

DEBATE AS A TEACHING STRATEGY FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING

LETIZIA CINGANOTTO
INDIRE

Abstract – The paper focuses on the potential of debate as a teaching strategy for language learning, as well as an innovative, student-centered technique, aimed at engaging the learner with interactive, collaborative and effective tasks. Literature on the role of debate as a teaching format for language learning will be discussed, highlighting its potential in enhancing the learners' motivation, language skills and soft skills (critical thinking, cooperation, collaboration, creativity etc.). In order to show how debate can be perceived by teachers and students as a method for improving language learning, initiatives at international and national level will be described. In particular, data collected from a survey in Italy will be analyzed, highlighting the potential of this technique, as reported by teachers and students. The main provisional outcomes will be presented, analyzing some of the data gathered, using qualitative methods: the interviews with the teachers and a questionnaire delivered to a class of students. The results of the survey, even if limited, indicate that debate may be an effective strategy to foster both language skills and soft skills. These outcomes may be useful for further studies and investigations in this field.

Keywords: Debate; CLIL; EFL; language learning; soft skills

Debating will help you to become a better speaker in all situations – private and public [...]. With new debating skills, you will be able to give more power to your own voice
(Rybold 2006, p. 2).

1. Introduction

Debate is a rhetorical practice dating back to ancient Greece, based on an interactive and representational argument to persuade judges and audience; during a debate different strategies of logic building as well as delivery are used to guide the target audience to a conclusion on a controversial issue.

Debating can be used in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes to practise all the skills in real contexts. According to Krieger (2005, p. 25),

Debate is an excellent activity for language learning because it engages students in a variety of cognitive and linguistic ways. In addition to providing meaningful listening, speaking and writing practice, debate is also highly effective for developing argumentation skills for persuasive speech and writing.

When a foreign language is used for debates, it may be considered as a different way to implement CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), as discussions take place in the foreign language, which is used to convey concepts, ideas and opinions related to specific subjects. In this way the aim of the learning activity is double-focused: language and content, as in CLIL methodology. This is one of the major highlights in

CLIL: “integrating language with non-language content, in a dual-focused learning environment” (Marsh 2002, p.2).

Moving from this background, the research described in this paper started from the following research questions: “How can debate be used in class as a teaching strategy for fostering language learning? What are the teachers’ and the students’ beliefs about it?”

In order to find answers to these questions, some references from the literature in the field will be discussed. In addition to that, initiatives carried out at both international and national levels will be referenced. In particular, initiatives implemented by the Ministry of Education in Italy, in cooperation with INDIRE (National Institute for Documentation, Innovation, Educational Research), will be presented, with particular reference to some initial applications involving Italian schools using debate for language learning.

The technique of debate has been widely investigated for its potential in terms of public speaking skills and other soft skills, but not so much research has been carried out to understand deeply the use of this technique as a CLIL strategy.

The results of a survey will be presented here, also describing the instruments used to collect data regarding the teachers’ and students’ feelings and beliefs on the use of debate for language learning.

In particular, the interview to the teachers can be a very powerful tool in order to understand their perceptions and reactions to a certain topic (Briggs 1986; Gubrium, Holstein 2001). A semi-structured interview was carried out, according to a guide, which was planned and organized in advance.

The other instrument used was a questionnaire delivered to a class of students in one of the schools, in order to understand how they perceived the activities connected with debates in English. The questions of the questionnaire were chosen in cooperation with the teacher, according to her knowledge of the class and to the kind of activities she had planned and implemented with the students.

However, as the pilot study presented in this paper is limited in terms of the number of subjects and the instruments used, only teachers’ and students’ implications, conjectures and beliefs collected from the instruments, will be reported and commented on.

2. The role of debate for language learning

When debating is used in EFL classes, all four skills of English language (e.g. listening, speaking, reading, and writing) are practised. Moreover, debaters need to master pronunciation of words, stress, vocabulary, brainstorming, script writing, logic building, argumentation and refutation. So practising debate in English requires many skills, which ultimately lead them to learn English (Alasmari, Ahmed 2013, p. 148).

The aforementioned quotation shows how debates can play an important role in enhancing language competence in the foreign language; in particular debate can be used to enhance a wide range of skills, such as the following (Rybold 2006):

- *Ice-breaking*: During the ice-breaking phase of the lesson, students may feel embarrassed to take the floor in front of the teacher and the class; debating on controversial topics may help lower the affective filter and overcome anxiety in using the foreign language;
- *Listening*: Through debates students can enhance their listening skills as they must focus on understanding what the opposing team is saying in order to plan their counter arguments. Moreover, training often takes place through video clips of debate sessions, speeches given by experts (for example Ted Talks);

- *Speaking*: Regular practice of debate will improve fluency, pronunciation and vocabulary. Teachers will provide feedback on pronunciation, choice of words, syntactic structure and relevancy of the information, logic building and content coherence;
- *Reading*: In order to plan effective and persuasive speeches, students have to read many sources that can be gathered through local and international newspapers, magazines, books, and websites. They can practise distinguishing between appropriate and inappropriate sources and they can enhance different reading modalities such as skimming and scanning, according to their specific needs. Through these practices, students prepare themselves for taking part in debates;
- *Writing*: Debaters can develop writing skills as well: they have to take notes on what they are planning to say, organize the different parts, as well as focus on coherence, consistency and persuasion. Therefore, they learn to write argumentative paragraphs and essays and make them controversial enough for arguments and counter-arguments. To sum up, debating helps students write compositions in English.

Debating in a foreign language ties in with literature on the use of conversational narratives in the EFL classroom, as well as on the communicative role played by topics that are particularly relevant to the learners (MacMahill 2001).

Like all task-based activities aiming at the creation of meaning, debate can be a motivating tool for the acquisition of language in authentic communicative contexts, as communicative purposes go way beyond the formal requirements of the EFL classroom.

2.1. Debating and CLIL

CLIL was launched in Europe in the 1990s (Marsh 2002). Since then, the European Commission and the Council of Europe have strongly supported CLIL as it responded to a need in Europe for enhancing second-language education, bilingualism and plurilingualism.

As already mentioned, CLIL is based on the integration of both subject and language objectives, which are to be reached simultaneously.

Using debates in an EFL class is often linked to CLIL methodology, especially when the “claim” or “motion” to be discussed is related to particular subject content: CLIL implies investigating, manipulating, co-constructing specific subject or interdisciplinary content through the medium of a foreign language, as Graddol (2006) states:

An approach to bilingual education in which both curriculum content (such as science or geography) and English are taught together. It differs from simple English-medium education in that the learner is not necessarily expected to have the English proficiency required to cope with the subject before beginning study (Graddol 2006, p. 86).

With debate used as a teaching and learning strategy, students are led to reflect on the use of academic language, in particular the vocabulary and language structures relevant to express the specific cognitive discourse functions (Dalton-Puffer 2013, 2016) linked to the topic of the debate. In fact, the lesson plan behind a debate in a foreign language may aim at developing a wide range of communicative functions relevant for reaching agreement in a team, connecting phrases and sentences through logical connectors, supporting a point of view with evidence, expressing agreement or disagreeing, or showing interest and appreciation of a speech.

Debate can help develop a wide range of language dimensions; it can help expand the students’ vocabulary and foster fluency as it trains learners to speak in public, to listen to and understand the positions of the other teams, as well as reformulating their own positions, taking into account what they have heard.

Debate can be considered as an example of “opinion-gap activity,” as students have to express their opinions and feelings in response to a certain claim put forth by the teacher based upon specific documentation, which enhances their ideas and makes them persuasive and effective.

3. An overview on debating in the international scenario

A large number of schools in America organize debates each year as curricular or extra-curricular activities for students. In 2011, the English Speaking Union (ESU) published a report in cooperation with “CfBT Education Trust” (Akerman, Neale 2011), whose key findings show that debate in education has great potential and helps reach these aims:

- It improves academic attainment;
- It develops critical thinking;
- It improves communication skills;
- It boosts aspirations, confidence and cultural awareness.

Other interesting findings from the above-mentioned report refer to dropping out: debaters in urban American high schools were 25 percent more likely to complete school than non-debaters; African American males who took part in debates were 70 percent more likely to complete school than their peers. To sum up, debate can prevent dropping out of school.

Much of the literature (Elliot 1993; Goodwin 2003; Jensen 2008; Rao 2010) highlights the benefits that active and deep learning debate implies, both in the collaborative and independent phases of the activity.

A wide range of formats is described in the literature, according to the specific teaching goals, as Snider and Schnurer (2006, p. 51) point out:

If you wanted to use a debate to warm up a classroom, you would want to have a format that ensured that everyone had an opportunity or was required to speak. If you wanted to use a debate as a final project where students were required to prove their mastery of a subject in a clash of ideas, then a formal debate whose ground rules were clearly established would give the participants enough time and opportunity to prepare.

Some of the formats described by Snider and Schnurer include round tables, public forums, spontaneous argumentation, public debate, team debating, extemporaneous debating, role-playing debate and model congress debate. Some other formats of non-competitive debates are the “constructive controversy” (Johnson *et al.* 2000), or the “deliberative debate” (Jerome, Algarra 2005), where students discuss and work together to reach a compromise and do not compete with each other.

Competitive debates can take place in two main formats: the “policy debate,” in which a certain topic is discussed over a whole school year, and “parliamentary debate”, in which a new resolution is debated in each round among “government” teams and “opposition” teams discussing a motion. At the end of a competitive debate judges decide how persuasive debaters have been according to three criteria:

- Content: what is said and the arguments and examples used;
- Style: the language, the voice, the style used during the debate;
- Strategy: the level of engagement with the topic, the response to other people's arguments and structure.

When a debate in a foreign language takes place, more criteria relevant to language competence are generally added, in particular:

- Vocabulary: debaters are led to use a wide variety of vocabulary;
- Grammar: fluency is generally more important than accuracy as some mistakes can be tolerated, provided that the speech is clear and effective;
- Prosodic aspects (pronunciation, stress, intonation): consistency of intonation and stress with the specific purposes of the speech is particularly important;
- Coherence of the speech and references to other arguments: being able to listen to the other speakers' arguments and react to them accordingly is crucial.

4. Debating in Italian schools

In Italy a large number of schools are adopting debate as a curricular or extra-curricular activity, also thanks to specific projects carried out in cooperation with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Boston. In 2014 a movement named "Avanguardie Educative", now involving about 800 schools all over Italy, was launched by INDIRE, with the aim of studying how teaching and organizational changes may be implemented within a school and mainstreamed to other schools. Debate is among the innovative "ideas" of the movement and a large number of schools have been experimenting with debates in English on different topics linked to subject content or extra-curricular themes, examples of initial applications of CLIL methodology through debating.

When engaged in a debate, students have to defend their opinions and points of view, by referring to authentic documents and sources mainly found on the Internet, which should support their thesis against the opposing team. During the different phases of the debate, students have to respect specific rules, especially as far as timing is concerned. Each speech cannot last longer than the established time (a certain number of minutes for the argument and for the rebuttal, but timing can change according to specific needs); expressing one's own opinions within a specific timeframe represents an important and useful skill for the students to develop.

The following are some of the skills debating helps develop:

- Ability to document the resources they found to support their positions;
- Oral interaction;
- Writing skills;
- Argumentative skills;
- Critical thinking skills;
- Listening skills;
- Team work (cooperative learning; peer education);
- Sharing one's own ideas according to specific rules;
- Supporting one's own opinions with evidence and sources;
- Conflict control;
- Understanding the opposing team;
- Skills of persuasion;
- Controlling emotions.

When debates take place in a foreign language, the language teacher often cooperates with the subject teacher in the organization of debates on topics which can be part of the school curriculum, putting into practice the so-called “Transitory Norms” issued by the Italian Ministry of Education in 2014, recommending collaboration between the CLIL teacher (a subject teacher, called “DNL” teacher in the Italian official documents) and the language teacher, or any other experts working in the language field (Cinganotto 2016; Cinganotto 2018; Cinganotto, Cuccurullo 2019).

In 2016 The Italian Ministry of Education launched a project called “National Debate Olympics”, coordinated by an upper secondary school in Lombardy,¹ aimed at spreading the value and the potential of debate as a teaching strategy, also adding the game-based learning dimension connected to the competition. The project consists of a training programme on debating, carried out by some renowned debate experts, such as the founder and president of Vermont Law School’s “SPEAK”, Jessica R. Bullock. After training, regional debate competitions are organized in order to get to the final national Olympics held in Italian. The winning team of the National Debate Olympics is admitted to the international Olympics to be held in English.

This area should be further investigated in terms of research: the specific topic of implementing CLIL with the use of debates needs further exploration and analysis as it is worth taking into consideration the contribution it may have on the school curriculum.

5. A survey

5.1. Methods

The present survey involved a limited number of Italian schools working with debates in English, in particular two teachers of English and a class of students in one of the schools.

The study was aimed at investigating the teachers’ and students’ perceptions on the use of debates in an EFL class, through a qualitative approach.

The research design started from the following questions: “How can debate be used in class as a teaching strategy for fostering language learning? What are the teachers’ and the students’ beliefs about it?”

The project was aimed at identifying a sample of students and teachers working with debate in English, in order to get information about the way they perceive it and their experience with it.

Two teachers² of English working in two different upper secondary schools in Italy were interviewed. They commonly use debates in their CLIL classes, also in cooperation with their subject colleagues, realizing the so-called “CLIL team”. Both the schools belong to the “Avanguardia Educative” movement and one of them is even one of the founding schools of the movement itself. The teachers were asked to express their feelings and beliefs on the potential of debate in English, in relation to their experience with the students (See Annex 1 and Annex 2).

In cooperation with one of the two teachers, a questionnaire was delivered to one of the classes, in order to get the students’ reactions and feelings about the use of debate in English. Therefore, the aim was to compare the teacher’s point of view, with the students’,

¹ “Tosi” Institute in Busto Arsizio.

² Michele Gabbanelli, teaching at “Savoia Benincasa” Institute in Ancona and Patrizia Russo, teaching at “Manzoni” Institute in Caserta.

in order to find out possible similarities or differences. In fact, as the teachers seemed really passionate and keen on the use of debates in English and their impressions were really positive, it was deemed interesting to find out if the teachers' perceptions and beliefs were confirmed by the students'.

The sample of students of the survey was represented by a class of 21 students attending the second year of upper secondary school, with a B1/B2 level of language proficiency in English, according to the Common European Framework of Reference. In this class lessons on Information and Communication Technology in English are part of the school curriculum and the class has been experimenting with debate in English on a wide range of topics related to ICT, in particular social media, networking and their social impact.

5.2. Instruments

A semi-structured interview was planned and carried out with the sample of teachers, preceded by observation of the school setting, informal and unstructured interviewing in order to develop a keen understanding of the topic of interest and choose relevant and meaningful semi-structured questions.

According to Bernard (1988), semi-structured interviewing is best used when the researcher is quite sure he/she will not get more than one chance to interview someone and that was the case, as a specific and unique session was arranged for the interview.

The semi-structured interview guide provided instructions for the researcher to be followed during the interview. Open-ended questions were added in order to let the teachers freely express their feelings and beliefs.

The students were asked to answer four Likert-scale questions about their perceptions on different aspects of debate, according to their experience, and each question required open comments and remarks (Annex 3). The data have been analyzed in order to find out their impressions about debate as a language learning strategy.

5.3. Procedures for data collection and analysis

The interviews were arranged with the teachers in advance in order to agree on the setting and on the date. The questionnaire was delivered to the students with the help of the teacher so that they would not be disturbed or get anxious because of the presence of the researcher. Data were then collected and analyzed separately.

Data both from the interviews and the questionnaire were collected and analyzed, according to the Framework Analysis method (Ritchie *et al.* 2014), which enables researchers to understand and interpret data, moving from descriptive accounts to a conceptual explanation of what is happening from the data of participants in the study. The results of the survey were grouped into certain categories identified by the author, according to the most relevant and popular statements the respondents provided, as highlighted in the following paragraphs.

6. Results

6.1. The teachers' voice: the interviews

In the analysis of the main highlights from the teachers' comments,³ headings have been identified in order to group the most significant outcomes from the interviews (Annex 1 and Annex 2).

- *Debate is good for improving language competences, but does not necessarily require a very high level of proficiency*

One of the main outcomes from the interviews is that the teachers strongly believe in debate as a powerful strategy for language learning. They are keen on using debate as a regular teaching practice and use it even if the students are not so proficient in the language, as this quotation from one of the teachers represents:

My students are introduced to debates since the very first year of Upper Secondary School (13-to-14 year olds) when their level of English is approximately between A2 and B1- (CEFR). They debate until the last year (18-to-19 year olds) when their level of English is B2/B2+/C1.

- *Debate is particularly useful for fostering audio-oral skills*

The teachers' idea is that debating can foster language competence in the foreign language, in particular audio-oral skills:

Debates are a learning method suitable for all subjects but particularly useful in foreign languages where all is about speaking.

With reference to language learning, a wide range of interesting insights have been provided by the teachers: they believe in the benefits of debating in terms of students' language competence, specifically vocabulary enrichment and fluency. In fact, the students are encouraged to speak in a natural and effective way. Fluency and vocabulary are the two dimensions strongly highlighted by the teachers, as the following remark shows:

What really matters is the fluency the students can develop supported by a wider and wider vocabulary. Debating and competing give the students a natural, realistic context to learn a language more or less the way they learnt their first language.

Debates seem to provide a natural and effective learning environment, which can help students improve their language skills in a very powerful way as pointed out by the following quotation:

They have learnt the linguistic notions/structures they needed very easily and in a very natural way even though they are commonly supposed to be studied at a more advanced level, as for example the second or third conditionals.

Another comment from a teacher underlines the impact of debate on the development of language skills:

³ Comments in Italian have been translated by the author.

In the 4th year many of my students sit the Cambridge First Exam or the CAE, which they often pass with merit or distinction. As far as I am concerned this is further evidence of how useful debates are for the development of linguistic skills.

The comment which was mentioned earlier also highlights this aspect:

Debates are a learning method suitable for all subjects but particularly useful in foreign languages where all is about speaking.

- *Debates can help students understand and respect others*

According to the teachers, through debates students will learn to respect other people even though they have different opinions: it is a good way to lead students to a deep understanding of other people's points of view:

They will learn to respect other people even though they have different opinions; they will learn that what matters most is not only having ideas but mainly being able to reach the heart and the mind of other people by means of the power of our logic and critical thinking.

- *Debate can foster team work and cooperation (21st century skills or soft skills)*

The teachers pointed out how team work is important for the success of a debate: the students have to cooperate and help each other find the best resources and the most convincing evidence. The success of each team depends on the mutual effort of each component, as this remark shows:

In addition to linguistic competence, debates contribute to other aspects of the learning process. When you debate you are definitely part of a learning group, which brings about a development in team work, one of the most important soft skills especially appreciated by HR departments.

- *Debate is based on finding the best resources to support one's own opinions*

Before the actual performance in class, students have to find information, documents, resources to mention during their speech as evidence for their positions. This may help develop very important life-skills, such as being able to document and support one's own ideas with evidence, recognizing trustworthy sources, using the internet in a proper way, etc., as commented on by one of the teachers:

They will learn to look for sources of information reliable and credited, in the form of statistics and facts to support their point of view. I think that the research for trustworthy sources of information is something that is unusual in our schools that will turn out to be a useful life-skill.

This other comment is very similar to the previous one:

You learn how to speak in public, to carry out research on a specific topic, how to recognize reliable sources, and to compare, select and synthesize data.

- *A debater can be a good CLIL learner*

According to one teacher:

I think that all the skills I've mentioned above are fundamental to approach a subject in the CLIL way and mainly the habit to be fluent and not "bookish" in speech and the way to approach the sources and go deeply into the topic considering the several sides involved. Also, the increasing importance of vocabulary would be of great help.

The teachers' idea is that the skills debate can help develop are helpful to approaching a subject in the CLIL way: debate is thought to be able to rethink the approach to a subject content in a foreign language, providing the opportunity to explore the topic deeply, from different perspectives, including the language dimension which can be fostered and improved thanks to the practice of debating.

- *Debate works better to review and repeat concepts and knowledge, than to introduce new ones*

The teachers think that the practice of debate can be used only for some specific CLIL activities, such as revising content the students have already been exposed to, or recalling particular lexical items, as highlighted in this comment:

Still we must keep in mind that debates are a subsequent phase: I mean, we do not explain or introduce a new topic through debating. We debate on something to consolidate skills, deepen our knowledge, explore and widen our cultural horizons.

- *Debate can reshape assessment*

Assessing a debate means to take into consideration not only the focus on linguistic features, which would be the priority for a language teacher and not only the content and knowledge acquired by the students, which would be a subject teacher's main goal: it entails considering both aspects from different angles, also including a wider range of skills. That is why the teachers in the study state they usually use paper or digital grids in order to take into account the different dimensions of the learning process, as pointed out by one of the teachers:

We noted down our assessment and observations following the several indicators in the grids and, at the end of the competition, positive and weak points were pointed out supported by suggestions for further improvement.

Another comment from one teacher pinpoints the same important aspects relevant to assessment:

We focus on the content of the speeches, the language (grammar, vocabulary as much as fluency), as well as on non-verbal aspects (volume of the voice, movements, self-confidence, kinesics, proxemics as well as the ability to speak in public). I provide this jury committee with a rubric (one copy per debater), where they insert the levels assigned, from 0 up to 4. This way we have the raw score (50-point scale) that easily leads to the final mark (10-point scale or A-F evaluation).

- *Debating is fun*

Debating means to "play a game" and to have fun: it is perceived by the students as an interactive and engaging way to learn at school, as this comment shows:

When debating students and teachers enjoy the right mix of fun and commitment.

6.2. The students' voice: the questionnaire

Interesting data about the students' reactions and beliefs were collected through the questionnaire administered to a class (21 students with B1/B2 level of English), which provided a wide range of relevant findings.

The questionnaire (Annex 3) was designed in cooperation with the teacher, according to her experience and her knowledge of the class. The students were left free to answer in Italian in order to avoid linguistic barriers and let them express their feelings and opinions in a genuine way.

The questionnaire was based on a five-point Likert-scale, with additional open comments; the teacher administered it during one of her lessons. Some of the most interesting answers will be reported below.

The question on the link between language learning and debating gave encouraging answers, as debating seems to increase passion for learning English: “Did debating help you learn and make you more passionate about the English language?”

1- not at all 2- a little 3- enough 4- a great deal 5- a very great deal”.

57,1% of the students believed debating helped them improve and become more passionate about the English language. These are some of the students’ comments:

È un modo innovativo di imparare l'Inglese. (It is an innovative way to learn English).

È un'applicazione della lingua. (It is an application of the language).

È un modo nuovo per avvicinarsi alla lingua. (It is a new way to approach the language).

Abbastanza perché ho imparato nuovi termini inglesi. (I’ve learnt new words in English).

Mi ha appassionata molto in quanto con il debate scopri nuovi modi per avvicinarti alla materia, modi che non si basano solo sulle conoscenze grammaticali, ma anche e soprattutto su proprie capacità e ti fa esporre in un modo che non sempre puoi usare e far tuo in un ambito scolastico. In un'esperienza del genere devi mettere il 101% delle tue potenzialità ed esporti senza esitazioni.

(I am passionate about debating as you can find new ways to approach the subjects, considering not only the grammar, but also your own skills and the ability to express your knowledge and competence, which is unusual in the traditional school environment. You have to focus 101% and express your opinions without hesitation).

3- La modalità di lavoro del debate ti ha aiutato a migliorare la tua preparazione ed i tuoi voti?

21 risposte

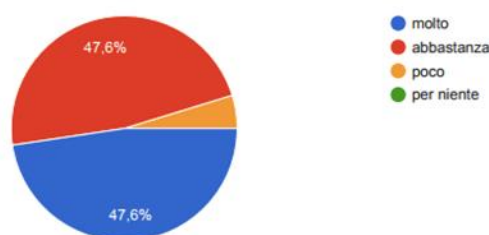


Figure 1.

The students’ idea of the potential of debate for expanding their knowledge and getting good marks.

“Did debate help you expand your knowledge and get good marks?”

Much – Enough – A little – Not at all”

The question in Figure 1 was aimed at investigating the perceptions of debating as an added value to the students’ knowledge: almost 50% of them believe it helped them a lot;

the connections between debate and good grades in the different subjects are clearly perceived by the students. A debater is a learner of the content discussed and of the language that is the medium of discussion.

Here are some of the students' comments related to this question:

Sì, perché avendo conosciuto nuove forme e vocaboli, ho acquisito maggiore padronanza della lingua, aiutandomi così a migliorare la mia preparazione e i miei voti.

(Yes, because I have learnt new structures and expanded my vocabulary, therefore I improved my preparation and my grades).

Questa modalità di lavoro mi ha aiutato a migliorare il mio modo di parlare, esprimersi, e dialogare in lingua inglese.

(I improved my speaking style, expressing myself, interacting in English).

Sì, moltissimo, ho acquistato una *fluency* nel parlare inglese sia nel periodo di preparazione che durante il debate. Durante il dibattito non c'era solamente un discorso imparato a memoria, ma anche un confronto di idee personali tra gruppi, senza né copioni e né discorsi preparati.

(Yes, very much: I improved my fluency in English both during the preparation phase and during the performance. It has nothing to do with a memorized speech, we shared ideas within the group without having a "script" to follow).

Another question was aimed at investigating the students' perceptions about the assessment and the feedback they received on their performance. As stated by the teachers, the students confirm the complexity of assessing a debate in a foreign language. Yet, they seem to appreciate this new way of being assessed with the use of grids, which are generally explained and discussed with the students themselves, in order to get them aware of the assessing process and in order to activate their meta-cognition and reflection about the competence they have developed and the competence still to be achieved.

7- La valutazione data alla performance tua e della tua squadra ti è sembrata chiara e adeguata?

21 risposte

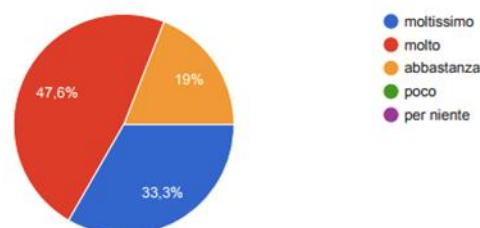


Figure 2. The students' perceptions on assessment

“Did you and your team receive clear assessment and feedback on your performance?

Very much so- Much – Enough – A little – Not at all”

The students' perceptions on assessment are positive and encouraging: they mostly recognize and appreciate assessment as transparent, fair and well balanced. Here are some of the students' comments:

Le griglie di valutazione sono state lette e commentate prima del debate ed anche all'inizio di tutto il percorso. Ci sono anche stati alcuni di noi che hanno svolto la funzione di giudici dando anche consigli per migliorare i risultati.

(The assessment rubrics were presented and described before debating and at the beginning of the lesson. Some of us played the role of a member of the jury and provided feedback for improvement).

La mia squadra ha saputo trattare ogni argomento con chiarezza. Ciò è stato fatto anche dalle altre squadre, creando voti alti, meritati e molto equilibrati tra tutti i membri della classe.

(My team was able to cover the issues clearly and effectively. The same was true for the other teams, therefore we got very high, well-balanced and well-deserved grades).

7. Discussion

The teachers' and students' opinions collected from the interviews and the questionnaire provided encouraging responses to the research questions: "How can debate be used in class as a teaching strategy for fostering language learning? What are the teachers' and the students' beliefs about it?"

Teachers' and students' beliefs are generally positive and encouraging and show the potential of debating for increasing motivation, language competence and soft skills.

The students' positive perceptions of the impact of debates are confirmed by the teachers' comments about their teaching experiences with debate in English. According to the data collected, debating can be a motivating language learning experience for both teachers and students, allowing them to focus on a goal, a real-life task, where they could face a challenge not just as "students", but also as individuals. They are perceived not just as subject or foreign language learners, with their specific subject knowledge and skills, but boys and girls who want to win a team competition by taking advantage of all their skills from a holistic perspective: their motivation, their engagement, their critical thinking, their speaking skills. Also team work and cooperation play a key role in this activity.

The data described in this paper can be considered as provisional results of the study: more data will be collected in future months, interviewing other teachers working with debates in English and their students and they will be specifically asked whether they believe skills other than linguistic ones were helped by the debating experience.

In the near future in Italian schools a wide range of training initiatives and workshops for teachers would be needed in order to make them aware of the potential of this strategy for language learning and also for CLIL.

Moreover, specific guidelines for teachers to help them plan and organize effective debates in an EFL or CLIL environment would be useful. To this extent, the guidelines on debate for teachers within the "Avanguardie Educative" movement have already been published and spread all over Italian schools (Cinganotto *et al.* 2016). They turned out to be very helpful to draw a picture of the use of debate in class. However, the document mainly focuses on debate as a general teaching and learning strategy, to be used in an Italian class: similar guidelines with a specific focus on debate for language learning and CLIL, with lesson plans, "hands-on" materials, suggestions, examples of successful stories and practices would be useful to foster a wider knowledge of the potential of debate for language learning and CLIL at school.

8. Conclusions

This paper aimed at investigating the potential of debate as a teaching strategy for language learning, as perceived by a sample of teachers and students. After providing a brief overview of the international scenario, some examples of initiatives carried out in Italy have been described to show the growing interest in this topic, which is worth researching and investigating further. In particular, the provisional outcomes from a study carried out in a sample of Italian schools using debate in English have been presented in this paper, which highlight the added value of debating as an effective and engaging teaching strategy.

As a concluding remark, it can be assumed that debating in a foreign language is worth trying and experimenting, among the other teaching methods and strategies: the mix of research, discussion, engagement, competition, cooperation and fun seems to have a strong potential in a language learning environment. Therefore, the use of debate should be promoted in the EFL classroom, as it links language with the creation of meaning, fostering meaning-making and deep learning as general educational goals.

Bionote: Letizia Cinganotto is a full time researcher at INDIRE (National Institute for Documentation, Innovation and Educational Research), Rome, Italy. She holds a BA in Foreign language Teaching, MA in ELT, e-learning and multimedia Learning and a PhD in Linguistics. She has far-reaching experience in continuous professional development for teachers, teacher trainers, head teachers (e-learning courses, blended courses, on the job, workshops) in the Italian context as well as in international communities of peers. Her main research areas are: CLIL, language teaching, Technology Enhanced Language Teaching (TELL), immersive teaching and learning of English, Linguistics, school innovation. She is a member of different working groups and committees on CLIL and language learning both at national and international level (ECML, European Commission, OECD). She is a reviewer and a member of the Editorial Board of different peer-reviewed journals. She has recently published three volumes on CLIL.

Author's address: l.cinganotto@indire.it

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Annexes

Annex 1: Interview with Teacher 1

Q: What are the students' reactions to debating in English?

A: They really enjoyed this activity for quite a number of reasons:

- they had to work in teams with an high level of cooperation. I've assigned the students to the groups on the basis of defined criteria: one component good at English, one good at ICT, another determined and hardworking, a student poor at English and/or disorganized in his revision style, a student with a bent for organization;
- the topics were really close to their world and life experience (social-networking, tattoos, fitness and eating habits);
- the debate competition that has provided a real and stimulating context to communicate;
- the teaching-learning activities have been aimed at real tasks, all intended to build the content for the debate;
- the work on language has been perceived.

Q: What is the level of competence of the students you involve in debating?

A: The classes involved in debates last year were mixed ability classes and the students' level of competence ranged from A2 – to B1 in 1AS and from A2+ to B1+ in 2BS and 2BC.

Q: Do you think debating in English may improve students' learning outcomes? How? Could you comment on that?

A: Yes, I do believe in the role of debating to improve the students' learning outcomes. I think that what really matters is the fluency the students can develop supported by a wider and wider vocabulary. They have learnt the linguistic notions/structures they needed very easily and in a very natural way even though they are commonly supposed to be studied at a more advanced level, as for example the second or third conditionals. Debating and competing give the students a natural, realistic context to learn a language more or less the way they learnt their first language. A further aspect not to be under-estimated is “competition” that provides the opportunity to put to the test not only the linguistic skills but also the whole person in her/his communicative competence. Students do not have to work hard for a mere assessment, they have to work hard, really hard to gain consideration from their mates and “adversaries”, not only from their teacher. Assessment is “cold”, a competition is engaging.

Q: What are the effects of debating on students in terms of transversal skills (cooperation, creativity, critical thinking etc.)

A: If the groups are chosen according to well defined criteria, first of all the students will learn that all of them are essential to win, that everyone is good at something that is a great resource for the whole group; this is important to increase their personal esteem. Then they will learn to be original and convincing in their ideas, proposing personal points of view. They will learn to look for sources of information reliable and credited, in the form of statistics and facts to support their point of view. I think that the research for trustworthy sources of information is something that is unusual in our schools that will turn out to be a useful life-skill.

Another skill that debate promotes is just the art of “debating”, the art to persuade and “lead” – “seduce”, in the Latin meaning of the word, other people and not as if it were a fight like in too many talk shows, but according to the “fair play” of a “civil” debate. They will learn to respect other people even though they have different opinions; they will learn that what matters most is not only having ideas but mainly being able to reach the heart and the mind of other people by means of the power of our logic and critical thinking.

Q: Do you think debating in English can be effective for CLIL? Could you comment on that?

A: I think that students who have been trained in debating will be great CLIL learners. CLIL doesn't always offer topics suitable for a debate; it depends on the subject taught because the topic for a debate must be engaging. Anyway, I think that all the skills I've mentioned above are fundamental to approach a subject in the CLIL way and mainly the habit to be fluent and not “bookish” in speech and the way to approach the sources and go deeply into the topic considering the several sides involved. Also, the increasing importance of vocabulary would be of great help.

Q: How do you generally assess debates?

A: I generally use two specific grids I've worked out using the web-tool “RubiStar”. The focus is on the

understanding of the topic, the amount of information provided and the way it was supported by statistics or facts, the clear organization of the talks, the ability in the rebuttal phase and respect for the other team. In order to evaluate also the single linguistic performances, I've accompanied the first grid with another one focused just on linguistic competence. The marks given to the individual students and the team score were determined by the results of the two grids. At the beginning of the teaching/learning unit I've shared the grids with the students commenting on them and giving explanations if and when necessary. In the evaluation of the team and individual performances I've never been alone but there have always been one or two students not involved in the competition. We noted down our assessment and observations following the several indicators in the grids and, at the end of the competition, positive and weak points were pointed out supported by suggestions for further improvement.

Annex 2: Interview with Teacher 2

Q: What are the students' reactions to debating in English?

A: They are excited: speaking in public, and in English too, makes them do their very best in order not to disappoint their teams. I think this is a crucial aspect in debating: being part of a team gives you the necessary support but also represents a challenge because you must meet their expectations. Your team can't lose the competition. From this point of view, the teacher should supervise and prevent any excess and ensure respect among debaters. Also important is where the debate takes place. In my school we have special classrooms equipped for active learning, including some debate corners made up of two galleries where the teams sit, some movable classroom chairs and two lecterns for the speakers to use one after another. I find it to be a fundamental moment when roles are assigned. Apart from the speakers, there are the "time assistant" and above all the chairman, who tells people when they can speak and keeps the rhythm of the whole performance. Rhythm is very important when debating because the experience is supposed to be fun, engaging and interesting with the right amount of competitiveness that makes things more dynamic and helps prevent boredom.

Q: What is the level of competence of the students you involve in debating?

A: My students are introduced to debates since the very first year of Upper Secondary School (13-to-14 year olds) when their level of English is approximately between A2 and B1- (CEFR). They debate until the last year (18-to-19 year olds) when their level of English is B2/B2+/C1.

Q: Do you think debating in English may improve students' learning outcomes? How? Could you comment on that?

A: In the 4th year many of my students sit the Cambridge First Exam or the CAE, which they often pass with merit or distinction. As far as I am concerned this is further evidence of how useful debates are for the development of linguistic skills.

Q: What are the effects of debating on students in terms of transversal skills (cooperation, creativity, critical thinking etc.)

A: In addition to linguistic competence, debates contribute to other aspects of the learning process. When you debate you are definitely part of a learning group, which brings about a development in team work, one of the most important soft skills especially appreciated by HR departments. Besides, you learn how to speak in public, to carry out research on a specific topic, how to recognize reliable sources, and to compare, select and synthesize data.

Q: Do you think debating in English can be effective for CLIL? Could you comment on that?

A: Debating in English or in any foreign language is certainly effective for CLIL. Still we must keep in mind that debates are a subsequent phase: I mean, we do not explain or introduce a new topic through debating. We debate on something to consolidate skills, deepen our knowledge, explore and widen our cultural horizons.

Q: How do you generally assess debates?

A: I generally select some (3/4) students who in-between the rounds of a debate comment with me on their schoolmates' performances. We focus on the content of the speeches, the language (grammar, vocabulary as much as fluency), as well as on non-verbal aspects (volume of the voice, movements, self-confidence, kinesics, proxemics as well as the ability to speak in public). I provide this jury committee with a rubric (one copy per debater), where they insert the levels assigned, from 0 up to 4. This way we have the raw score (50-point scale) that easily leads to the final mark (10-point scale or A-F evaluation).

Additional remarks

Debates are a learning method suitable for all subjects but particularly useful in foreign languages where all is about speaking. When debating students and teachers enjoy the right mix of fun and commitment. I suggest trying to use debating in any class and type of school, see how it works maybe on a small scale, with a single class as an experimental project. Once tried, students will ask for more chances and, step by step, they will appreciate this peculiar mix of learning and competitiveness.

Annex 3: The questionnaire administered to the students

1- La modalità di lavoro del debate ti ha appassionato di più allo studio dell'inglese?

- per nulla
- poco
- abbastanza
- molto
- moltissimo

2- Motiva la tua risposta

3- La modalità di lavoro del debate ti ha aiutato a migliorare la tua preparazione ed i tuoi voti?

- per nulla
- poco
- abbastanza
- molto
- moltissimo

4- Motiva la tua risposta

5- La modalità di lavoro del debate ha favorito o consolidato il clima di solidarietà tra gli studenti?

- per nulla
- poco
- abbastanza
- molto
- moltissimo

6- Motiva la tua risposta

7- La valutazione data alla performance tua e della tua squadra ti è sembrata chiara e adeguata?

- per nulla
- poco
- abbastanza
- molto
- moltissimo

8- Motiva la tua risposta

Annex 4: An example of rubric

	Levels of Performance			
Criteria	1	2	3	4
<p>Organization and Clarity Viewpoints and responses are outlined and expressed correctly, clearly and orderly.</p> <p>3</p>	Unclear and incorrect in most parts	Clear and quite correct in some parts but not over all	Most clear, quite correct and orderly in all parts	Completely clear, correct and orderly presentation
<p>Use of Arguments Reasons – with examples and facts - are given to support viewpoints.</p> <p>3</p>	Few or no relevant reasons given. No examples/facts are given either.	Some relevant reasons supported by few examples/facts given	Most reasons supported by some examples/facts given: most relevant	Most relevant reasons with examples/facts given in support
<p>Use of Rebuttal Arguments made by the other teams are responded to and dealt with effectively.</p> <p>2</p>	No effective counter-arguments made	Few effective counter-arguments made	Some effective counter-arguments made	Many effective counter-arguments made
<p>Presentation Style Tone of voice, use of gestures, and level of enthusiasm are convincing to the audience.</p> <p>2</p>	Few style features were used; not convincingly	Few style features were used convincingly	All style features were used, most convincingly	All style features were used convincingly

TOTAL SCORE /40