

Debate Planning and Practice Using Argument Diagrams

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Abstract

Effective debate is predicated on the debaters' sound understanding of argumentation. When attempting to teach debate in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes, students initially require instruction in the fundamental skills of argumentation and opportunities to practice those skills repeatedly. This article describes how Stephen Toulmin's model of argumentation and the argument diagrams derived from it could assist students in practicing essential debate skills such as argument creation, argument comprehension and argument analysis. The practice activities are designed to fit into a task-based language teaching (TLBT) framework and reference cognitive theory. Practicing the basic concepts of argumentation using this diagram technique may provide EFL students with a simple, flexible and easily repeatable method for acquiring debate skills. Teachers and students could both benefit from applying some or all of these debate practice techniques in their debate classes.

Keywords: EFL, Debate, Argumentation, Skill acquisition, Task-based Language Teaching

Introduction

Debate can be a useful task to assign students in EFL classrooms as there is a strong focus on speaking and listening. Newman & Woolgar (2014) state that "...the point of [debate in a classroom environment] will be to develop the students' speaking and listening skills [but] can also be a useful teaching tool for delivering content and understanding across the curriculum" (p.7). Debate offers not only a communicative element, but also the opportunity for students to learn and think about unfamiliar content or re-think familiar content in a more deliberate and critical manner. The competitive nature of debate can also be a motivating factor that encourages students to be better communicators and better researchers. Debate is essentially "The process of inquiry and advocacy; the seeking of a reasoned judgement on a proposition" (Freely & Steinberg, 2008, p.2). This process is driven by argumentation, "...reason giving in communicative situations by people whose purpose is the justification of acts, beliefs, attitudes, and values" (Freely & Steinberg, 2008, p.5). In an academic debate, it is assumed that both debate teams have an equal understanding of what an argument is and how to justify arguments so that a reasoned judgement can be realised. To ensure a fair debate, all debaters should be able to recognise an argument as opposed to an opinion, construct (strong) arguments, analyse arguments and discover weaknesses in them, listen to and comprehend opposing arguments, and present their arguments and rebuttals in a comprehensible manner. The common element in all of these competencies is the knowledge of argumentation. Winning the debate is dependent on sound argumentation and both teams must feel confident in their ability to argue effectively. If the debating teams do not have an equal understanding of this basic concept, one team will have an unfair advantage over the other. However, many EFL students need substantial practice in argumentation before they will feel comfortable participating in a live academic debate. Language ability and confidence can also vary significantly from student to student so that one student may dominate a debate or do more work than is required in a team that is supposed to be cooperating equally. Practicing argumentation in a debate class is therefore beneficial because it raises awareness of the central concept of debate, ensures a fair debate, and can give students

confidence in their ability. To this end, Steven Toulmin's model of argumentation and specifically the diagrams in which he represents arguments presents itself as a convenient and useful pedagogical tool in EFL debate classes. Argument diagrams formalise the structure of reasoning behind each and every argument by separating and clarifying the essential elements. Existing arguments can be deconstructed into the diagram so that students can practice analysing logical (or illogical) connections between the elements of any argument. New arguments can be constructed by filling in empty diagrams with relevant information. Repeated practice of deconstruction, analysis, reconstruction, and construction of new arguments could provide the solid grounding in argumentation that may lead to more coherent arguments and improved language skills. There may also be the added benefit of students becoming better critical thinkers as many scholars recognise a close connection between proficiency in the skill of argumentation and the ability to think critically about a topic. (Diyanni; 2016 Egege; 2021 Freeley & Steinberg; 2008 Swatridge; 2014)

Literature Review

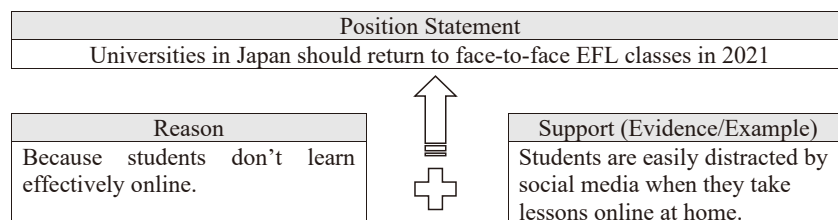
Freely and Steinberg (2008) highlight the significant cognitive load that is required for argument construction and analysis. According to Freely and Steinberg (2008), when preparing arguments for a debate, students must research issues, organise and analyse data, synthesize data, and evaluate the quality of information they find. They must also understand how to reason, recognise and critique different methods of reasoning and comprehend the logic of decision making. Subsequently, students must then acquire the skill of communicating their arguments with words and be able to process the arguments of others quickly. It is not surprising that, "The creation of an argument is one of the most complex cognitive acts students can engage in" (Freely & Steinberg, 2008, p.38). Teachers can utilise task-based language teaching methodology and cognitive theory to help students deal with this complexity. In task-based language teaching methodology, tasks should always involve a "pre-task" (Ellis, 2003) or a "facilitating task" (Willis & Willis, 2007). Essentially, this is a planning and preparation stage that enables students to become familiar with what the goals of the task are and how to accomplish the goals. This step also functions as a way "...to ease processing load and to push learners to interpret tasks in more demanding ways" (Ellis, 2003, p.249). Ellis also presents research-based evidence for a positive effect on fluency and complexity when strategic planning (planning completed before the commencement of the task itself) is employed (Ellis, 2003). A learning strategy specific to argumentation can also be beneficial to debate skill acquisition. "In L2 learning, task-relevant learning strategies increase the likelihood of task success [and] have a positive spill-over effect onto other task outcomes: affective judgements about the task, the language, and the self" (Oxford, 2017, p.72). Therefore, practicing argumentation using a strategic plan before doing a formal debate should reduce the cognitive load of the task and instil more confidence in students' ability to successfully complete the task. Argument mapping is conducive to use as a strategic plan for debate because the key elements of an argument can easily be distinguished and checked for reasoning and logic. This familiarizes students with the goals of a debate and makes successful completion of the debate more likely. Toulmin's model of argumentation (Toulmin, 1958), also known as "Toulmin's Argument Pattern," has been applied to academic English composition classes in the United States (Kneupper 1978; Karbach 1987) and in EFL writing classes in Japan (Oi, 2005). These writers concur that using the model results in improvements in the logical organisation and coherence of essay writing and note benefits for students and teachers. For example, Locker & Keene (1983) as cited in Karbach (1987) acknowledge the benefits for both teachers and students by

stating “Instructors can use this model to show students the faulty or inadequate logic in their writing, but best of all, students can use the model as a heuristic to check the logic in their own rough drafts” (Karbach, 1987, p.90-91). Although the studies mentioned above concern the teaching of writing, I believe that Toulmin’s model of argumentation can provide similar benefits when applied to the teaching of debate. Toulmin’s argument model consists of three main parts: claim, warrant and grounds. The “claim” is the thesis of an argument, the “warrant” is an assumption that links the claim to the grounds, and the “grounds” is the support/evidence for the claim. Toulmin also identified the “backing,” “qualifier,” “reservation,” and “rebuttal”. Of these, the “rebuttal” and the “qualifier” seem the most useful to debate practice activities. “Rebuttals” are possible objections to the claim, warrant, or grounds, and a “qualifier” is something that limits and restricts the range of a claim. In an EFL class, these terms may be difficult for students to remember so adapting some of them to those in the right column of the table below may be of some assistance.

Toulmin Terminology	Debate Class Terminology
Claim	Position Statement
Warrant	Reason
Grounds	Support (Evidence/Example)
Rebuttal	Rebuttal (But /However /Unless)
Qualifier	Point of view/Viewpoint

Using Toulmin’s diagrammatic style and the terminology for a debate class, an example argument for the proposition ‘Universities in Japan should return to face-to-face classes in 2021’ can be represented diagrammatically in the following way.

Figure 1
Example of a Completed Argument Diagram



Debate Practice

The style of argument diagram described above can be used to practice argumentation in a number of ways. I believe it is useful to use when practicing all elements of argument construction, analysis, note-taking, and presentation. In this section, I will describe how the diagrams could be used to practice each of these debate skills.

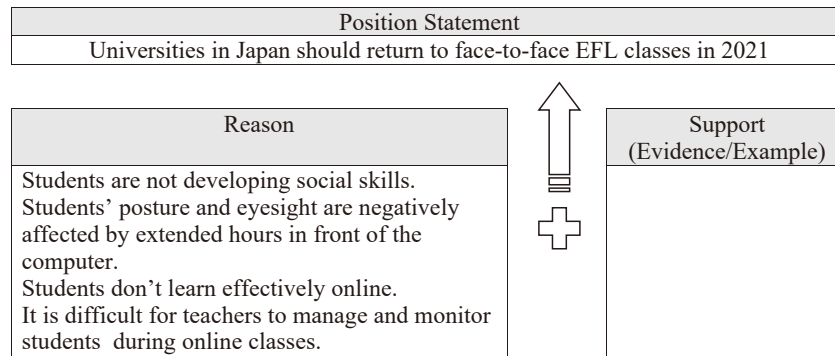
Practicing reasons and support (argument construction)

One way to practice reasons could be for the teacher to provide a list of supporting evidence and have students brainstorm one reason based on each support. This activity is limited in possible reasons that students could conceive of, however, it could be a useful alternative for lower-level

students.

Another more creative way (figure 2) for students to practice could be to give them a position statement and then have them brainstorm as many reasons connected to the position statement as they can think of.

Figure 2
Example of a Completed Argument Diagram Used for Practicing Reasons

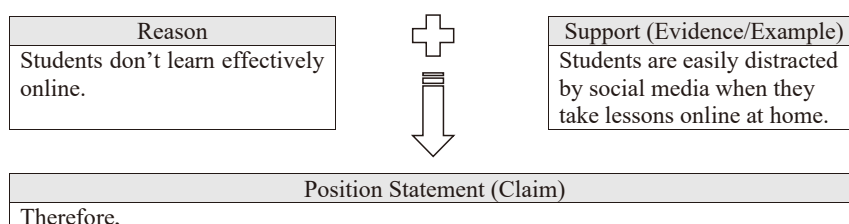


In order to practice support, students could then be asked to search the internet for relevant examples or evidence that matches the reasons they have brainstormed. Alternatively, the teacher could provide a diagram with a position statement and a reason in addition to providing a newspaper article or internet webpage relevant to the topic. Students would then be asked to search for supporting evidence or examples from the article/webpage and to complete their argument diagrams. A separate box or space for the source (author, year, etc.) could also be added to the diagram and practiced if deemed necessary.

Practicing position statements (argument construction)

The position statement is in fact the conclusion of the argument. If we take the argument we used in the diagram in the previous section, we can make this relationship clear by rearranging the three elements of the argument in the following manner, “Students are easily distracted by social media when they take lessons online at home so students don't learn effectively online. Therefore, universities should return to face-to-face EFL classes in the second semester of 2021.” As a result of this relationship, students can practice developing position statements by being given reasons and support and then drawing a conclusion from them. For example, a student might be given a reason and support such as those in figure 3 and then be asked to complete a third sentence starting with “Therefore...” This conclusion, minus “Therefore”, would be the position statement.

Figure 3
Example of an Argument Diagram Used for Practicing Position Statements

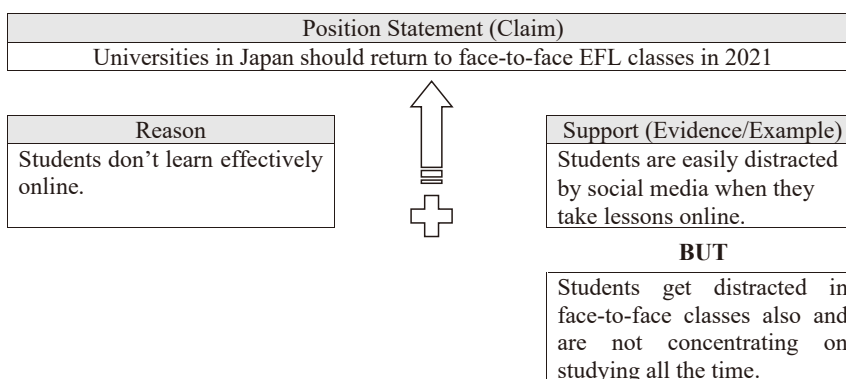


From the reason and support in figure 3, students could possibly deduce a position statement, such as “(Therefore) learning in the classroom is better than learning online.” When creating and practicing position statements, students may find it helpful to include a viewpoint such as, “From a health/economic/safety point of view...”. If not qualified in this manner, information that may otherwise be implicit becomes explicit. An example and reasons for this will be described in the next section on practicing rebuttals.

Practicing rebuttal (argument analysis)

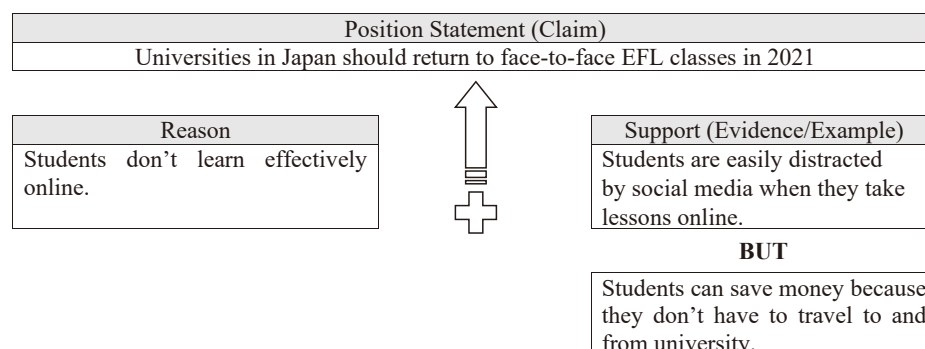
Students need to understand that it is necessary to look at all three parts of the argument when formulating a rebuttal and to attack the reason/claim connection and/or to attack the support if it is unreliable or untruthful. Rebuttals can be practiced by including another space to the three original spaces. This rebuttal space can be labelled something along the lines of “but”, “however” or “unless”. A completed rebuttal for the proposition “Universities in Japan should return to face-to-face EFL classes in 2021” can be represented diagrammatically in the following manner.

Figure 4
Example of a Completed Argument Diagram Including a Rebuttal



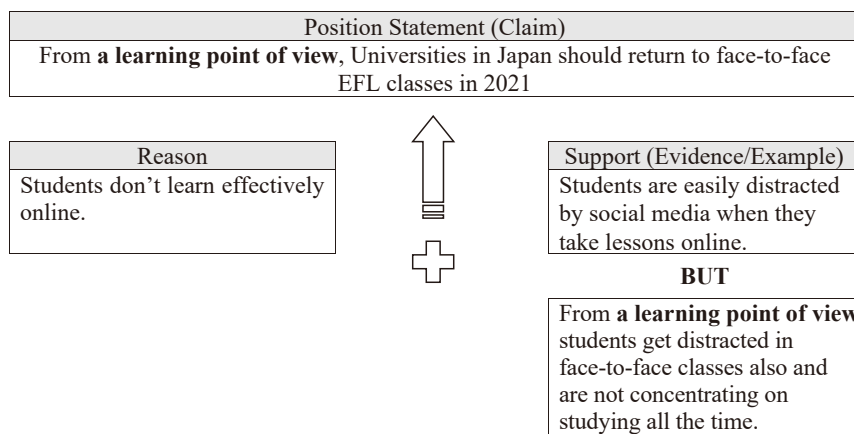
Students can practice analyzing and writing rebuttals to arguments by filling in a blank rebuttal field after reviewing the previous three elements. Completed arguments could be supplied by the teacher or students could utilize previously completed diagrams from their own practice of creating arguments. It is worthwhile spending quite a lot of time on practicing rebuttal as this skill is essential to debate and can easily be practiced in the wrong way. For example, consider the argument and rebuttal in figure 5.

Figure 5
Example of a Completed Argument Diagram Including an Erroneous Rebuttal



When viewed simply as a rebuttal to the position statement, the rebuttal above seems to be satisfactory, however, the rebuttal does not address the reason of the argument and the implication that classroom learning is superior to online learning. The central idea of this argument concerns the effect on learning. In the above example, the cost of travelling to and from university is irrelevant to whether or not learning improves in an online or face-to-face environment. However, many students may falsely believe that “students can save money” is an effective rebuttal to “universities should return to face-to-face EFL classes.” Using the diagram, teachers can easily exemplify such erroneous rebuttal suggestions and highlight inferences that may not be immediately clear to students. Moreover, adding a viewpoint can help students avoid such examples of weak argumentation. When formulating rebuttals, students should keep this viewpoint in mind and add it to the beginning of their rebuttal so that connections to the reasoning of the argument are explicit. Teachers can refer students back to this viewpoint if/when students provide vague or irrelevant rebuttals during practice. A completed rebuttal practice (including the revised position statement) would resemble that as represented in figure 6.

Figure 6
Example of a Completed Argument Diagram Including a Point of View



Qualifying the position statement can also make it easier to analyse and adjust rebuttals that might otherwise be weak. For example, by considering the viewpoint more closely the rebuttal in figure 5 could be changed to the following. “But (from a learning point of view) students don’t have to spend time travelling to and from university and therefore should be able to get more sleep and be more alert when they are taking lessons online.” The rebuttal now has a relevant connection to the effect of online classes on learning. Before a debate, students can perform this sort of analytical practice with their own arguments in an attempt to predict possible rebuttals and reinforce their own arguments.

Practice speaking/fluency (argument presentation)

The practice activities that I have described so far have a clear focus on thinking and writing down ideas. After having done some written argument practice, students also need opportunities to practice argumentation through speaking. Creating cards from argument diagrams can facilitate a variety of communicative interactions. As an initial starting point, (especially for lower-level students) teachers could create practice cards with various arguments already written on them. For example,

10 simple arguments are printed onto argument diagrams. Three sets of cards could then be created from those arguments; one set of position statements, one set of reasons, and one set of supporting evidence/examples. Once the basic idea of arguments (the idea of having three parts) has been introduced to the class, groups of students would then be asked to recreate the 10 arguments by communicating the information on the cards. After the groups have finished matching their arguments, each group could move around and look over the other groups' work to check for similarities or differences. Another idea is to create two sets of cards; one set of argument cards containing a position statement, reason, and support and one set of cards containing rebuttals to those arguments. In pairs, one student has argument cards and the other has rebuttal cards. The aim is for the two students to match correctly the arguments and rebuttals by communicating the content of their cards to each other. This activity could lead into a less structured 'ping-pong debate' activity where students could use rebuttals they remember from the previous card game or come up with their own ideas impromptu. Another slightly more advanced card idea could be to provide cards with various position statements related to level appropriate topics. One student in the group (preferably a group of three) would start by reading the position statement and the student on their left would then say a reason for or against the proposition. The next student on the left would give an example to support the reason. In a group of four, the fourth student could give a rebuttal. Points could be awarded for contributions. Students can reinforce their knowledge of the basic elements of argumentation while they practice presenting their arguments before a formal academic debate. As preparation, diagrams can be used as note cards in the same way as note cards are used to give a presentation. For example, completed argumentation cards could be used in conjunction with debate phrase cards (cards which include useful debate phrases) and practiced as a mock debate in teams. Ultimately, the aim is to have students use the cards as a scaffold when they first begin speaking but then to gradually introduce practice activities in which they rely less and less on the cards and concentrate more on their speaking fluency.

Practicing listening for specific information and note-taking (argument comprehension)

It is necessary for students to take detailed notes when listening to other debaters either as an opposing team member or as an audience member. To practice this skill, blank argument diagrams can be given to the listeners and used as note-taking templates. Specific information related to the proposition, reason, and support for each argument can then be easily recorded. While listening, some information may be incomprehensible and a blank or incomplete space will be left on their note-taking template. In this case, when the speaker concludes, it is easy for the listener to recognize which piece of information is missing and then ask the speaker for repetition or clarification. Students can also practice asking comprehension checking questions once all the template fields have been filled, to ensure the information they recorded is as the speakers intended. Thus, through this activity, students can practice both note-taking and cross examination skills.

Summary

In this paper, I have described the reasons why I believe Toulmin's argument diagrams are useful for practicing debate skills in EFL classes. I have also outlined how the diagrams could be applied to the practice of argument construction, analysis, presentation, and comprehension. Debate

is an extremely complex task that requires many hours of practice. Incorporating this model of argumentation into the planning and practice of debate could enable students to manage the task complexity and provide them with a common springboard from which to learn effectively.

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