

VIDEO-CONFERENCE DEBATES:

A Platform for Critical Thinking within Foreign Language Acquisition

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Abstract: The need to foster critical thinking has long been one of the key issues in education. It is essentially vital nowadays against the background of an increased volume of cross-cultural communications due to the present-day demand for collaboration to tackle pressing global issues through joint efforts of different nations. While the format of debates has been recognized by researchers as one of the most efficient tools of setting off critical thinking, it is up to the new technologies in education to make it possible to bring this platform to a cross-cultural level. Since a cross-cultural dialogue in most cases supposes the mastery of a foreign language, e-learning in the form of cross-border video-conference debates present an invaluable opportunity for educators to enhance the pedagogy of foreign language acquisition around the globe. The present paper focuses on a case-study of an on-going project of implementing the tool of synchronous cross-cultural video-conference debates.

1 INTRODUCTION

A growing demand for pedagogy enhancement in foreign language acquisition within the framework of formal education rests on the attempts of educators to meet the present-day needs of the global community, i.e. to provide it with multi-lingual professionals capable of critical thinking. Critical thinking has been viewed as a cornerstone of the learning process since ancient times, but the modern approach dates back to American philosopher, John Dewey, who is considered ‘the father of modern critical thinking tradition’ (Fisher, 2001). Namely, Dewey established the concept of ‘reflective thinking’, which he defined as ‘active, persistent, and careful consideration of a belief or a supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds which support it and further conclusions to which it tends’ (qtd. in Fisher, 2001). Such approach is clearly based on contrasting reflective/critical thinking to a passive acquisition of ready-made knowledge without questioning it. Since critical thinking supposes an active role of an individual in processing information they encounter, researchers outline a number of cognitive skills involved in this process. Specifically, Facione (2011) highlights the following constituents of critical thinking:

interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulation. These components could be fostered in academics only within a specifically-created environment which fosters active argumentation and reasoning, the two underlying concepts of the debate format. Thus, this study addresses the following research questions: under which conditions can debates most efficiently bring about critical thinking and how does the innovative format of synchronous cross-cultural video-conferencing contribute to this process?

2 CRITICAL THINKING IN DEBATES

Debate is usually used in education as a formally-structured discussion of a particular issue with the two opposing sides trying to refute the arguments of each other. Such activity not only allows considering multi-facet nature of the issue in its logical development, but also involves the use of elaborate public speaking techniques of persuading the audience of one’s point of view. Thus, the nature of debate is two-fold as it concerns the use of language and logic. Due to the language component, the

debate is a popular tool in foreign language acquisition pedagogy.

Table 1. Critical Thinking Cognitive Skills in the Debate Tasks

Critical Thinking Skills	Sub-skills	Debate Tasks
1. interpretation	categorization	to distribute claims according to their nature: value, policy, or fact
	decoding significance	to examine the scope of the claim
	clarifying meaning	to negotiate the meaning of the key terms and concepts used in the debate
2. analysis	examining ideas	to create mind-maps of the issues connected to the claim
	detecting arguments	to outline the main arguments for both sides
	analyzing arguments	to brainstorm adequate support for the arguments
3. evaluation	assessing the credibility of statements	to question the validity of the arguments
	assessing the logical strength of the arguments	to track logical fallacies
4. inference	querying evidence	to request sufficient evidence to all arguments
	conjecturing alternatives	to list alternative approaches
	drawing conclusions	to make a conclusion
5. explanation	describing methods and results	to state the research methods
	proposing and defending arguments	to provide adequate amount of support
	presenting full and well-reasoned arguments	to logically structure the support to each argument
6. self-regulation	self-examination	to provide self-evaluation feedback after the debate
	self-correction	to suggest the ways for self-improvement

2.1 Cognitive Skills

The format of the debate as a methodological tool has been given a considerable amount of attention by researchers due to the fact that such format presents a unique combination of challenges to its participants, ‘engaging the students in a variety of cognitive and linguistic ways’ (Krieger, 2005). In particular, it triggers the development of ‘logic-based rhetoric and critical analysis that lies in the heart of formal debate’ (Hansen, 2007). Debate does not only imply a skillful use of the language, but also supposes the use of logical patterns, which makes the debate an invaluable means of learning analytical thinking skills and forcing self-conscious reflection on the validity of one’s ideas (Nisbett, 2003). Such interpretation of the debate process brings us back to the cognitive skills involved in critical thinking, which tie the two processes – debating and critical thinking – together. The way the debate tasks reflect the core cognitive skills of critical thinking is shown in Table 1. (The classification of cognitive skills and sub skills is provided by Facione (2011)).

Table 1 shows that each stage of debate starting from the initial examination of the claim up to post-debate self-criticism involves a number of cognitive skills which constitute critical thinking. Thus, the format of debate proves to be an appropriate tool for fostering critical thinking.

2.2 Efficiency Pre-Requisites

When applied specifically to foreign language acquisition context, the format of debate raises a number of issues to be solved. Nisbett (2003) emphasizes that ‘potential fluency limitations of the students are always an issue, as well as differing linguistic and cultural norms regarding discussion styles and the application of logical rules and critical analysis in communication.’ That statement clearly touches upon several aspects: 1) language proficiency, 2) awareness of communication patterns, and 3) aptitude for reasoning, which can be attributed to the following learning outcomes of the debate class: 1) to increase language fluency, 2) to master culturally-rooted communication styles, and 3) to learn the skills of argumentation. Thus, the instructors end up with the three-fold focus for efficiency pre-requisites: language, culture, and logic.

The three targets of the debate class – language, culture, and logic – can be tackled differently. Whereas, the language and the logic components can be tackled in a conventional manner, the culture part

calls for the use of new technologies in education. In particular, language component can be addressed through a series of scaffolding exercises, which equip the students with the necessary vocabulary and grammatical structures to frame their communication. Likewise, the rules of logic structure of the arguments can be introduced in a series of preliminary theoretical passages in the students' native language. However, it is the culture component that cannot be dealt with by scaffolding only and requires a hands-on practice-based training, ideally involving the representatives of the target culture. Building a cross-cultural environment is key to culture learning as it is 'not merely learning the target culture, but gaining insights into how the culture of the target language interacts with one's own cultural experience' (Liaw, 2006). Moreover, exploring one's own culture is credited with vital significance in a cross-cultural dialogue. According to Levy (2007), 'pedagogical approaches and techniques that help learners to reflect objectively on their own culture are especially important because language teachers and learners need to be sharply aware of their point of departure in culture learning.' Thus, it is essential to bridge the gap between the two cultures, which can be successfully dealt with through electronic conferences.

3 ELECTRONIC CONFERENCES

Creating a formal educational platform to bring together native speakers and non-native speakers in the process of foreign language acquisition proved to be successful by a number of researchers. For instance, some researchers show increase in learner's motivation (Jauregia et al., 2011), while others indicate the boost in interactive competences (Fitze, 2006). Whatever the outcome, tools for formal asynchronous and synchronous students' interaction are a popular subject of today's debate over the use of new technologies in education.

3.1 Asynchronous E-forums

Asynchronous e-forums, also referred to as written electronic conferences, bring numerous benefits into the foreign language acquisition classroom. For example, Liaw (2006) outlines four types of intercultural competences that the students developed through the use of such tool: '(A) interest in knowing other people's way of life and introducing one's own culture to others, (B) ability to change perspective, (C) knowledge about one's

own and others' culture for intercultural communication, and (D) knowledge about intercultural communication processes.' (p.49) Clearly the interaction of native and non-native speakers in this case contributed to the first-hand exchange of the culture-related knowledge and experiences.

The findings of another study by Fitze (2006) suggest that 'second language students in written electronic conferences display more interactive competence, or in other words, more control of the discussion' than in face-to-face conferences (p.78). Although the beneficial nature of the written conference is evident, the latter juxtaposition of the written and face-to-face conferences seems invalid. The author attributes having 'more control of the discussion' to an advantage of the written conferences. Indeed, the asynchronous mode of the discussion leaves room for more self-reflection and a more careful choice of language means. However, the real-life communication rarely presents such an opportunity and requires a spontaneous communicative act. Being trained to act on the spot within the ever-changing discourse is a key advantage of the synchronous conferences either face-to-face or technology-mediated. Thus, even though the numerical data provided in the research of Fitze (2006) indicates the advantage of the written communication practice, it is essential to consider it only as a supplement to the face-to-face communication training.

3.2 Synchronous Conferences

The most popular tools for synchronous video-conferences in education are Skype and Polycom. The benefits of the former include greater availability and low cost, the advantages of the latter are higher quality of transmitted signal (picture and sound) and more options for manipulating with viewer layout and recording the video. Nevertheless, both are user-friendly, which allows their use by non-technicians. Due to the spread of video-conferencing technology, a number of studies have been dedicated to the use of these instruments in the foreign language acquisition classes. For instance, Eaton (2010) provides an extensive overview of the pedagogy of using Skype in ESL classroom. The study focuses on the increase in students' language and communicative competencies.

In contrast to the asynchronous e-forums, video-conferencing has some unique features which can be regarded as the advantages of this type of technology. First, unlike in written communication, the user faces strict time constraints which call for

the development of time-management skills and the ability to express oneself in a laconic yet meaningful manner. Such constraints impose self-regulation and a more careful choice of linguistic means. Likewise, inability to alter one's speech act upon its completion (unlike the possibility to use the feature of editing in the written e-forums) also pressures the participants into a more reflective speaking. Then, on the other hand, real-time communication leaves room for flexibility and self-correction based on the instant reaction of the listener. It allows a faster negotiation of meaning in case of comprehension failure. Finally, the unique characteristic of video-conferencing is the opportunity to observe the verbal and non-verbal communication patterns of the target culture live. The culturally-rooted discussion styles are on display while the viewers get both the audio and the visual picture.

4 CASE-STUDY

4.1 Project Description

In response to the demand for pedagogy enhancement in foreign language acquisition in terms of creating a special environment for critical thinking and cross-cultural learning, a World Debate project was launched in the spring 2011 between the two institutions of higher education: National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia, and Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, U.S.A. The main goal of the project is to teach argumentation and debate in a foreign language by focusing on the three areas: language proficiency, cultural communication patterns and logical reasoning. The project has been carried out in the form of synchronous video-conference debates.

4.1.1 Participants

The project brought together the students of English as a foreign language from Russia and the students studying Russian as a foreign language in the U.S.A. The initial level of the students ranged from intermediate-high to advanced-high according to the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) conducted by American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. The project was conducted in the spring semester of 2010/2011 and the fall semester 2011/2012 bringing together each time 12 students on each side. Russian ESL students were all sophomores majoring in world economics and

international affairs, while American students were sophomores and juniors from various majors.

4.1.2 Framework

The project consisted in conducting 6 video-debates (conducted through Polycom): three in each target language, alternating the language of the debate each time. In total the students participated in 3 debates in the foreign languages and 3 in their native language. Each video-debate had a time limit of 50 minutes total (the class time of the U.S. institution) and had the following structure. Six participants on each side were given 4 minutes each to provide the arguments in favor or against a particular claim. The minutes were distributed in the manner so as to have the first minute to present the argument, the second and the third minute to answer on-the-spot questions from the opposite side, and the fourth minute to conclude the argument. Each student from the opposite side had to pose at least one question during the debate round. This rule specifically tackled the issue of critical evaluation of the presented arguments.

4.1.3 Objectives

The main objectives of the project included the following: 1) to increase foreign language proficiency; 2) to learn communication patterns specific to the target culture; and 3) to master efficient argumentation and reasoning. All three objectives were united by a meta-goal of fostering critical thinking in foreign language acquisition.

4.2 Content Design

The content of the project was designed so as to meet the intellectual needs of the students. Researchers of debate pedagogy note that proper topic selection is key: It cannot be too vague or too general (Hansen, 2007). Thus, the choice of debate topics was done through a survey in which the students had to pick those topics that they found engaging. The short-list offered to the students included the topical issues relevant to both countries – Russia and the U.S.A. For instance, the students had to debate such claims as 'Economic growth should not be carried out at the cost of the environment' and 'Foreign governments are justified

in interfering in domestic affairs of sovereign countries.'

As a scaffolding tool, the students were provided with the articles in respective fields in the foreign languages along with the list of topical vocabulary and speech patterns to frame the debate. The aims of the articles consisted in introducing the students into the issue, equipping them with the vocabulary and appropriate language constructions to the discussion of the topic and stimulating further research which would result in constructing their own arguments and proving them with valid support.

4.3 The Benefits of Technology

The synchronous video-conferencing technology used in the project (Polycom) brought about the following benefits of a multi-cultural environment.

First, the students on the two sides of the ocean got an opportunity to practice the language with the native speakers of the target language, which would not have been possible without such platform. Namely, not only did it allow observing the correct usage of grammar and vocabulary, along with checking the right pronunciation of the key vocabulary but also it provided for observing speech pragmatics in practice. The differences between the Russian and the American styles of debate were clearly seen in the students' interaction, which facilitated finding common ground and adapting to the culturally-rooted communication differences.

Second, synchronous interaction encouraged instant negotiation of meaning and immediate self-correction in case of an error. The on-going dialogue also contributed to practicing spontaneous speech and questioning the opponent's position through posing questions and requesting clarification in case of fallacies in reasoning. The immediate peer-reviewing and peer-correction by prompting the right answers through the questions facilitated the cross-cultural dialogue.

Finally, the use of video-recording of the debate provided an opportunity for self-reflection and self-criticism. Each student was assigned to submit feedback on their own performance in the written form highlighting their strong and weak points displayed during the debate round.

All in all, the video-conference debate created a platform for building language and reasoning skills along with fostering cross-cultural understanding.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Anticipated results of the World Debate project conducted in the form of video-conference debates revolve around measuring the students' progress in critical thinking reflected in the use appropriate language tools and culturally-rooted discussion patterns to negotiate the meaning through a logically-built argumentation and reasoning. Yet, on the level of implementation already, it can be observed that the format of debate can promote critical thinking in foreign language acquisition under the following conditions: 1) creation of multi-cultural environment, 2) appropriate content design, 3) initial scaffolding in terms of language and reasoning. Since the video-conferencing plays a vital role in bridging the gap between native and non-native speakers bringing them together in a synchronous virtual classroom, we can conclude that new technologies in education facilitate the successful implementation of critical thinking and enhance the pedagogy of foreign language acquisition.

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