DEBATES AS A TYPE OF DISCUSSION IN ENGLISH TEACHING FOR TECHNICAL STUDENTS

Oksana Synekop
National Technical University of Ukraine “Kyiv Polytechnic Institute”, Kyiv, Ukraine
oksana.synekop@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0001-6191-6264

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Abstract: One of the ways to develop students’ foreign language communication competence is using debates. The work presents the analysis of debates as a type of discussion in English teaching for students in higher technical universities. The relevant topics of debates in the educational, technical and scientific, professionally oriented spheres are outlined. Debates are analyzed according to the following criteria: conditions of communication, quantity of participants, the aim of communication, and the nature of the situation. It is possible to differentiate debates in accordance with the form of presentation, the participants involved in the discussion, the place of organization, division of opinions, involved spheres, priority of types of speech activity, control and function. Foreign language communicative, compensatory, intellectual, training and organizational skills are defined. The acceptable styles of debates for technical students are outlined; the evaluation of debates is considered.

Keywords: debates; students of technical specialties; higher technical universities; foreign language communication; evaluation criteria and descriptors; educational, technical and scientific, professionally oriented spheres.

Introduction

Today mastering foreign language communicative competence is an inseparable component of the professional competence of any future specialist as well as the specialist in the field of information security. The abilities to speak and write are in priority for the students of the higher technical educational institutions. Among the key skills outlined in the document ‘Competency Models for Enterprise Security and Cybersecurity’ (2015) verbal and written communication skills are important for the formation of cybersecurity competencies in students of technical specialties in the field of information security. It means that the future specialist has to be able to communicate in written and oral form on professional topics not only using his or her native language but foreign language as well.

This work focuses on the developing students' speaking skills. Mastering the spoken language by technical students gives them the ability to explain, express their viewpoint and exchange opinions. One of the ways to improve students' speaking skills is to participate in debates. Debating is considered to be a type of discussion. Examining the difference between debates and discussions J. Goodwin (2003) has come to conclusion that more different opinions are included in debates. Furthermore, in contrast to the discussions debates have got a strict structure and definite limits of time.

Debates attract the attention of different scientists and methodologists. For example, A. J. Freely and D. L. Steinberg (2005) focus their research on the importance of critical thinking in decision making, the classification of debates, building the argumentation; D. M. Leuser (2003) uses classroom debates for strengthening students' leadership skills, interpersonal influence, teambuilding, group problem solving, and oral presentation; D. Krieger (2005) considers debates as a way of language learning; J. Goodwin (2003) researches debates in content area classes and come to conclusion that they enhance disciplinary learning as well as core skills; G. Iberri-Shea (2009) investigates public speaking tasks in English language teaching; T. V. Sidorenko and S. V. Ryboushkina (2014) form the metasubject competence in technical students through debates; S. P. Vargo (2012) outlines the types of debates acceptable for teaching cadets of military academy such as four corner, role-play, fishbowl, think-pair-share, and meeting house; M. Walker and Ch. Warhurst (2010) summarize that debates enable students to develop a critical view of the topics under discussion and to acquire a number of transferable skills, C. Park, Ch. Kier and K. Jugdev (2011) study debates in the context of online education etc. Taking into consideration the information above, it is evident that debates are widely used in teaching practice. But at the same time debates are very little developed in methodology of teaching foreign languages in the context of teaching technical students in the field of information security.
So, the aim of this paper is
- to outline the necessity of teaching debates for the students of technical specialties in the field of information security;
- to consider various meanings of the notion ‘debates’;
- to analyze the characteristics of the debates;
- to define the main skills of the students that they have to master for participating in the debates;
- to consider the organization of debates;
- to suggest the criteria and descriptors.

Overview

Debates can be used for practising foreign language communication of the students of technical specialties exactly in the field of information security. This necessity is supported by the following explanation. During the six-year-English studying period at the National Technical University of Ukraine “Kyiv Polytechnic Institute” students study different topics that belong to the educational, technical and scientific, professionally oriented spheres and can be considered disputable and acceptable for debates. The analysis of authentic texts, books and videos, devoted to various educational and scientific topics including professional ones on the issues of information security, has shown that there are a number of raised issues that are interesting for students to be discussed. For instance, Traditional vs. Distance Learning, The Internet: Pros and Cons, Censor the Internet (educational sphere); Science and Technology: Advantages and Disadvantages (technical and scientific sphere); Social Networking Sites and Warfare, Privacy vs. Security, Surveillance Technologies, Cyber Attacks, Unauthorized Sharing of Licensed Files (professionally oriented sphere). Taking part in such discussions gives the students an opportunity to study the problem from different opinions and represent interests of various social groups from professionals and government officials to ordinary people. With every passing year the range of professionally oriented topics increases. It is necessary to mention that professionally oriented topics in the field of information security are particularly connected with the life of our society and the point of view of the specialists in the field of information security is valuable. That is why the future specialists in this field have to be able to explain and give arguments for / against on issues of information security.

As we know a debate as a type of discussion is a discussion of opposed viewpoints on controversial topics in educational, technical, and professionally oriented spheres. Taking into consideration the point of view of A. J. Freely and D. L. Steinberg (2005) the debates can be applied or academic. Academic debate is conducted under the direction of an educational institution for the purpose of providing educational opportunities for its students. Applied debate is presented before a judge or audience with the power to render a binding decision on the proposition in a real way (Freely and Steinberg (2005)). Thus, within higher educational institutions students of technical specialties are taught academic debates.

Except the viewpoint that the debate is a type of discussion the notion ‘debate’ accumulates various interpretations. Let us look at these meanings. In accordance with A. J. Freely and D. L. Steinberg (2005, p. 6), a debate is the process of inquiry and advocacy, a way of arriving at a reasoned judgment on a proposition. A. Alasmari and S. S. Ahmed (2012) define debating as a formal method of interactive and representational argument aimed at persuading judges and audience. D. Krieger (2005) interprets the notion ‘debate’ as an excellent activity for language learning because it engages students in a variety of cognitive and linguistic ways. P. Zhdanov (2009), E. G. Kalinkina and S. A. Naumov (2002) reckon that a debate is an intellectual role play. In the teaching process E.V. Sovetova (2007) considers debates as an intellectual role play and at the same time educational technology. Paying attention on the above information all the definitions suppose such key points: roles of participants in the discussion, a strict procedure of organization, intellectual abilities of persuading. Hence, debates as a type of discussion can be realized as an intellectual role play in which the participants act certain roles in the logic of the plot and follow the established rules with the aim of decision-making.

Using the criteria of oral speech communication from analysis suggested by O. Y. Goikhman and T. M. Nadeina (2008), let us characterize debates according to conditions of communication, quantity of participants, the aim of communication, and the nature of the situation. The first characteristic ‘conditions of communication’ can be provided through active or passive feedback. Debates present direct communication with active feedback. All the participants of discussion try to react at once on the utterances of communicators. Taking into consideration the next characteristic ‘quantity of participants’, most debates can be referred to a polylogue as a type of dialogue. To clarify this point it
is possible to differentiate the dialogue that is known as communication between two people and polylogue that is considered as a discussion between more than two people. The polylogue is defined to be more complicated than the dialogue because it involves complex mechanisms of interaction not only from the viewpoint of debates organization but also from psychology (the theory of speech generation), pragmatics, social psychology. Nevertheless, as the type of a dialogue, debates are directed on exchanging the ideas or opinions on a particular issue in order to reach a certain decision. According to the characteristic ‘the aim’ of debates, it is possible to define the following: contact (receiving and sending information); persuasive (through arguments influence on the position of the communicator); cognitive (exchanging knowledge through thoughts, ideas, opinions between participants). The last characteristic is ‘nature of situation’ in accordance with debates can be considered as business communication.

The analysis of different debates described by scientists and taking into attention the conditions of teaching students of technical specialties it is possible to differentiate them according to the following criteria:

1) the form of presentation:
   - written form;
   - oral form;

2) involving the participants in the discussion:
   - a certain part of the students in the group (strictly limited the quantity of participants, for example, six speakers and three judges);
   - all the students of the group (for instance, speakers, judges, experts and audience);

3) the place of organization:
   - online;
   - offline (in the classroom);

4) division of opinions:
   - two points of view;
   - more than two (J. Crone (1997) outlines three points of view or four ‘strongly agree’, ‘agree’, ‘disagree’, and ‘strongly disagree’);

5) involving the spheres:
   - educational;
   - technical and scientific;
   - professional oriented;

6) priority of types of speech activity:
   - speaking;
   - writing;
   - all the types of speech activity (speaking, listening, reading and writing);

7) control:
   - from the side of students;
   - partly from the side of a teacher;

8) the function:
   - formation of sub-skills and skills in types of activities;
   - generalization and control of knowledge, sub-skills and skills.

From the viewpoint of methodologists negative and positive influence of debates on the educational process should be considered. Expressing the criticism, M. Y. Omelicheva (2007) emphasizes on the origin of the word ‘debate’ which means ‘beat’ and can be interpreted as ‘attack’ and that is why occurrence of conflict is possible in the classroom. N. Tumposky (2004) thinks that behind the students’ competition there is a question of losing or winning. Also M. Y. Omelicheva (2007) adds that the students do not always objectively evaluate their fellowmates. Besides the mentioned drawbacks one more should be added – not all the students of the group are involved in the discussion. Some of them are not active at all.

Nevertheless, instead of the criticism, debates positively influence on the formation and development of:

1) foreign language communicative
   - sub-skills (lexical, grammatical and auditory);
   - skills of listening comprehension (to understand the basic and complete information, to predict its content); skills of speaking (to start, continue and finish the speech; to ask and answer questions; to use speech cliché; to respond adequately to a request of the interlocutor; to explain information;
to give accurately arguments and counterarguments reinforcing the point of view by definitions, facts and quotations; to convince an opponent; to use appropriate pronunciation and intonation, gestures and facial expressions; **skills of reading** (to understand the text in general, completely, critically; to compare the information from different sources and choose the relevant material); **skills of writing** (to take notes during the speech of the interlocutor and in the process of preparation to debates; to write arguments and counterarguments; to express the ideas following the style, integrity, coherence, completeness of the text);

2) **compensatory skills** (to paraphrase information; to ignore the information if it does not affect the common understanding);

3) **intellectual skills** (to define the problem; to compare, analyze, synthesize, organize, systematize, generalize; to evaluate critically; to predict);

4) **training skills** (to process information; to use strategies);

5) **organizational skills** (to plan; to work independently; to be able to self-assessment and self-improvement).

Also, debating allows students to deep their scientific and technical, professionally oriented knowledge; to work in team and individually; to adapt to the future professional situations; to be tolerant; to respect the opinion of fellowmates; to integrate knowledge from different disciplines.

All the debates need arguments as well as counterarguments that should be strong, relevant, logical. And this is achieved by evidence, facts and quotes.

There are different formats or styles of organizing debates. The scientists (P. Zhdanov (2009), C. Park, Ch. Kier and K. Jugdev (2011)) outline Parliament Debates, Lincoln–Douglas Debates, Political Debates, Carl Popper Debates, Open Debates, Internet/Online Debates, Problem-solving debate and different their modifications. The analysis of literature shows that among the suggested formats in the list the most acceptable for teaching students of technical specialties are Karl Popper debates and Open Debates. The purpose of both types of debates is to persuade the judges and audience through substantial arguments / counterarguments that the chosen position is right.

Let us consider *Karl Popper debates*. This format involves eleven students. The key roles of this type of debates are: a chairperson, a timekeeper, six speakers, three judges and the audience that follows debating. The debates are opened by a student-chairperson who shortly introduces the topic of debates, tells about the rules of debates, asks the audience to vote at the beginning and the end of debates, finishes them. Also there is a student-timekeeper, who regulates the speech time of speakers (times the speech, lets know speakers about the beginning and ending the speech). Discussing the topic three students of each team occupy different positions and correspondingly represent arguments and counterarguments, prepare cross-questions and ask partners. The speech of the speaker is limited and lasts five minutes, answering the cross-question takes three minutes. According to the rules the following procedure should be realized: an argument of the affirmative team (Af. T. Speaker 1) → cross-questions of the opposing team (O. T. Speaker 3) → a counterargument of the opposing team (O. T. Speaker 1) → cross-questions of the affirmative team (Af. T. Speaker 3) → an argument of the affirmative team (Af. T. Speaker 2) → cross-questions of the opposing team (O. T. Speaker 1) → a counterargument of the opposing team (O. T. Speaker 2) → cross-questions of the affirmative team (Af. T. Speaker 1) → final comments of the affirmative team (Af. T. Speaker 3) → final comments of the opposing team (O. T. Speaker 3).

The next format is *Open debates* that are more complicated than the previous one because of involving the experts and audience in the process of discussion. Adapting the time and modifying the procedure of open debates suggested by P. Zhdanov (2009), it is possible to represent the following steps of the discussion:

1. Introduction of a chairman (he/she introduces the topic, explains the rules) – 3 minutes.
2. Voting before debates (fill in the table with possible answers) – 1 minute.
3. The first speaker’s speech (arguments, facts, quotations) – 5 minutes.
4. The second speaker’s speech (counterarguments, facts, quotations) – 5 minutes.
5. Questions of the audience (experts do not ask) – 5 minutes.
6. Comments from the audience (audience may occupy different positions and develop the topic) – 5 minutes.
7. Experts’ speech (two or three experts) – 3 minutes for one expert.
8. Questions to experts – till 6 minutes.
10. Final speech of a chairman (analyzing the positions of both sides, contrasting the points of view of speakers, experts and audience) – 5 minutes.

11. Comments of judges – 5 minutes.

Voting occupies a crucial role in debating. It is a feedback that indicates how the opinion of students has changed during the discussion. There are different voting tables or diagrams, for example, yes/no or yes/no/do not know. The analysis of debates on the site ‘International Debate Education Association’ (1999) shows that a voting table should be flexible. The flexibility is achieved by suggesting a wide range of statements: strongly against, strongly for, mildly for, mildly against, do not know. Using such a voting table will allow us to define even little doubts of students and get more precise results at the end of debates.

The evaluation of debates should be done both by students that perform the role of judges and teachers. The total score of each student is 100. The teacher and the judges should evaluate the speakers and discuss the results. Taking into account the teachers and judges scores allows the teacher to be democratic and the students to be objective in the classroom. To count the scores of the team, it is necessary to add the scores of speakers (and experts in the open debates). The analysis of debates’ evaluation criteria by different scientists and methodologists (P. Zhdanov (2009), D. M. Leuser (2003), R. Kennedy (2007)) gives us an opportunity to define the following criteria: fluency and pronunciation, content, relative language correctness, response to a cross-question and delivery. And correspondingly their descriptors:

### Fluency and pronunciation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Speech is natural and close to that of a native speaker. Pronunciation is excellent and easy to understand.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Speech is mostly effective and continuous but with some hesitation. Pronunciation is good and acceptable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Speech is slow with some hesitation but a speaker manages to continue. Pronunciation is slightly unclear at times, but can generally be understood.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Speech is very slow with significant hesitation, difficult to understand. Frequent mistakes in pronunciation cause inadequate understanding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Speech is very slow with significant hesitation, difficult to understand. Frequent mistakes in pronunciation cause inadequate understanding.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Content

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Content is always effective, focused, relevant and logical; supported by various definitions, examples, facts, quotations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Content is generally appropriate, focused, relevant and logical; supported by some definitions, examples, facts, quotations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Content is appropriate, but not well developed; supported by limited definitions, examples, facts, quotations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Content is inappropriate, either very few or no definitions, examples, facts, quotations; difficult to follow.</td>
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### Relative language correctness

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<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Speaker uses a wide range of vocabulary with full flexibility, accuracy and extension; expresses his/her opinion and responses the questions with a full range of grammar usage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Speaker uses generally appropriate and flexible vocabulary as required; expresses his/her point of view and responses the questions accurately but makes minor (1-2) grammar mistakes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Speaker uses ordinary vocabulary with a lack of precision and variety; expresses his/her opinion and responses the questions with frequent grammar mistakes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Speaker uses very limited vocabulary with numerous mistakes; expresses his/her point of view and responses the questions with numerous grammar mistakes.</td>
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### Response to a cross-question

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<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Student is able to understand; spontaneously and easily answer the cross-question demonstrating full knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Student is able to understand and answer the cross-question appropriately.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Student has some difficulty to understand and answer the cross-question.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Student has significant difficulty to understand the cross-question; does not answer at all.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Delivery

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<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Speaker is able to demonstrate eye contact, gestures, facial expressions effectively; to sound persuasively, confidently and sincerely.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Speaker is able to demonstrate limited eye contact, gestures, facial expressions; to sound with limited persuasion, confidence and sincerity.</td>
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Conclusions

The analysis of debates as a type of discussion shows the peculiarities of their organization for the students of technical specialties. Debating allows the students to improve foreign language communicative skills in oral and written form; to develop compensatory, intellectual, training and organizational skills. Also, debates can help students to adapt to future professional situations and get valuable experience in communication. Using debates as a model of natural situation gives an opportunity to both teachers and students optimize the process of studying English and organize learning interestingly and effectively. In our future research we intend to concentrate on creating exercises with the aim of developing communicative skills for technical students’ participation in debates.

References


