here](#) to view a PDF of this blog post.)



Navigating Discussions and Debates in the EFL Classroom

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Defining Discussions and Debates

Cognitive learning and second-language acquisition theories both support the importance of verbal expression in order to better acquire the target language. Developing skills for a variety of communicative tasks, such as writing and reading, is also an essential part of language learning. As an educator, one must use careful thought and planning when teaching students how to effectively participate in each of these tasks in a language classroom, which leads the purpose of this article on navigating discussions and debates in the EFL classroom.

In communicative language teaching, tasks such as discussions and debates are incorporated as a means for students to create authentic dialogue and to deepen their communication and conversations among each other. Think for a moment about what discussions and debates mean to you. What comes to mind when you hear these words? Can you think of a real-life example of a discussion or a debate? What examples do you have to demonstrate what these activities mean for your students?

And, what might these activities look like for students in your English language classroom?

The Purpose of Discussions and Debates

Discussions and debates may look different in your classroom than they do in the examples you pondered from your brainstorming. However, this does not mean that the quality or intent of these activities has to change just because you are using them in a classroom environment. Authentic experiences can be created in the classroom that invite and challenge students to use their target language skills to effectively communicate in discussions and debates with each other. So, let's think more about what these authentic experiences may look like in the EFL classroom.

If one of the primary goals of discussions and debates is to get all students engaged in speaking or communicating about a topic, then the teacher does not need to be, or should not be, the person doing all the

tasks, the teacher needs to talk less and focus more on coaching or guiding students' next steps in a discussion or debate style activity. Having this structure also supports a student-centered approach to learning and positions the teacher as a guide on the side, rather than the direct and only facilitator of instruction, also known as the sage on the stage.

Let's go a little deeper into the structures behind and leading discussions and debates in the classroom setting. Discussions and debates are context driven and can be influenced by cultural norms. For example, for some, the word "discussion" may signify there is a disagreement about a topic and the objective is to discuss the differing opinions. For others, a "discussion" may mean an open-ended conversation around an agreed-upon topic where it is expected that all people contribute their thoughts and opinions in a respectful manner. Additionally, another alternative is that a "discussion" is a process of conversing about something in order to simply exchange ideas or reach a decision. One commonality of all of these cases is that a "discussion" involves the participation of more than one person. A discussion does not always mean verbal communication, but can also engage students through writing, reading, and listening modes as well.

Debates also share this commonality of requiring more than one person engaging in communicative skills, usually focused on speaking. Listening is a key skill needed to actively participate in debates in the

classroom. By being an active listener, students can also enhance their writing, reading, and critical thinking skills when engaging in debates in the classroom. Debates can be organized as more formal discussions on a topic where there are opposing sides on an issue. Debates do not have to be argumentative in nature, despite what one may think based on debates seen in the news. There is typically an expectation to point out the faults in the other's argument or point of view and include facts or evidence to support one's position. Debates can be arranged for teams, groups, and individuals, which make them an ideal activity for differentiating and adapting to your students' needs.

Implementing Discussions and Debates

In order to effectively implement both debates and discussions in the classroom, establishing norms or expectations in advance will help guide the students and teacher toward achieving the communicative goals for the task. In preparing for a class discussion, consider these questions to get you set up for success: *What do I want my students to be able to do throughout this discussion/debate? What do they need to know in order to be able to do this? What information do I need to provide them in advance and what language should I expect to be used for this activity? How does my classroom need to be arranged to allow for this activity to take place? How should I plan to group my students for this activity?*

Discussions and debates can be modified or tiered to students' language proficiency levels to guide the expectation of their participation. These activities can also be adapted based on time and resources available in the classroom. Jennifer Gonzalez identifies 15 class discussion strategies on her blog post with Cult of Pedagogy (2015) that can be used to engage students in discussion using higher-prep, low-prep, and ongoing activities for the year. This is one of the articles you can select to read in this module to help you envision how discussions can be structured in your English language classroom.

Strategies for Success

So, you may be wondering, "What do I need to do in order to get my students to lead the discussions instead of me as the teacher?" One way to approach this common concern is to set students up for success by providing them question starters or a way to rethink their question development skills. Question starters may be posted on the classroom wall or an **anchor chart** and display a series of questions that elicit discussion, such as "What is your opinion of..." "Why do you think...", and "What are some alternatives to...?"

Although asking questions that only result in a "yes" or "no" answer may not lead to furthering deep conversations, introducing a topic with these simple response questions can be a way to engage in students' listening skills and make sure they

are attending to questions carefully when participating in a discussion. For example, in novice level language classes, the teacher can ask "yes/no" questions to introduce a variety of new vocabulary for describing objects in a picture. For example, "Do you see..." "Is there a...in this picture?" To extend students' question development further, you may also consider having students examine the types of questions they would ask in a discussion on a topic and then critique with each other whether the questions stimulate discussion or simple responses. This exercise is discussed further in the reading for this module by Lynn Zimmerman. Developing higher order thinking (HOT) questions is also a way to advance students toward more critical thinking and inquiry, which will produce discussions and debates that lead to opposing ideas and opinions.

To conclude, discussions and debates are authentic and rich activities that are a natural approach to the development of language learning. Incorporating them into your instruction is a gateway for engaging students in the target language for practicing interpersonal communication. If you are feeling like your students are struggling to keep the dialogue going, provide them some scaffolding with an anchor chart of questions to ask their classmates or a graphic organizer for setting up their argument for debate. But as their teacher, it is also important to allow them some space to feel the pressure to produce the language to sustain conversations, because this is how they will build confidence by gaining an awareness of the essential skills they need to communicate.



References

Gonzalez, J. (2015, October 15). The big list of class discussion strategies. *Cult of Pedagogy*.
<https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/speaking-listening-techniques/>

TEACHING TECHNIQUES

Critiquing Questions

by LYNN W. ZIMMERMAN



Question formation is a basic part of teaching and learning English. However, we often focus on the ability to form the question properly and not as much on the quality of the information the question is seeking. Whether teaching English language learners or students who want to be English teachers, teachers need to carefully consider the intent of questions.

If students are expected to provide simple factual information, a question such as “What kind of pet do you have?” will elicit that information. However, if you want your students to discuss their preferences for certain types of pets or the advantages and disadvantages of different pets, then another type of question must be asked to promote discussion—in other words, a discussion question. The purpose of discussion questions should be to guide and stimulate discussion, not just to acquire information.

What makes a good discussion question? A question that results in a Yes/No answer or one that elicits only factual information is not likely to promote discussion. More fruitful are open-ended questions that elicit factual information as well as opinions and differing perspectives.

Suppose your class is discussing environmental issues. One may pose the question, “Do you recycle?” The appropriate answer of “Yes” or “No” stimulates no discussion. The questioner could then add the qualifier, “Why or why not?” However, this type of add-on still may not promote much discussion, especially with lower-level or younger learners. The respondent might say, “Yes, I recycle because it’s the right thing to do.” On the other hand, consider this question: “If you were going to design a recycling public-service poster for your city, what would you focus on, and why?” With appropriate scaffolding, even upper

beginners could discuss that question. For upper-level learners, a question to stimulate discussion might be, “Some cities offer refunds to people when they recycle and impose fines when people do not. What kind of incentive program do you think your city should adopt to encourage recycling?” This question gives a framework and ideas with the introductory statement and then asks the respondent to present his or her own ideas. Within a lesson that provides background information, intermediate students should also be able to discuss that question.

WHY FOCUS ON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS?

I realized that we do not focus on teaching English students how to develop discussion questions when I was teaching a graduate-level course in intercultural communication in Poland; the students were at B2 and C1 proficiency levels, and the course included opportunities for the students to lead small-group discussions. While most of the questions students asked were technically correct, few of their questions were effective discussion questions. For example, I overheard one student ask, “Do women in our country have equal rights?” Because these were upper-level students, this question did provoke some discussion despite not being an open-ended question. However, in most English classrooms, it would not have. I thought it would have been better to ask, “What evidence have you seen that women have equal rights in our country?” or “How has the status of women changed in our country over the past 20 years?”

To address the issue of how to develop effective discussion questions, I planned an interactive activity that required students to write questions about a topic we had just focused on; in this case, the topic was sociocultural influences on intercultural communication. After writing discussion questions, students then critiqued one another’s questions. Although I used this activity with a class of 30 students, this would also be an effective activity in larger classes because it involves small-group work.

Q/A ACTIVITY

Because of the interactivity this technique encourages, it would be appropriate for almost any type of class. The first step is to choose a topic that you would normally use and present it in whatever way fits the topic and your class. The only criterion is that the topic should be one that promotes discussion—that is, a topic on which students can express their opinions and perspectives.

Next, divide the students into an even number of groups. The ideal group size for this activity is four students. The group will have two identities: in Part 1 of the activity, they will be Group 1; in Part 2, they will be Group 2. As Group 1, students write three open-ended discussion questions about the topic the class has been studying. Once students have completed this task, they give the questions to another group (Group 2). Although I prepared a handout (see the sample at the end of this article) and gave a copy to each group, students could just as easily prepare this activity themselves using notebook paper.

As Group 2, students orally respond to the questions they received. Tell them not to write their answers, but to read the questions aloud and discuss them as they would in a small-group discussion.

Next, tell groups to write a critique of each question. Ask students:

- Did the question stimulate much discussion? Why? Why not?
- How could the question be improved to be a better discussion question?

You might want to write these questions on the board.

Then have a full-class discussion about the activity. Ask students to identify the question they thought was the best and to explain why. Ask for suggestions to improve the questions that promoted less discussion in their groups. Elicit from the students the differences

between Yes/No questions and open-ended questions, along with observations about how the latter promote more discussion. Conclude by having students summarize the characteristics of effective discussion questions. You might want to list those characteristics on the board.

CONCLUSION

This multistep technique engages students in authentic discussion at several levels and uses a variety of language skills and functions. Because of the technique's simplicity, it could be used with almost any age and level of student, except very young learners and beginners. To start off, students have to be familiar enough with the topic to be able to develop their questions; that may require them to read about or do research on the topic and to discuss it with classmates. Or, students can develop questions about a topic the class has recently studied.

Writing the questions will provide opportunity for discussion about how to properly phrase them. As students answer

another group's questions, they are discussing the topic again, perhaps from a different perspective than they did originally, because each group will approach the topic differently. Then, as students analyze, discuss, and write about the quality of the questions, they have to use appropriate language to explain the strengths and weaknesses of each question.

Finally, the whole-class discussion about the most effective questions and suggestions for improving weaker questions promotes speaking about the topic using relevant vocabulary; it also engages students in the functions of comparing and contrasting the various questions, making suggestions, and perhaps agreeing and disagreeing. These are all skills and functions that students at the upper-beginner level and beyond can manage and continue to develop.

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Q/A Activity Worksheet

Group 1: Write three open-ended questions that could be used in a discussion group. Give the list of questions to Group 2.

Group 2: Discuss the questions. **Do not write** your answers to the questions.

Write a critique of each question. Did the question stimulate much discussion? Why? Why not? How could the question be improved to make it a better discussion question?

Question 1	
<i>Question 1 Critique</i>	
Question 2	
<i>Question 2 Critique</i>	
Question 3	
<i>Question 3 Critique</i>	

Bring It On: 7 Questions Every ESL Teacher Has About Classroom Debates

fluentu.com/blog/educator-english/esl-debates/

vickypapadopoulou



What comes to mind when you hear the word “debates”?

TV debates, politicians contradicting each other before elections or...debates in class between student teams?

Well, in case you aren't familiar with this exciting method in ESL classes, I'm going to lay it all out on the table for you.

Trust me. I have used debates in my classes for some time now and I would love to share these teaching experiences, as well as tips and resources on this method with all readers here.

Bring It On: How to Get Students Fired Up About English with ESL Debates



1. What Does an ESL Debate Lesson Look Like?

A **debate** is a competition in which two opposing teams make speeches on a particular topic and motion to support their arguments and contradict the members of the other team.

A debate in ESL class can be based on a specific topic that has recently been taught, therefore strengthening language skills and vocabulary but also critical thinking on the part of the students.

There should also be a judges' table made up of 3-4 students who will be evaluating the whole process and assessing each team based on certain criteria. The judges—not the teacher—are the ones who will grade both teams and finally decide on the winner. In other words, the teacher should play the role of the coordinator, thus allowing students to feel independent, comfortable with the process and responsible for following the rules and guidelines.

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2. Why Get Debates Going in Your ESL Classes?

Well, obviously, a debate is not something static but rather challenging and extremely appropriate for teenagers or young adults who can easily be bored while learning a second or foreign language. So...why not include this technique if you want to spice up your classes?

As a teacher, you are surely familiar with using board games, films or listening activities to make your lessons more interesting; however, debates in an ESL class combine lots of positive features that improve learner use of the language as well as the relevant skills.

But can debates take place in **lower level classes** as well as upper-intermediate and advanced ones? Well, judging by my own experience of teaching English as a foreign language to teenagers, I can assure you that debates enliven even a younger or less experienced class and encourage students to use English in a natural and direct way. However, it is up to you to decide whether you use this method in your advanced classes only or you extend it to your lower level classes too. After all, you are the one who knows your students' needs, weaknesses and limitations.

When I started using this method in class, I thought that it could only work with my advanced students as the language structures needed throughout the debate can be used at this level more easily.



To tell you the truth, I have used debates in a couple of my pre-intermediate classes and has some less-than-desirable results—as the whole process was going on, those students seemed overwhelmed and did not enjoy it that much. But was it about the debate activity, or something else?

Later on, I realized that **easier topics** can be used in debates at lower levels, thus making it easier for students to be involved in the process and benefit from it. For example, you could hold debates over which pop song is better, which subject class is the most fun or who loves their mother more and why.

Last but not least, teenagers and adults usually find this technique extremely challenging and are often intrinsically motivated to use English as a common medium of communication. The playful nature of a debate can also make the whole process enjoyable!

3. Which Language Skills Are Improved During Debates?

Well, obviously, **speaking skills** are strengthened throughout a debate. Students learn how to improve oral skills by using appropriate phrases and structures but also by trying to use **argumentative language**.

Team members will soon find that they cannot persuade the judges by using simple phrases or repeating the same expressions (“I think,” “I believe”) all the time. They have to use more elaborate language and therefore learn it.

Listening skills also benefit from this process since team members and judges learn to listen to one another carefully and understand their points of view, no matter the accent or intonation. They should be paying close attention in order to gather information for their own opposing statements and arguments.

Writing skills are strengthened when team members and judges are asked to take notes and write their arguments in the given worksheets (should you choose to give them). Furthermore, you can ask them to write an essay as a follow-up assignment based on the topic they have finished debating for or against. Do not forget this if you prepare classes for language examinations where essay writing is important—both the note-taking and essay-writing techniques can boost your students’ skills and confidence.

Reading skills can be enhanced while students are preparing their arguments by reading articles and websites and are learning how to evaluate these sources.

Critical thinking in the foreign language is enhanced more than anything else, in my humble opinion. Every step of the process encourages students to be critical thinkers, pull points together logically and express their ideas in a clear manner. They even need to pay close attention to hear the gaps in other people’s thinking. This will aid them in every area of language and life, from test-taking to securing a new job.

4. How Can You Get Debates Going in ESL Class?

Before you start organizing debates in your classes, it is essential that you remember the following:

Debates are not something to be taken lightly by the teacher. They are not a good way to fill empty teaching time. You cannot sit back and let the students run without your observation and guidance. It is an activity that requires good planning on your part, along with carefully chosen resources and material.

Debates must have strict time limits and a clear set of rules. Time limits stop shy students from becoming totally intimidated (phew, I only have to talk for one minute!) and keep more talkative students from dominating the talking time. Rules keep things fair for everyone.

Props are always a plus! You need a number of inexpensive materials that give the whole process a playful touch; in other words, this activity is cost effective.

This can become extra-curricular. You could alternatively start an after-school English debate club, instead of trying to squeeze things into your normal class time. This might also give ESL students a chance to practice with students who speak English as their native language.

Okay now. Let's see how a debate is performed step by step.

First, you need to find a **topic** or **motion** that your students will enjoy but will also be able to build their arguments upon. For instance, a topic could be as easy as "paper books vs e-books" or as demanding as "should animals be used for medical experiments?"

Afterwards, you ask students to **form their teams**. They might be given the chance to choose, or they might get divvied up based on their personal feelings about the issue at hand. You may also choose to randomly assign teams. Be sure to choose the judges' panel as well.

Have them **study the topic** and **find relevant sources** at home or in the school library before the debate takes place in class. Studying the topic at home and evaluating sources is an absolutely valuable assignment for students. Obviously, reading skills are at their best when ESL learners are asked to read English texts, learn new vocabulary items and evaluate these written sources. Maybe you'd like to check the following [site](#) that presents techniques your students can use while evaluating sources before the debate takes place in class.



The day of the debate students sit in their teams: The team “for” and the team “against” the topic. A common phrase to use before starting the debate is the following: “This house believes that...”. For example, “This house believe that animals should not be used for medical experiments.”

While sitting in their places, team members can choose their **key speaker**, who will give them a main introduction and conclusion, even though they can decide whether they all take their turns to speak.

All team members have their own materials (handouts, sets of rules, objection cards). Likewise, the judges sit at their table where they have their own materials (a clock, a bell or a buzzer, their name tags, a set of rules and handouts for their evaluation/grades).

At this point, I have to underline that **class size** matters; obviously, when you have a class of 30 students, things are much different than they would be with a class of 10, but this should not scare you away. Actually, I have experienced excellent debates in a class of 27 students and a rather uninteresting debate in a class of only 12 students.

In a large class, things need to be **organized** more carefully. There could be 4 smaller teams instead of two, with the talking time of each team decreased.

5. How Can You Choose Debate Ideas and Pro/Con Sides?

Now let me give you some nice topics that you can use in class during your debates. Additionally, you can browse topics on sites like the following: [Debate topics 1](#) or [Debate topics 2](#).

The following list though comes out of my debating experience with my students. Feel free to make any alterations to the topics or pro and con sides as you see fit!

Teachers can be replaced by computers.

Pro: Teachers can be subjective and unfair to students whereas computers are not. Teachers can make mistakes whereas computers will never give you a wrong answer.

Con: Teachers can understand the student’s emotions and help them with these, whereas a computer only expects the right answer.

School uniforms should be compulsory.

Pro: No need to buy new modern clothes all the time.

Con: It is better to retain your own style at school.

It is more fun to be an adult than a child.



Pro: Adulthood comes with independence, a job, your own money, romance.

Con: Adulthood comes with lots of responsibilities, stress and old age. Childhood is more carefree.

E-books are better than paper books.

Pro: E-books are huge space savers, more convenient, cheaper and more environmentally friendly.

Con: E-books can break, get stolen, have their batteries die while you are reading and they can cause eye strain.

Social media decreases human communication.

Pro: Online communication cannot be compared to face-to-face interaction. It can be fake, dangerous and does not rely on genuine emotions.

Con: It is easier, more convenient, faster to talk to friends and learn to communicate with people abroad using social media, so it improves and increases human communication.

The list can go on and on...The topics are just countless!

Finally, let me remind you that in case you use CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) in your lessons, debates can be English but the topics can be based on the subject matter, i.e. history, biology, literature.

6. How Should the ESL Debate Be Structured?

Both teams take about 10 minutes to work silently amongst themselves so as to prepare their **initial statements** and **their arguments**. The judges (or the teacher) let the students know of the **stages** below and the duration of each stage. If you browse through various websites and relevant resources, you might find different debate formats that will equally suit you. The one I describe here is the one I prefer. In particular, the stages are the following:

1. Constructive stage (10-12 minutes): The key speaker of each team presents their introductory statements and then they reinforce their affirmative or negative arguments respectively. This phase could last from 10'-12' on the whole. While listening to their opponents, team members have to take notes about the arguments they heard so as to contradict them in the next phase.

2. Rebuttal stage (15-20 minutes): The "pro" team refutes the opposing team's arguments and vice versa. This is the phase when team members can use their red objection cards to ask an extra question or refute the argument the opponents have just



expressed.

3. Closing statements (2-3 minutes): This phase can be described as the conclusion to the whole procedure. After the exchange of ideas and arguments, students summarize their final statements and try to show the judges why they should be the winning team.

4. Judges' questions (5 minutes): This is an interesting phase when each judge addresses one final question to each team. Those questions are based on what teams have presented so far and can be tricky and difficult so that judges can decide on the strongest team.

Throughout each debate, there is a clear set of rules that all students have to follow. The most important rule in any class debate is **show respect**. Each participant must show respect to the opposite team and the judges. Other rules could be the following:

- Respect time limits and talk only when it is your turn to do so.
- Plagiarism is not accepted.
- If you have a source, mention it.
- You can use your objection cards only once.
- Speak clearly and loudly
- Don't look at your cards while speaking.

7. How Can Students Be Assessed During ESL Debates?

As mentioned, the final assessment will fall to you and your judges' table. You can completely rely on them to determine grades, or you can make adjustments after reviewing what they have written down for each team in the debate.

Teenagers might sometimes find it hard at the beginning of the debate to assess the team where their best buddies are, but they will gradually get so deeply into the process that you will be amazed at how accurate and fair they are while filling in their assessment cards.

Some of the criteria which I think are easy and effective for judges to use are the following:

- Clear voice
- Clear way to express their arguments
- Organized thoughts
- Strong opening and/or closing statements
- Effective use of argumentative language
- Effective use of key language structures
- Equal participation of all team members
- Strong arguments, well thought-out statements
- Effective rebuttal
- Respect shown to the judges and the opponents
- Teamwork amongst members of the same team



- No breaking of the rules

If you want to offer your students a more surprising and more demanding debate, don't tell them what the topic is beforehand but ask one of them to choose one slip of paper from a box where you have written random topics. This way, the whole process gets a mysterious and unexpected touch that students love.

What is more, finding arguments and using more complex structures to express their viewpoints on an unexpected topic could make it more difficult but also more challenging.

As daunting as debates might sound when you start using them in your classes, there are lots of [sites](#) and [resources](#) that can guide you and support you all the way through.

All in all, debates in ESL classes are valuable tools to involve your students in a beneficial learning process but also to enliven your lesson.

Once you and your students get hooked, feel free to jump a few steps further with this. You can organize competitions between two classes in your school or even between debate teams of your school and a neighboring school. In this case, you can ask students who do not take part in the competition to play the role of the audience who can also critically ask a couple of questions to the team speakers.

So...ready, set, go—plan your next debate and be prepared to try it in class next time.

I'm sure you will love the process! Have fun along with your students!

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9.3. Search

Explore more teaching resources about facilitating discussions and debates by searching these websites:

- [American English Resources page](#)
- [STAR TALK: Classroom Activities Collection](#) Under the Featured Activities, click the three Discover more...buttons to view examples of activities for interpretive, interpersonal, and presentation modes of communication.
- [Cult of Pedagogy](#) Click on the magnifying glass in the upper right corner of the website to type your keywords to search.

(Hint: Try using these keywords: discussions, debates, conversations, engagement)

Take notes here:

Do



9.4. Think

Consider the ways you already use or would like to integrate and manage learning activities that support a communicative approach for language learning in your classroom. Think about the following questions and write down some thoughts in your journal.

- What do “discussions” and “debates” look like for you? How about in your classroom instruction?
- How do you usually get students interested in discussing a new topic in your class?
- How do you generally select the topics of discussion for class? Do students have any choice or input in selecting topics?
- What are your challenges and possible solutions for facilitating discussions and debates in your language classroom?

Take notes here:



9.5. Create

This module introduced several ideas for integrating discussion activities and debates in your language classroom. Based on your preference, choose one of the following tasks:
After reading “Critiquing Questions”, create a question bank with 3-5 question starters you can use in a discussion or debate activity.

OR

Select an image that connects to one of your lessons or units. Create Higher Order Thinking (HOT) Questions to engage students in discussion on that image. Post in your portfolio.

OR

Create a list of debate topics that align with your curricula. Post a “Bucket of Prompts” in your portfolio.

Use the template below when creating your activity:

Activity/Lesson Name:

Grade level / Unit (if applicable):

Activity Description:

- The purpose of this activity is to...
- These activity will be effective for this lesson/unit because...
- Here are some steps to help you use this activity in your classroom...

Step 1:

Step 2:

Step 3:

Note: This will be added to your Portfolio.

Take notes here:



9.6. Share

Share the discussion or debate activity you created in the group chat. Be sure you post an activity that you have not seen already in the group chat. Please post a brief message and attach a Word document, PDF, or PPT slides with your activity description.

Example

Hello, Colleagues! The discussion or debate activity I want to share is called _____ (activity title). The purpose of this activity is to _____ . This activity is effective because _____ . See the attached file for an example on how I use this activity in my classroom. (Be sure to attach your activity file.)



9.7. Apply

After you share an activity in the group chat, read through your colleagues' activities. Find at least one or two **new** activities in the group chat that you can use in your next class. Apply a new activity from this module in your next class. If it was a success, be sure to send a message and tell your colleague "Thank you!" and why it was effective.

Take notes here:



9.8. Reflect

Write 1-2 paragraphs to reflect on Module 9 (300-500 words). You may use what you have created, shared, and applied in the previous tasks.

Note: *This will be added to your Portfolio.*

Take notes here:



Module 9 Checklist:

- I watched three videos.
- I read three articles.
- I searched for a few new web resources to help my teaching.
- I thought about how I use discussions and debates and wrote down some reflections.
- I created questions or topics for use in a debate or discussion.
- I shared my questions for a discussion or debate activity with my colleagues on Telegram.
- I applied at least one new discussion or debate activity from my Telegram group in my teaching context.
- I wrote 1-2 paragraphs to reflect on my learning in Module 9.