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USING DEBATE AND DISCUSSION METHODS TO DEVELOP ORAL SPEECH IN ENGLISH AMONG ADOLESCENT LEARNERS

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Abstract
Oral fluency remains the weakest skill of many adolescent learners of English in Uzbekistan's schools, even where reading and grammar results are satisfactory. This article argues that structured debate and discussion offer a practical way to close that gap, because they give teenagers a real reason to speak, to listen, and to defend an opinion in a foreign language. Drawing on interactionist and sociocultural theory and on published classroom studies, the article describes a four-stage procedure for grades 7–11 (preparation, modelled language, structured speaking, reflection) and explains how to match formats to CEFR levels A2–B2. It also discusses assessment, error correction, and the main obstacles teachers meet: anxiety, uneven participation, and limited preparation time. The article is a methodological proposal for classroom use rather than a report of experimental data.

Keywords: Oral speech, debate, discussion, adolescent learners, speaking skills, communicative competence, CEFR, English language teaching.

Introduction

In recent years the role of English in Uzbekistan's education system has grown sharply, and schools are expected to produce graduates who can use the language, not merely describe its rules. Yet in many classrooms speaking still receives the least time. Lessons are built around textbook exercises, reading aloud and written grammar practice, and a teenager may complete a whole lesson having produced no more than a few memorised sentences. Speaking is also the skill that exposes a learner most openly, so adolescents, who are acutely sensitive to the opinion of their peers, often prefer silence to the risk of a mistake [3; 11].

Debate and discussion respond to this problem directly. Unlike drills, they require learners to form their own ideas, choose language to express them, react to an unpredictable partner, and defend a position under mild pressure. Adolescence is also a stage at which students begin to care about social questions, fairness and personal choice, so topics such as school uniforms, mobile phones in lessons or the value of homework can provide a genuine reason to speak [5].

The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) and its Companion Volume likewise treat interaction, including discussion and informal exchange of views, as a core mode of communication rather than an optional extra [4].

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The purpose of this article is to show how debate and discussion can be organised so that they develop oral speech in learners aged 12–17 whose levels range from A2 to B2. The article reviews the theoretical grounds for the approach, proposes a four-stage classroom procedure, and considers assessment and the practical difficulties a teacher is likely to face.

2. Literature Review

The theoretical case for speaking-centred tasks rests on three ideas. Long's interaction hypothesis holds that language develops when learners negotiate meaning with an interlocutor, asking for clarification, checking understanding and reformulating what they said [8]. Swain's output hypothesis adds that producing language pushes learners to notice gaps in their knowledge and to process grammar more deeply than comprehension alone requires [10]. From a sociocultural perspective, Vygotsky argued that higher mental functions first appear in social interaction and are then internalised, so speech with peers and a supportive teacher can lead learners beyond what they can do alone [12]. Together these views suggest that spoken interaction is a means of acquiring English as well as a means of showing what has already been learned.

Methodological sources describe speaking as a combination of linguistic knowledge and the ability to use it in real time. Bygate distinguishes knowledge of language from the skill of producing it under time pressure, and notes that this skill develops only through repeated practice with a real communicative purpose [3]. Thornbury similarly stresses awareness of the genre of talk, a sufficient stock of ready-made phrases, and opportunities for performance followed by feedback [11]. Harmer and Brown add that interactive activities increase learner talking time and strengthen willingness to communicate when anxiety is kept low [2; 6].

Debate in particular has been studied in several language-learning contexts. Krieger describes a six-lesson unit for ESL students in which vocabulary for agreeing, disagreeing and rebutting is taught before learners take part in short team debates [7]. Zare and Othman, studying Malaysian university students, report that learners perceived classroom debate as useful for developing both critical thinking and oral communication, although some also reported nervousness at the beginning [13]. An international review by Akerman and Neale concludes that debating can raise confidence, speaking skills and engagement across age groups, while noting that much of the evidence comes from self-reports and small studies [1]. Most of this research, however, concerns adults or older students. Practical guidance for school teachers who work with 12–17-year-olds of mixed proficiency in large, exam-oriented classes is still limited, and this is the gap the present article tries to address.

3. A Four-Stage Classroom Procedure

The procedure below is designed for a 45-minute lesson or a two-lesson sequence and can be adapted to class size and level. It follows the general sequence of presentation, practice and production described in methodology anthologies [9], but moves the emphasis to production and reflection.

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Stage 1: Preparation (8–10 minutes). The teacher introduces a motion that is close to the learners' experience, for example "Students should be allowed to use phones at school." Learners brainstorm ideas in pairs, first in Uzbek or Russian if necessary, and then write key points in English. Pre-teaching vocabulary at this stage reduces the cognitive load of the later speaking task.

Stage 2: Modelled language (7–8 minutes). The teacher provides a short bank of functional phrases, such as "In my opinion…", "I see your point, but…", "Could you give an example?" and "To sum up…", and demonstrates them with a short model exchange, ideally with a confident student. Krieger's unit similarly teaches rebuttal and agreement language before any debate takes place [7].

Stage 3: Structured speaking (15–20 minutes). Learners work in the format that suits their level (Table 1). Roles are fixed (speaker, rebutter, timekeeper, observer) so that every student has a clear task and quieter learners are not left out. Time limits are short and visible.

Stage 4: Reflection and feedback (7–10 minutes). Observers report what they noticed, the teacher notes two or three frequent language problems and writes them on the board without naming the speaker, and learners give one sentence about what they would do differently next time. Delayed, whole-class correction protects fluency during the activity and still draws attention to form [6; 11].

Table 1. Debate and discussion formats by learner level (author's proposal, aligned with CEFR descriptors for interaction [4]).

CEFR level	Recommended format	Typical task
A2	Pair discussion with sentence frames	Choose and justify one option (e.g. the best school club)
B1	Small-group discussion; "four corners"	Agree, disagree or partly agree with a statement and give two reasons
B1+ to B2	Team debate (2 vs 2) with rebuttal	Defend an assigned side of a simple motion, then respond to opponents
B2	Panel or whole-class debate with audience questions	Present a position, answer questions and sum up

To reduce anxiety, the teacher should begin with informal discussion before formal debate, allow learners to argue positions they were assigned rather than ones they hold, and make clear that ideas, not accuracy, are being assessed first. Mixed-level groups can be managed by giving weaker students supporting roles with sentence frames and stronger students the rebuttal and summary roles.

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4. Discussion: Pedagogical Implications and Challenges

The procedure targets the components of speaking identified in the literature. Fixed roles and short time limits raise each learner's talking time, which matters because in a traditional teacher-led lesson the teacher produces most of the speech [2; 6]. Rebuttal and clarification phrases create the conditions for negotiation of meaning, and the need to respond to an opponent forces learners to produce language that has not been rehearsed [8; 10]. The reflection stage turns errors into material for learning rather than a source of embarrassment, which supports the motivational conditions described by Dörnyei, in particular a safe classroom atmosphere and tasks that learners find relevant [5].

Assessment should reflect these aims. A simple analytic rubric with four criteria (fluency, range and accuracy of language, content and argument, interaction) allows the teacher to give feedback that is specific and consistent with CEFR descriptors [4]. Peer assessment by the observer, using the same rubric, adds a second perspective and trains learners to listen critically. For younger or weaker groups, a three-point scale with one comment per criterion is sufficient.

Several difficulties should be expected. First, large classes limit the time each learner can speak; running debates in parallel groups, with the teacher circulating, partly solves this. Second, dominant students may take over discussions, which is why timekeepers and turn limits are important. Third, learners with low proficiency may fall back on their first language; sentence frames, preparation time and pair rehearsal before the public stage help to keep the interaction in English. Fourth, sensitive topics should be avoided or carefully framed, and motions should be chosen so that no student is put in the position of defending a view that could embarrass them. Finally, the evidence for debate in school contexts remains limited, and teachers who adopt these methods should observe their own classes, record learner reactions and adjust the procedure accordingly [1; 13].

5. Conclusion

Debate and discussion can move oral practice in the English lesson from repetition to real communication. For adolescents, who need both a purpose for speaking and a safe setting for it, a staged procedure that combines preparation, modelled language, role-based interaction and reflection offers a realistic route to greater fluency and confidence. The approach works best when formats are matched to CEFR level, when assessment rewards ideas and interaction as well as accuracy, and when the teacher builds a supportive atmosphere gradually, starting with informal discussion. Further classroom research in Uzbek schools, with pre- and post-course speaking measures, would show how large the effect is and which formats suit which age groups.

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