

Korean EFL Learners' L2 Proficiency and Debating Skills

Hyun Jin Kim

Cheongju National University of Education

37hjkim@hanmail.net

Abstract

This paper shows Korean EFL learners' English debate course and their evaluation of the course. After three debates during the 15 week course, the learners did the survey on the debate course and wrote reflection paper. The data analysis and results show that they believe their debating skills improve more than their English skills through debate.

Keywords

L2 proficiency, English debate, debating skills

Introduction

The present study is designed to explore whether Korean EFL learners' English proficiency and debating skills are improved through debate.

1 Debate and English ability

Debate is a type of speech act where one rebuts his/her opponent's argument and defenses his/her logic and where, therefore, persuasive power of proof is a key factor (Richards & Rickett, 1995). Debate requires both general linguistic skills including word choice or fluency and content and argument skills including data analyzing or negotiation skills. It gives L2 learners a cognitive burden because it requires four language skills comprehensively (Stewart & Pleisch, 1998), and furthermore, it demands ability to connect data or information and logical thinking (Jung, 2006). In this sense, debate is very demanding for EFL learners; however, they can develop their English ability to a higher level through debate.

2 The study

2.1 English debate class

32 freshmen at a Korean university participated in 3 debates during the English debate course, which is one of the compulsory course of the

university curriculum. During the course, they practiced debating skills and participated in debates three times: at the sixth, tenth, and fifteenth week of the semester. They learned about the debate structure, debating roles, and debating skills such as how to research, argue, rebut, and defense. The course schedule is as shown in Figure 1.

Week	Activity
1	Orientation
2	Topic 1 (Afterschool academies)
3	Topic 2 (Genetically modified foods)
4	Topic 3 (Climate changes)
5	Review & rehearsal
6	Debate 1
7	Topic 4 (Replacing teachers with computers)
8	Topic 5 (Using CCTVs in public places)
9	Topic 6 (Punishment for criminals)
10	Review & rehearsal
11	Debate 2
12	Topic 7 (Cosmetic plastic surgery)
13	Topic 8 (Physical education in schools)
14	Review & rehearsal
15	Debate 3

Figure 1: Debate course schedule

As shown above, eight topics were chosen and practiced. The students learned and practiced how to organize supporting arguments from week 4 through 5, how to develop logical supporting reasons from week 7 through 10, and how to develop effective supporting reasons from week 12 through 14. They were asked to research data and prepare arguments before class. In each class, they first discussed about the topic and then participated in group debate where each of them belonged to either proposition team or opposition team. Each group consists of four to six members, with each team consisting of two to three members as shown in Figure 2.

1 group	
Proposition team	Opposition team
Pro 1	Con 1
Pro 2	Con 2
Pro 3	Con 3

Figure 2: Group members

The debate procedure and each member’s task is shown in Figure 3.

Step	Proposition team	Opposition team
1	Pro 1: Agree opening statement	
2		Con 1: Disagree opening statement
3	Pro 1: Agree argument 1	
4		Con 1: Rebuttal 1 & Disagreement argument 1
5	Pro 2: Rebuttal 1 & Agree argument 2	
6		Con 2: Rebuttal 2 & Disagreement argument 2
7	Pro 3: Rebuttal 2 & Agree argument 3	
8		Con 3: Rebuttal 3 & Disagreement argument 3
9		Con 1: Disagree closing statement
10	Pro 1: Agree closing argument	

Figure 3: Debate procedure

2.2 Survey

After the final debate, the students were asked to respond to Survey 1 and Survey 2. Table 1 shows the items of Survey 1.

Table 1: How Important Each Element Is in Debate?

Category	Subcategory
English ability	Pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency
Delivery	Voice (clarity), attitude, time management
Content & debate skills	Argument, reasons, evidence/example, explicitness, rebuttal, preparedness

Survey 2 consists of 15 items including the following questions: how their speaking skills improved through debate, how their writing

skills improved through debate, how their debating skills improved through debate, how they like the debate class, what strategies they used in debating to understand other debaters, what strategies they used in debating to have themselves understood by other debaters.

3 Results

The results of the survey are as follows. All three categories were marked as important elements of an effective debate, but ‘English ability’ and ‘Content & debate skills’ categories were recognized more important than ‘Delivery.’ Among ‘English ability’ subcategory, ‘vocabulary’ and ‘fluency’ were recognized more important than ‘pronunciation’ and ‘grammar’, and ‘grammar’ was the least important element. Among ‘Content & debating skills’ subcategories, ‘explicitness’ was marked as the most important’, and ‘evidence/example’ was ranked as the least important’. Korean learners replied that debate classes contribute to the improvement of their L2 proficiency and debating skills overall, but they replied that their L2 proficiency does not improve as much as their debating skills. Despite those responses, they found debate classes interesting and useful because they were provided more chances to use English in class, to express in English what they think, to study English while preparing for the debate, and to apply what they have learned. Also some students replied that they could expand their knowledge through preparation for and participation in the debate.

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