

## **Debate Propositions for Classroom Debate: Voices from Debate Instructors in Japan**

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In Japan, due to the popularity of debate education, instructors who do not have debate experience are sometimes asked to teach debate. This study focuses on debate propositions, which have a huge influence on arguments in debate, are often given to students by instructors. This study conducted interviews with thirteen debate instructors, with or without previous debate experience. The analysis of the interviews suggests that instructors with no debate experience are more open to student-made propositions. Moreover, the interviews also provide rich ideas and examples of effective and failed teaching methods, and the narratives by debate instructors reveal unique issues embedded in debate education in Japan.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

In Japan, debate has been a popular teaching method not just for argumentation education but also for active learning, which “involves students in doing things and thinking about things they are doing” (Bonwell & Eison, 1991, p.19). In Japan, due to the popularity of debate education along with the demand for the teaching of active-learning, instructors who do not have debate experience are sometimes asked to teach debate.

Although debate is considered to be active learning, however, propositions, which have a huge influence on arguments in debate, are often given to students by instructors. This study therefore investigates how and by whom propositions in college debate classes should be created. In classroom debates, most students do not have prior debate experience. Creating debate propositions requires expert knowledge about both the subject matter and debate rules. Even with such knowledge, creating good debate propositions is a difficult task (Stromer cited in Kruger, 1968). Are students able to create debate propositions? If so, how can instructors support them to do so? In order to examine those research questions, this study conducted interviews with thirteen debate instructors, with or without previous debate experience. The analysis of the interviews suggests that instructors with no debate experience are more open to student-made propositions. Moreover, the interviews also

provide rich ideas and examples of effective and failed teaching methods, and the narratives by debate instructors reveal unique issues embedded in debate education.

In the following, I lay out previous studies on debate propositions, explain research methods, analyze the interview results, and make suggestions for debate instructors as well as draw a large picture of how debate education can/should be.

### **2. ACTIVE LEARNING AND DEBATE PROPOSITIONS**

The strong connection between debate and active learning has been widely accepted, as debate is a pedagogy in which learners create arguments and discuss with each other (Oros 2007; Dallimore, Hertenstein, & Platt 2010). Positive outcomes of debate education are said to be “critical thinking, logical thinking, quick thinking, listening skill, language skill, and research skill” (Matsumoto, 1998). Students are able to obtain those skills through doing research, constructing and organizing arguments, creating refutations, and writing ballots by themselves. The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) introduces debate as well as group discussion and group projects as effective methods for active learning (MEXT, 2012). As such, debate has become popular as a

method for active learning among educators in Japan.

However, the process of making propositions, which determine what is to be argued in debates, has not been learner centered. For students, debate propositions are always “given” by teachers or tournament organizers, because making proper propositions is considered difficult and requires a lot of knowledge and experience. For example, debate propositions must meet the following requirements:

1. Room for controversy
2. Multiple arguments for and against the proposition
3. A social issue of interest to the participants
4. Easy access to the written data
5. One central topic
6. Neutral wording
7. The same state of affairs until the debate ends

(Konishi, Kanke, & Collins, 2012, pp.23-25)

In addition to the above seven requirements, if students debate in a foreign language, propositions must fit the level of their language abilities. Furthermore, who the subject in the proposition is plays an important role in the debate that will result. For example, “Resolved: That the United Nations should ban tobacco” and “Resolved: That the Japanese government should ban tobacco” respectively bring different arguments. Thus, creating debate propositions requires precision.

Although creating propositions is not easy, it would be a great active learning method. Miyawaki (2019) reports that student-made propositions actually work, and this pedagogy can boost teamwork, motivation of learners, output tied with learners’ interests, and interaction with the audience. Miyawaki also concludes that instructors with no debate experience can use the pedagogy if they understand the basic rules of debate. Miyawaki does not investigate, however, how instructors understand and teach propositions and what obstacles they may face. Therefore, this study collects voices from instructors and analyzes potential concerns about promoting the pedagogy. In addition, this study also examines the voices of instructors who have debate experience and those who do not. An analysis of the interview results suggests a gap between the two.

### 3. METHOD

Thirteen college instructors who teach debate, anonymously referred to as 1N to 6N and 1Y to 7Y based on their understanding of their debate experience (See Table 1), participated in this study. Except one focus-group interview with 5Y, 6Y, and 7Y, all interviews were conducted as one-on-one, semi-constructed interviews. Ten open-ended questions were prepared (see Table 2). Each interview took between one and two hours, respectively. The interviews were videotaped by the author with an informed consent form signed by each participant. All interviews were conducted in Japanese, the first language of all participants.

| Alias | Debate experience                |
|-------|----------------------------------|
| 1N    | No                               |
| 2N    | No                               |
| 3N    | No                               |
| 4N    | No                               |
| 5N    | No                               |
| 6N    | No (one debate class at college) |
| 1Y    | Yes (high school)                |
| 2Y    | Yes (high school & college)      |
| 3Y    | Yes (college)                    |
| 4Y    | Yes (college)                    |
| 5Y    | Yes (college)                    |
| 6Y    | Yes (college)                    |
| 7Y    | Yes (college)                    |

Table 1: Participants and their debate experiences

|      |   |
|------|---|
| 1    | Tell me about your teaching career?<br>How long have you taught debate?                               |
| 2    | Have you experienced debate as a /debater? If yes, tell me about it. If no, how did you learn debate? |
| 3    | What style of debate do you teach?  |
| 4    | How do you explain debate in class?   |
| 5    | How do you explain proposition in class?  |
| 6    | Who decides debate propositions in the debates that you are involved with?                            |
| 6-1  | If you decide, what criteria do you use for your decision?  |
| 6-2a | If students decide, what assignment or class activity do you use?                                     |
| 6-2b | What would you do if a student say he/she has no idea?  |
| 6-2c | What would you say if a student wants to use a proposition like “Gay marriage should be legalized”?   |

|    |  |
|----|--|
| 7  | How do your students react to the selected propositions?   |
| 8  | Please share assignment or activities that work well in debate class.                                      |
| 9  | Please share assignment or activities that do not work well in debate class.                               |
| 10 | What resources (for example, textbook and teaching manual) would you like for improving your debate class? |

Table 2: Prepared questions for the interviews

#### 4. VOICES ON DEBATE PROPOSITIONS

Regardless of their debate experience, each instructor has their own justification for their pedagogy. Some interviewees use teacher-created propositions for the sake of enlarging students' worldviews, ensuring quality debates, and their research interests. For example, 4Y makes a list of propositions regarding social issues and lets students vote, because "students get into a filter bubble [a situation in which someone only hears or sees news and information that supports what they already believe and like, (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020)]...they are in the world of like or dislike. We [instructors] may need to work to let them out of it, well, it is a bit illuminating." Furthermore, determining what word would be most appropriate for a debate proposition requires debate experience as well as language skills. 6Y uses a teacher-created proposition because "it is easier for debating in English." 2Y shares a unique perspective; he uses a teacher-created propositions to analyze differences between classroom debates and tournament debates.

Interestingly, the interviewees who actively employ teacher-created propositions all have debate experiences and teach courses titled "debate," while other interviewees teach debate as a part of "presentation," "English," or "public speaking" courses. This suggests that while using teacher-created propositions has merits for teaching debate itself, it would be less attractive for instructors whose class is not debate-focused. 6N, who does not have experience of tournament debate and teaches debate in public-speaking class, mentioned: "To be honest, I don't have much knowledge and experience about debate...so making it [which proposition to use in class debate] open is easy for me."

Some interviewees who use student-created propositions explains this pedagogy can respect the current interests of the students. For example,

4N, who teaches English presentation classes at the department of pharmacy, asks students to find controversial issues in their interest areas, such as phytotoxicity, vaccination, and cervical cancer screening. According to 4N, this approach lets the students "decide a proposition not for the sake of debate but for their own interests." In fact, Miyawaki (2019) argues that the use of student-created propositions boosts student motivation because the topics are then are tied with their interests. Furthermore, 4Y comments that he once heard a famous debate/English professor saying that letting students decide propositions makes them feel they are participating. Such pedagogy may result in the situation in which both students and teachers enjoy the debate, as 6N mentions: "in terms of propositions, I want students to have fun. In addition, typical propositions and their entailing arguments are boring for me."

Although teaching with student-created propositions has merits, some interviewees, especially those who have debate experience, are concerned whether or not students are capable of making appropriate debate propositions. 3Y says although he lets students decide propositions, he does a final check to make sure if the proposition is appropriate for the format of the debate that is planned.

On the other hand, several interviewees claim that using a poorly crafted proposition (e.g. only one side can obtain credible sources) is an important learning step for students. For example, 1Y argues: "They [students] cannot do it [making well-crafted arguments and propositions] well. For example, each argument does not clash...but to sum, they have to experience failures, like 'oh no this proposition doesn't work'." That means making a debate proposition itself is a learner-centered activity. 6N explains that in other classes, like essay writing class, a sentence-statement is always given to students. Debate is active learning compared to essay writing class, so a different approach is suitable. Therefore, 6N wants students to create a proposition by themselves. As 6N says: "Although some students struggle, this is part of the activity," and "if some problems arise in some propositions, the class can discuss them, and this may have educational value." Such positive evaluation of propositions that do not result in effective debate can be an answer to the concerns of instructors with debate experience who worry about incomplete debates with inappropriate propositions.

## 5. MAJOR ISSUES IN CLASSROOM DEBATES

Although it is recognized that classroom debate is a valuable active learning method, most of the interviewees talk about how debates can be superficial or not satisfying. They think effective refutation and cross-examination are not done in the debates, due to the learners' English (foreign language) level as well as time constraints. For example, 2N sets up a rule that students must refer to two English articles. According to 2N, "Everyone struggles to do it. They are not good at English, but they have to read the articles." 5N shares her similar experience: "impromptu debates in English were not effective for students whose English levels are not high... If I wanted to let them experience using logic to argue a point, I should have done it in Japanese."

Furthermore, due to language issues, students cannot understand the values of debates. 1N mentions that most of his students said they could not express what they wanted to say, but as he says, "I cannot tell if that frustration came from their (lack of/poor) English or debate skills. This may be a problem of having them debate in English. Opportunities for debating in Japanese may be needed, but this is an English class." Furthermore, the English skill level of each debater has a large impact on judging. 6N comments that: "Students wrote about debater's ethos, in this case English speaking skill, as a strong point on their judging sheets... they cannot reach to a judgement based on logic." The narratives described here depict the unique problem of teaching debate in a foreign language.

Another issue raised by some interviewees is the difficulty of making refutations and verifying evidence. Use of a foreign language can cause these issues, but class schedule might also explain them. 2Y, who teaches Japanese debate, spends a fair amount of class time to explain how to use evidence in a debate and how to interpret each piece of evidence when two pieces of evidence clash. However, in class of 30, "probably only two or three students really understand." In addition, 5N mentions that while some teams can prepare evidence, others cannot due to the amount of time available, and "those students just explain their ideas."

The time constraints also hinder the types of debate arguments that can be taught. For example, 6N says he does not include counterplans due to time limits. Other interviewees, who are familiar with counterplans and other types of arguments,

also mention they stick on merit-demerit debates due to the limited time available. However, this does not mean their students are not capable of logical and critical thinking. 3N explains some reasons behind debate rules and his students get excited for new knowledge. For example, 3N tells students that, in policy debate, the affirmative side has more burden because it has to change the status quo. 3N says his students "enjoy such new knowledge. They may feel they get smarter."

Due to time constraints, the interviewees struggle to let their students create well-crafted arguments, refutation, and judging ballots. This suggests that debate teachers need to rethink what is the essential in debate education---what do we want students to get from our debate class? For example, examining evidence is an important skill, which boosts the students' literacy. However, as the interview results reveal, in actual classroom debates, very few students demonstrate such skills. They seem to try their best to follow the format, do research, and create their arguments---mostly in English which is not their first language. This is definitely a great achievement, but this does not reach the goal. What methods would be useful to go further?

## 6. IDEAS FOR EFFECTIVE TEACHING

Each interviewee shares ideas for teaching debate that have worked well in their teaching contexts. Whether a class activity was judged to be effective or not depends on the teacher's goal setting and is also difficult to evaluate with objective criteria in the everyday classroom. Some similar ideas were shared by different teachers as successful, however, and this is a sign of their success. Prominent ideas reported as successful in the interviews are impromptu debates, a format for refutation, and ballot writing.

Several interviewees are in favor of impromptu debates, in which students are given a proposition right before the debate. 2N uses impromptu debates as an introductory activity for debate and it works well. He comments: "it was a good opportunity to let students think about what persuasion is like and how they can be persuasive. It may be the first time for them to think about those things consciously." 1N gives an example of an impromptu debate on the proposition of "Would it better if people could communicate with animals or with people from

every other country?” 1N says this activity lets students generate various arguments. 4N also mentions that impromptu debate in Japanese was effective for her students. Those narratives suggest that such training to speak against someone should be an introductory activity for debate especially in Japan. As 1Y points out, “debate is based on the Western culture that avoids silence...but, it [arguing back] can be regarded as arrogant in Japanese culture.” Therefore, impromptu debate is effective for students from collectivistic cultures to get used to making straight-forward refutations against others. Practicing it can help Japanese students become mentally ready for other debate activities.

Teaching formats for refutation is another prominent idea that emerged from the interviews and is of particular value because it can somewhat resolve the difficulty of making refutations that several interviewees described. 2Y shares his way of teaching refutation formats using counterexamples. He recounts how a student learning this technique responded to the statement that school teachers in Japan often say, “an undisciplined hairstyle [like dyed hair] is a sign of an undisciplined mind,” with “if so, is lack of hair a sign of lack of mind?” 2Y prepares several other refutation formats and examples, and then assigns students to find refutations in their daily lives. The activity is a great example of active learning. In addition, 3Y suggests, writing “a perfect flow sheet, which includes all arguments in constructive speeches and rebuttal speeches is the most important activity in debate class.” This can also lead to students preparing various refutations by themselves.

The last prominent idea from the interviews is ballot writing. 1Y positively evaluates what his students write in ballots: “Students analyze and write what was good and what was not in debates logically...they can’t perform well as debaters, but as audience members, they understand [presented arguments] well.” 3Y further emphasizes the important of ballot writing, as “the goal of debate education is writing [good] ballots. Judges must understand that debate is essentially to write ballots.” From the perspective of active learning, writing ballots enables students to listen critically, organize presented arguments, and draw their conclusions by themselves. Although many classroom debates have constraints like a limited number of class periods and varying levels of English skills, employing the above ideas even partially would benefit students.

## 7. NEEDS FOR TEACHING MATERIALS

The interviewees all talked about the lack of suitable materials for teaching debate effectively in Japan. Most of the interviewees say model debate videos would be beneficial. 4N is concerned that “some students think that debate is just a quarrel” so she wants teaching materials that teach “manners of debate, like making a constrictive speech and then refuting it... The format of debate rules and a video illustrating them would be great.” 1N shares her preference for model debate videos over textbooks. Videos would be easier for both students and teachers to understand; as 1N suggests, “in class, teachers can play the video. They can stop at an important part and explain what is happening there.” 2N requests similar materials, like model debates with a simple proposition and simple arguments. 1Y also wants good model debate videos, especially by students whose English levels are not native-like. As 1Y explains, “I have seen a few good debates, which flow well logically, with very simple English. Those debates were very interesting.” Such good debates in plain English would “encourage students that they can debate [with their English level].” In addition, some interviewees want a teaching manual that explains model debates. 6N says he was given a model speech [by his supervisor], but how to explain it or what points he should emphasize were not provided. Therefore, model debates should come with a teaching manual, which lists and explains their good and bad points.

While interviewees without debate experience prefer videos to written model debate, debate-experienced interviewees request written ones. 5Y says some examples of written initial arguments as well as refutation would be beneficial. 7Y suggests a list of arguments for a certain proposition, like the White Papers issued by the government of the United States of America. 2Y also wants a “case study that comments on a proposition...for example, in an actual debate round, this argument is evaluated this way.” He says he is working to create a list of ballots as part of judge training.

A list of debate propositions is also desired by both teachers who use teacher-created propositions and student-created propositions. 6N, who uses student-created propositions requests a list of propositions of various levels. 5N, who uses student-created propositions as well as 6N, wants some typical phrases or formats students can use for creating propositions.

2N, who uses student-created propositions, also points out the need for the list as examples for students, and he plans to make one with his colleagues.

Several interviewees with debate experience suggest creating a roadmap for beginners. As 6Y says, “teachers can easily access resources, such as worksheets, through the internet.” However, “it is difficult to select appropriate ones if they do not know debate.” 3Y also mentions “other teachers without debate experience cannot tell which are good debate propositions and which are not.” Therefore, a website or a collection of teaching resources that open for a lot of instructors would be beneficial.

Interviewees, especially those who do not have debate experience, seek opportunities for faculty development or workshops in which they can learn debate basics. 5N expresses her lack of confidence, as “the hardest bottleneck [of teaching debate] is my lack of debate experience...there are few opportunities to study [debate and its teaching methods].” 1Y, who is in the position of supervising other instructors, also claims the need for seminars that target inexperienced instructors: “A Faculty Development workshop that invites debate professionals would be appreciated, like a seminar that covers most important points in teaching debate. The demand surely exists. It is necessary but few can do it.”

In sum, model debates with a manual for teachers, a list of debate propositions, a roadmap of teaching materials, and seminars for teachers are considered to be necessary. The author will create actual teaching materials based on the demands provided by the interviewees, as well as her analysis of existing debate textbooks and resources; but presenting all of them here is out of this essay’s scope. The rest of this essay discusses potential benefits as well as problems of seminars that teach superficial, how-to methods of debate pedagogy, because it exemplifies the gap between teachers who have and do not have tournament debate experiences.

## 8. ELITISM AND FUTURE OF DEBATE EDUCATION

There must be a need for seminars or workshops for teachers. Debate has been popular as a method of bringing active learning to the Japanese language classroom, and many universities and colleges provide debate classes.

However, few teachers have experienced debate themselves, and many teachers who have no debate experience but are assigned to teach debate are deeply troubled. Teaching what one does not know is very difficult. Setting up opportunities for such teachers to learn the basic rules and teaching techniques of debate can ease the pressure that they feel and improve the quality of their classes. This can lead to improved evaluations of debate itself in Japan.

However, there are some concerns. 3Y strongly warns against holding “seminars that give easy, how-to techniques.” He clarifies the difference between “teaching debate” and “teaching by debate.” According to 3Y, we [teachers] must teach debate, and in order to teach debate, we must have resources that tournament debaters use.” In other words, there is no easy or short-cut way to get what debate is--teachers must experience intensive research, arguments and refutations, speaking under pressure, etc. Such expectations of debate instructors are somewhat ideal but can be intimidating for less experienced teachers, and as 3Y himself acknowledges, makes debate only for the elite. 4Y also mentions such elitism underlying debate education: “well, experienced debaters are members of the elite... they are not ordinary people. A certain elitism is immanent in debate...because debate requires intelligence that cognitively clarifies and verbalizes [the social issues].” In addition, debate seminars by debate professionals can create a hierarchy corresponding to each teacher’s debate experience. This should be avoided, because there are many teachers without debate experience who are able to teach debate appropriately, as the narratives by the interviewees here exemplify. Based on the interviews of this study, a teacher’s past debate experience influences his/her choice of teaching method but does not impact his/her teaching skills.

Another concern is about debate itself. 4Y comments “we [debate teachers] must recognize the danger of debate form...we artificially create a topic about which both sides can make arguments...we have to think self-reflectively.” This suggests that debate-teaching materials should embrace a meta-perspective on debate itself, including the risks and limitations of debate education as well as its merits. For example, in any style of debate, there are only two sides and they must have points that clash. This basic debate rule leads to dichotomies and

can cause complexities of the given topic to be overlooked. Furthermore, silence is not valued in debate; however, it plays a significant role in communication (Glenn, 2004). Such less favorable features of debate rarely appear in the context of debate education. Indeed, most debate textbooks write about the merits of debate, but few refer to its negative aspects.

It is somewhat true that debate education consolidates elitism. However, there are literatures arguing debate education serves for citizenship education (e.g. Arthur & Cremin, 2012) and discussion about social class (Robinson & Allen, 2018). In addition, it would be meaningful for teachers without debate experience to teach debate, along with experienced former debaters, in order to overcome the elitism. As Beerman and Shorter (2018) claim, “anyone can coach” and “any student can debate” by developing a community to craft an educational experience (p.189). Furthermore, student-created propositions would play an important role in making debate more accessible and open for anyone. For future projects, debate seminars for teachers should be planned. In order to avoid making a superficial, just-easy-techniques seminar, organizers should provide an opportunity for novice teachers to experience debate as debaters. Using a proposition such as “Debate should be mandatory for all college students” would be beneficial for critically thinking about debate itself.

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