

Virtuální hospitace – Anglický jazyk: A Formal Debate

Autoevaluace

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For this task, I chose to create a formal, two-sided debate, which was to be run on a strictly divided basis and on somewhat "parliamentary" rules of debating.

Before the date of the lesson I had informed the students about the task and the only preparation for the debate had been to (a) choose a topic for the debate, (b) formulate a proposition to be argued for and against and (c) to decide which students were on the "agree" or "disagree" side of the discussion. I had some standard controversial topics for the class to choose from, but the students decided to choose a topic of their own – the environment – a subject close to their hearts and something about which they all felt passionately.

I informed the class that to have a debate we needed not only a topic, but a proposition. I explained that a proposition is a sentence expressing an idea, an opinion, something which can be agreed or disagreed with. I felt it very important to let the students decide on their own proposition because it was genuinely how many or all of them really felt about the topic.

As most of the girls agreed with the proposition they chose, the hardest part (I believe from their view) was the necessity of having a "disagree" team, which would have to purposefully argue for something which they do not believe. This, I informed them, is the essence of debate, perhaps even the foundation of democracy – the right to hold an express an opinion and to be able to see another or an opposing point of view, even if it is not one's own view. I told them that there are always two sides to everything and that serious issues, such as pollution and the environment, are very often not "black and white" questions, there are huge grey areas to be contended with.

I created the two opposing teams by simply drawing an imaginary line half way through the classroom, resulting in the teams being randomly made up of students who mostly agreed with the proposition, but with half of them obliged to argue for the "disagree" side. There were objections at first, as one would expect, but I reiterated that part of the purpose of this exercise was to be able to argue passionately for something that you DON'T necessarily agree with. Of course, the "agree" team had the relatively easier task, as they all naturally agreed with the proposition they had chosen as a class.

I told them that they should provide a set of arguments as to why they "agree" or "disagree" with the proposition and that the arguments must have some substance and not be merely circular statements, such as "I agree because it is good", there

had to be some solid reason why they agreed with it. I explained to the students that my role was to be merely the facilitator of the discussion, acting as the “chairman” of the debate, and not actually taking part. My job was to write on the blackboard each argument that the students put forward during the course of the debate, to show visually how the discussion was progressing and so that each team could see not only their own arguments but those of the opposing team so they could somehow connect each argument with its counterpart on the other side, to build up a substantial set of arguments which would hopefully help each person to make up her own mind about what they, in reality, felt about the idea. Another aspect of my role would be to keep the discussion moving, if it slackened, by re-iterating and re-phrasing the recent arguments given, in an effort to also clarify, as well as moving things along smoothly.

What I hoped to achieve with this discussion was a lively philosophical debate, conducted in a foreign language to the students. In this situation they would not only have to use their skills of reasoning, but also their linguistic skills, and naturally would also have to listen carefully to what their classmates were saying, because there were bound to be some unexpected arguments. The use of English I expected to hear would have to be relatively formal, the discussion being of the nature of a formal debate. Words and phrases such as “on the other hand”, “we feel that...”, and so on, as well as words related to the topic, such as “emissions”, “toxic”, “atmosphere”, etc. So, I felt that this was to be a test of linguistic skills, in addition to listening and arguing skills.

This was by no means the type of lesson I would essay with a class who was not at least at the upper-intermediate level. As the English of class 4B is quite advanced, I felt that they were more than capable of handling a formal debate. After teaching this class for 8 months, I have been constantly delighted by their fearlessness at expressing their own, sometimes strong opinions on various topics which I have introduced as a theme for the day's discussion.

As they were all a little nervous about the prospect of being filmed for posterity in the process of the class, I thought I would give them a nice, standard debate topic. I suggested abortion to them, but they said that they would prefer to talk about something relevant to them and their lives – pollution in the Ostrava region. I tried to bargain with them that they were biting off a large piece of meat with this topic and they would need sharp teeth and maybe a discussion about abortion would be easier... but they were determined to have their own topic. And so I let them.

I didn't want one or two of the students to dominate the proceedings, as is so often the case, so I instructed each member of each team to come up with an argument for or against the proposition and that they would have to voice their own arguments, one by one. This was a double-edged task, both in preparation and in execution –

i.e. formulating the arguments themselves and also trying to imagine what arguments the opposing team would bring to the table, and countering these potential “threats” with equally strong counter-arguments. As each team didn’t know the content of the other team’s arguments, this was quite a challenge for them.

I was particularly pleased with the way the debate went. From the beginning, we heard solid arguments, one after another. Although the arguments provided by the students were excellent, I would have perhaps liked to have seen a little more actual “arguing” and interaction between the two teams. Although each team itself was quite efficient as a unit. I think it was already decided from the start which side would “win” the debate, because I suggested that at the end they all vote (with their real opinions) and I already knew that most of them agreed with the proposition “The factories are ignorant, but people are more ignorant”. Perhaps this was also the reason for the reduced interaction, as this topic was not as truly controversial as the word is defined, for reasons just mentioned. However, what I saw, and indeed, what I wanted to see was not necessarily the conclusion, the “destination”, but the “journey” itself: the simultaneous development of a discussion, in which each participant had to listen to her own team AND the other team, and an understanding of the ethics and method of formally discussing a proposition. I was more than satisfied with the result.