

# SPEAK YOUR MIND: SIMPLIFIED DEBATES AS A LEARNING TOOL AT THE UNIVERSITY LEVEL

Lenka Lustigová

Czech University of Life Sciences Prague  
lustigova@pef.czu.cz

## Abstract

This study focuses on the development of speaking skills in intermediate and lower level university classes through the simplified format of debates. The aim of this paper is to describe teaching observations with special attention given to the preparatory stages, strengths and challenges of simplified debate faced by both the teacher and the students. Observations were made while teaching speaking through simple debate to 19 - 20 year-old-students of general English at the Czech University of Life Sciences Prague in intermediate and lower level classes. By describing the methods and procedures used to engage in debates, this paper aims to enrich pedagogical methods for effectively teaching speaking skills and thus serve ESL teachers at large. By contextualizing debate within a milieu larger than the ESL classroom, this study also accesses possibilities for further application of simplified debate to heighten training for other subjects, while drawing upon the democratic context supported by debate.

## Key Words

ESL/EFL, pedagogy, intermediate-lower university level, debate skills/development, democracy, lesson plan suggestions

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## Introduction

Of the four language skills (speaking, reading, writing, listening), speaking is generally thought to be the most important. Likewise, the ability to speak a second language is often equated with proficiency in the language itself (Thornbury, 2006: 208). According to Hornby (1974: 826-827), "speaking is making use of words in an ordinary voice, uttering words, knowing and being able to use a language, expressing oneself in words, as well as making a speech." In short, speaking is the ability to perform the linguistic knowledge in actual communication. Chancy (1998: 13) further defines speaking as "the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols in a variety of contexts."

On the whole, the principal objective of teaching English at early stages is to develop the student's communicative competence by involving them in their own learning process. However, most of them prefer drilling exercises, i.e. passively memorizing, which in turn does not make speaking the language overly natural. Students struggle to express their thoughts, as they not only lack vocabulary, but often creative thinking as well. Recently, Koteková (2010) has been testing new ways to have students use their own words and express their thoughts. She found that students must be encouraged to respond to text-based situations with their own thoughts and experiences, whether answering questions or doing abstract learning activities. Harmer (2007: 84), however, takes care to emphasize that the teacher must assign tasks which the students are indeed capable of doing, rather than opting for over-challenging ones which have the potential to humiliate them. Likewise, according to him, the teacher should stimulate intellectual activity and thereby aid students in becoming aware of various contrasting ideas and concepts which they themselves can resolve via speaking. As quoted

in Thornbury (2006: 208), typical activities to teach speaking include: dialogue, drama activities, role-plays, simulations, games, discussions, informal classroom chat and debates.

Among such activities, debates are seen as one of the most active learning processes since students learn more through the process of actual construction and creation on their own, as well as working in a group and thus sharing knowledge. Founded by The Open Society Institute, the International Debate Education Association as defines debate in the following manner:

Debate is a formal contest of argumentation between two teams or individuals. More than a mere verbal or performance skill, debate embodies the ideals of reasoned argument, tolerance for divergent points of view, and rigorous self-examination. Debate is, above all, a way for those who hold opposing views to discuss controversial issues without descending to insult, emotional appeals, or personal bias. A key trademark of debate is that it rarely ends in agreement, but rather, allows for a robust analysis of the question at hand. Perhaps this is what French philosopher Joseph Joubert meant when he said: 'It is better to debate a question without settling it, than to settle a question without debating it.' (International Debate Education Association, n.d.)

Focusing on the "critical thinking, effective communication, independent research, and teamwork" which such discussion kindles, the objectives of this association reinforce that "debate teaches skills that serve individuals well in school, in the workplace, in political life" (International Debate Education Association, n.d.) and obviously anywhere else that opinions hold sway. An important educational tool for analytical thinking skills and for self-conscious reflection on the validity of one's ideas (Nesbett, 2003: 210), debate is an excellent activity

for language learning because it engages students in a variety of cognitive and linguistic pathways, directing them into responsible dialogue within a diplomatic, democratic context.

Given the nature of this study, the objectives of this paper are to provide sufficient reason for larger integration of debate into university-level classrooms via simple debate structures for intermediate and lower-level classes. By offering a working framework, the purpose of this paper focuses on a practical and yet motivated solution to multi-faceted issues faced by the university teacher of ESL. Various sources were used, as appropriate to both the intermediate/lower university levels and on a wider scale, via books and other online resources to encourage students to speak, form their opinions and approach questions creatively within the debate context.

The methodology used to formulate this paper comprises a scholarly assessment of the importance of speech, including the definition of debate and a description of speech/debate within the university context. This is followed by identifying simplified debate formats and describing their implementation in practice. Having established the observation processes and explained the organization of the groups, a cohesive integration of grammar and other external language measures into debate are subsequently described. All has been tested in the classroom, as evidenced by the number of students, genders, age, professional goals, etc. This paper then provides a discussion of the strengths and limitations of simplified debate, including those faced by both the teacher, as well as the student, before offering various solutions to specific classroom situations. Special attention is given to the spectrum of wider applications for simplified debates, including their potential as amplified tools to teach students how to think in courses which cover subjects other than ESL, yet are offered in the English language.

Finally, the scholarly results are summarised with a reflexion on the importance of debate within the context of democracy and societal interaction.

## Material and Methods

It is becoming increasingly common to introduce debate skills into university programmes as the value of such courses is more frequently acknowledged. For ESL/EFL, debate participation consolidates the students' second language skills via reading, writing, persuasive speaking and eventual conversational fluency. Debate has been described by Lubetsky, LeBeau and Harrington (in Lieb, 2007) as a highly sophisticated form of immediate, interactive communication which assumes an elevated level of discourse skill, the mastery of which is often elusive even for native speakers. Its complexity extends far beyond the level of ordinary conversation, demanding dynamic and critical listening, as well as advanced language competency and critical thinking. At the Czech University of Life Sciences Prague, debate sessions are usually held by teachers who are native speakers and are focused on upper-intermediate and advanced students. Although serious debate topics are too formal and can be especially intimidating for ESL/EFL learners, simplified debate does indeed offer a powerful tool for enlivening teaching and energizing beginner-level students. When students engage in debate, they take an active role in their education, while subjects which may once have seemed dull and abstract come vividly to life (Tumposky, 2004: 52).

The methods and subsequent results analyzed below were tested over the course of two full-length university semesters at the Czech University of Life Sciences Prague. Class sizes varied, from 20 to 25 students, included both genders (however the majority were male - 55 %) and covered an age range of 19 –

21 year olds. The total number of students was 475. All of the students were native speakers of Czech; however some of them also came from multinational backgrounds (including Russian, Ukrainian, Kazakh and Vietnamese families). The English course in which these debates were incorporated was a required course for B.A. degree majors; however the intentions of the students with regard to their professional life after completion of the degree varied (Economics and Management, Engineering, Environmental Science, Forestry, Wildlife and Wood Sciences, Agrobiological, Food and Natural Resources). Thus it was clear that their career choices would significantly benefit from advanced English skills, specifically in terms of speaking, discussion, opinion-gathering, etc. The choice to introduce debate into the classroom for these students was therefore a contemplated one, taking into account the best for the students based on available time and resources. Of the students participating in the course, 75% continued into a second semester and thus had the benefit of participating in debate sessions for an entire academic year.

### **Simplified debate formats**

For efficient group discussions, small groups turned out to be ideal, because quiet students were formerly avoiding any contributions to large groups. Likewise, larger groups tended to be noisier and thus more difficult for the teacher to monitor. The group members were either assigned by the teacher or the students determined the groups by themselves. However, the groups were systematically rearranged for each separate discussion activity so that the students could cooperate with dissimilar people, learn to be open to different ideas and ultimately, test their own opinions on a variety of people.

Students were placed in two teams of two or three members. The teams were then presented with a "topic" (resolution) such as

e.g. "Smoking should be banned in public places." In teams, the students subsequently prepared their arguments by following this suggested format:

1. Affirmative team speech
2. Opposing team speech
3. Affirmative team rebuttal
4. Negative team rebuttal
5. Questions/answers from teams, field questions from audience
6. Affirmative closing argument
7. Negative closing argument
8. Audience assesses arguments' persuasiveness
9. Teacher provides constructive feedback

Mini-debates primarily focused on language use at the given level of the students. The focus was on a multitude of factors, for example: pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, use of appropriate register, synonyms, fluency of speech and accuracy to keep the debate going smoothly. It was assumed that with the centre of attention of each debate focused on different language issues, the possibilities for the teacher, as well as the opportunities for the students would grow.

When assessing simplified debate, concentration was not on the organisation, use of arguments, use of examples and facts, and effective counter-arguments, as would normally be done in qualifying debates. Instead, constructive feedback was provided primarily from the language use point of view, particularly in how the language was used and why. Suggestions for improvement were once again tailored, given the debate at hand. Options included, but were far from limited to: use of additional weight-carrying verbs (versus "to be," "to

have," etc.), improved opinion-indication phrases, increased diplomatic approaches and referencing of external opinions to support individual opinions.

This final suggestion sometimes led to number 10) being added to the above-outlined scheme in that enough time for the students' own feedback on the teacher's comments needed to be allowed. This fostered an atmosphere of excellent teacher/student communication. Students were encouraged to be creative with evidence and support for their positions. The goal was not to train world-class debaters, but instead to allow the students to consolidate their language skills, practice speaking, develop a diplomatic approach to opinion expression and enjoy the process along the way (Fedorkiw, 2010).

### **Simplified debate – methodology in practice**

When teaching debate to intermediate and lower classes, it proved to be essential to employ a step-by-step or scaffolding approach. Rather than overwhelming the students with the complex structure of debate speeches, it was best to start with the straightforward process of formulating and becoming aware of their own opinions, while introducing a number of language structures, grammar issues and new vocabulary along the way. Harmer (2007: 84) clarifies that "simplified debates concentrate the content of the ESL/EFL learner's speech, thus allowing the students to focus on improving their skills by using knowledge already grasped," and further explains that "skills integration is a major factor in a lesson planning." Lessons preparations for the students' debate included:

- topic definition,
- class warm-up discussion,
- pre-reading warm-up questions,

- reading short news stories or texts from course textbooks on current topics or on debatable historical issues (for more advanced students),
- comprehension questions,
- reading, watching and listening to recorded debates or videos on a given topic,
- comprehension exercises,
- vocabulary review review of useful debate phrases,
- discussion of where debate may be applicable to real-life situations.

This simplified debate project was split into and/or combined together with several different activities, each supporting the next. The first stage involved choosing an interesting situation to maintain student interest and keep them active. The topics were consistently targeted to the language level and background interests of the class. The students were even offered several cases to be debated and then voted for the most suitable one. Occasionally, a list of potential topics was also developed in a teacher/student brainstorming session during which relevant and thought-provoking issues were chosen.

Subsequently, the aim was to link the topics with the vocabulary and language focus of the textbook which generally served as the basic study material in the classroom. An alternative was to have the students debate a range of less formal topics, since even students with limited language skills could thereby become engaged. Using simple debate topics also allowed the students to sidestep the common stumbling block of ESL/EFL learners trying to translate complex thoughts from their native language into their second language.

Based on extensive trial, the following topics worked well for beginner-level university classes:

- Girls are smarter than boys.
- Celebrities are better people than us.
- Television makes you stupid.
- The world will end in 2012.
- Fashion is more important than quality.
- The internet is just a fad.
- Diet is better than exercise.
- There is too much billboard advertising.
- Little white lies are OK sometimes.
- Summer is better than winter.
- The phone is more useful than e-mail.
- Information technology should be used more in the classroom.
- Smoking should be banned in public places.
- There is a good system of caring for the elderly in the Czech Republic.
- The President of the Czech Republic is doing a good job.
- A student fee should be introduced at state-owned universities.
- Love is more important than money.
- It is better to be married than single.

For intermediate-level university students, the above-mentioned list was also applicable; however more nuanced topics were also addressed, such as:

- WWII still influences life here today.
- Friends are more important than family.

- Without travel, we cannot appreciate life in our own country.
- Being part of the EU helps us live better on a daily basis.
- Without a broad CV, it is impossible to find a good job.
- University education is vital to finding a career-based position.
- The Czech Republic is losing its best people to the West.
- Friends are more important than family.

Obviously the list was tailored, again based on the professional goals of the students in the class.

With an increasing number of debates, students began to form their opinions accurately, explain the reasons for such opinions and provide substantial evidence, all the while acquiring additional confidence in English. Depending on the chosen topic, it was useful to introduce students to the three different types of opinions as defined by Lubetsky et al (in Lieb, 2007).

- Opinion of value: X is better than Y (e.g. Summer is better than winter.)
- Opinion of policy: X should do Y (e.g. Smoking should be banned at public places.)
- Opinions of fact: X is / was / will be true. (e.g. The world will end in 2012.)

Depending on the topic, students were also provided with particular grammar structures (comparatives of adjectives, conditional clauses, simple past, present and future tenses). Sample grammar structures were written on the board or given to the students as a handout. A list of opinions on a given topic was then provided to the students in the form of cue cards. Once the students were given sample grammar structures and explained the variety of opinions for use during the debate,

they pragmatically focused on correct production skills in conversation and, in time, learned to identify their own opinions. Students were also trained to form questions to challenge the other team.

The next step was to provide reasons for the opinions. Given that mini-debates were relatively new to the students, multiple choice activities served this process very well, requiring the students to select the best reason from a list of choices. Students were thus introduced to different types of reasons, such as comparisons, contrast, and cause/effect relationships which were reflected in various grammar structures to be acquired. For example:

Opinion: Summer is better than winter.

- A) ... because summer is a more pleasant season.
- B) ... because summer is my favourite season.
- C) ... because there are usually summer holidays.
- D) ... because \_\_\_\_\_.

In the following stage, the students were asked to look for evidence to support the chosen reason (Lubetsky et al in Lieb, 2007). This evidence could be their subjective explanation, an expert opinion based on media research or the use of some statistical data to support the reason for a certain opinion. For example:

Opinion: Large cars are better than small cars.

Reasons: Large cars are more useful than small cars.

Evidence:

1. ... because you can fit more things in a large car and....
2. If you have a large car, you may .....
3. According to XY magazine, large cars save you money.
4. 6 out of 10 people say they prefer large cars over small ones, because they can put many things in them and...

At this stage, the students researched their debate topics using books, newspapers and the internet. This was done in the classroom or sometimes given as homework. This student research emphasized reading skills, including the skimming and scanning of texts. Moreover, students practiced writing while making their notes and developing a list of arguments. The students were asked to write their notes and list their arguments in English. It was not acceptable to write the arguments in L1 and to then translate them into English. Arguments needed to be written in clear and simple English that could be easily understood by their peers. Watching and listening to sample debates using the internet as a video database also significantly enhanced the students' listening skills.

After such preparation, the students were ready to assemble their affirmative speeches. At this point, certain simple refutation language structures were also introduced, allowing for a suitable language framework for agreement/disagreement to be established early on. Students were encouraged to provide linguistic support to the teacher at each stage of the process. Useful vocabulary for the students was sensitively chosen to serve them in the short-term debate context, as well as in the long-term life context. Several examples are provided below:

- Expressing agreement and disagreement (e.g. I agree. / I think so. / That's right. / I disagree. / I don't think so. / I think that you are right.)

- Talking about point of view (e.g. From my perspective... / For example, I think... / In my opinion... / I'd rather... / I'd prefer... / The way I see it.... / I suppose.../ I suspect that....)
- Reporting what others say (e.g. From the point of view of... / So, what you're saying is... / So, if I understand you correctly, you are saying... / So, in your view...)
- Talking about meaning (e.g. I'm not sure I understand what you mean. / Would you mind rephrasing your thought? / I didn't quite follow you, could you explain that point again? / Do you understand what I mean? / Do you follow what I'm saying? / Am I making sense?)
- Drawing conclusions (e.g. We finally all agreed that... / After much discussion, we decided that... / We recognised that... / We are fully aware that...)
- Giving reasons and offering explanations (e.g. To start with... / The reason why... / That's why... / For these reasons... / Many people think...)
- Phrases of interruption (e.g. Can I come in here? / To go back to an earlier point... / Coming back to the chat with John... / I think that I agree with the point you made earlier, Chris... / Sorry, carry on. / No, go ahead. / Sorry, you were going to say....)
- Language of comparison e.g. (X is bigger than Y.) Language of cause and effect (e.g. If you do X, then Y will happen)

(McCarthy and O'Dell, 2008, pp. 68, 72, 80-84, 96, 108).

Given that the debates were oral, the students were requested to use a louder voice than normally used during a conversation and thus be easily heard by their classmates. They were also pushed to change and modulate their tone of speech, highlighting certain words.

## Results

The above-described scholarly work confirms that debate is an active learning technique that encourages students to be interested in the teaching-learning process, while significantly benefiting the students in terms of speaking ability, specifically-measurable verbal communication and critical thinking skills. At the start of the debate sessions, they would last approximately 6 minutes; however by the end of the semesters, the students were still debating 20 minutes later – a significant improvement in terms of the actual time that they were capable of speaking. Thus, the efficiency of debate as a technique to train students to cooperate with others in a group-setting also produced the visible by-product of motivating students to express their own opinions and arguments beyond a superficial level.

A step-by-step approach proved to be the most beneficial, as students were gradually introduced to new language structures, grammar and vocabulary. By fine tuning the debate topics to the students' level of knowledge, the students themselves contributed more actively and created a relaxing and positive teaching/learning atmosphere. Taking into account the four language skills, the students manifestly improved their writing, reading and listening skills, as was evidenced within the classroom with enhanced performance in written homework and oral consultation sessions. Vocabulary tests, and other oral activities, during the semester also demonstrated a sufficient increase of gained knowledge.

At the start of implementing these mini-debate sessions, several students expressed anxiety at being forced to express an opinion in front of people with whom he/she did not consider himself/herself to have much in common, beyond attending the same class at the same university. All fears were allayed; however, as it was made clear that the ESL classroom was simply the chance

environment where the students were at the moment. The relevance to real life was also a considerable factor in driving home the importance of debate and made the students feel more comfortable.

By using simplified debate format which focused particularly on language use, English was able to be introduced into the ESL classroom in a way that was both challenging and interesting to the learner and teacher simultaneously. Given the high adaptability of these activities, it became much easier to consolidate previous lessons, comprise reading, writing, listening, speaking, and research skills, while also providing the groundwork for future concepts and integrating these skills in such a way that they supported and enhanced one another. As the students developed communicative competence in English, the teacher directly benefited from a more interactive classroom atmosphere; this was evident from the participating students since attendance rose by 20 % on days where it was previously announced that mini-debates would take place. Students were also observed increasing the number of topics debated in conversation outside the classroom (either before or after class). As a result, society most likely also gained in the long-term since these thinking skills were eventually projected into a wide range of applications in everyday life.

As demonstrated above, the teacher's thorough preparation and sensitive involvement was the tool to overcome potential challenges such as time constraints, limited knowledge and various language capabilities of the students, mixed-level groups, and the occasional nervousness of learners. Overall, the results of significantly merging debate into the classroom, along with other activities, produced the tangible results of more confident students who were keen to contribute to their own language storehouse, to the improved classroom environment

and ultimately, willing to tolerate others' opinions, while responding with well thought-out counter arguments. This type of diplomacy cannot be purchased. Thus, in spite of the challenges presented, debate (even in its modified and simplified version for intermediate and lower-level students) proved effective for everyone involved, as well as for those who would ultimately be influenced.

As students began requesting mini-debate sessions, the range of topics widened and began reflecting increasingly relevant issues to the European Union and the Czech Republic's place within it, specifically the Czech university level, the role of émigrés past and present, the need for Western standards to attain world status for the country, etc. In terms of the topics and associated grammar, the students themselves began suggesting matches or pairings between subject/grammar. As long as the suggestions were within the range of the material which was necessary to teach the students, the majority of the ideas were incorporated. Once again, this placed in teacher in an elevated position of respect from the students who were literally learning how to teach themselves and grateful for the opportunity of participating, first-hand, in their education.

## Discussion

### Strengths of Debate and Potential Applications outside the Classroom

Although these debates were tested within a classroom focused on ESL/EFL training, the potential applications of such mini-debates for a range of courses can be considered, including: history, politics, anthropology, philosophy, comparative literature, citizenship and responsibility – indeed in any course where the focus of developing the students' capacity for

thinking is vital. With a purposeful modification by the teacher of the topics addressed and increased student participation in more lengthy arguments prepared for the given debate issues, the prospective profits for all involved are multiplied.

As suggested earlier, the development of a student's poise in expressing an opinion for which he/she will not be harassed by outside societal pressure is a key to the growth of the individual within society as a whole. In particular, the scheme for development of thought to a deeper degree is well suited for adaption to other subjects, particularly for those subjects taught in English to students who are non-native. A number of Western European countries are currently offering high-school and university level subjects taught in English, as opposed to the respective language of the country where the courses are based. By changing the core vocabulary reviewed, the actual debate issues, as well as the end target for why each debate is important, simplified debates can appreciably further the offering of teachers of multiple subjects. Books such as Price and Deller's *Teaching Other Subjects Through English* (2007) offer a variety of helpful methods, including discussion within business, design and technology, geography. Debate, however, does not feature.

Based on the above observations and experiments in the classroom, debate held in English, yet not specifically pertinent to the ESL classroom, could also be integrated much earlier than the university level. High school is likewise an ideal ground for students to establish their opinions before facing university. Given that a number of students are opting for business, economic and financial classes early on, the integration of English debate skills is increasingly germane. Multiple science projects taking place within the EU are also choosing English as the language base. Finally, the possibility of travelling for students from the former

Warsaw Pact countries, now that Europe has opened its doors, may well affect students who are already at the middle-school level, offering prospects of cultural and language exchanges and eventual pen pals. As well-informed ambassadors for the country they represent, students, even at lower age levels, need to be able to formulate their opinion and express it simply in order to promote their own nation, as well as themselves.

### **Limitations of Debates and Suggested Remedies**

The main challenge faced by the teacher was the limited classroom time and the varying capabilities of the students, while the students themselves struggled with a limited knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency and nervousness. To overcome time constraints, the debate was moved forward smoothly and quickly, limiting each speaker to one minute. This gave approximately fifteen minutes in total for one mini-debate session. Small teams of two or three students were ideal. These teams were encouraged to solicit help from the rest of the class so that everyone was involved.

Any lack of language capability and/or mixed-level groups was solved by the students' thorough home preparation, sensitive distribution of students within the groups and assignment of appropriate topics. Students were allowed to have their notes on hand, as well as the teacher's handouts or cue cards with sample grammar structures and sample opinions available for the entire debate. It was also effective when the students were assigned specific roles, opinions and points of view that they did not necessarily share. This freed them from having to express their own opinions and they could therefore focus on expressing themselves well in English. Removing this personal investment factor helped students gain confidence in using English. Once this confidence was gained, especially by timid

students, they were then increasingly sure of expressing their own points of view. In specific situations, timid students were paired with more vocal volunteers who offered to “mentor” their fellow students to a more bold position. This had the effect in the classroom of building smaller groups of united students, eventually helping to form a more united class as well.

With an aim to balance the different capabilities of the students and to have *all* the students interact, the following approach was also tried. Once the topic was established, the students were divided into two groups, i.e. those who agreed with the statement and those who disagreed. They then prepared their arguments. The chairs were arranged so that there were two hot seats facing each other with the remaining chairs placed behind each of the two hot seats (enough for all the students in the class). Two students started the topic of conversation, trying to defend their group’s point of view. Once started, the teacher then signalled any two students during the conversation (one who was in a hot seat and one who was not). Once they had been signalled, they had to stop the conversation and two new students had to resume it exactly where the other two left off, even if this was in mid-sentence. They were required to make the debate coherent, following up on the previous opinions and statements. This activity thus involved all of the students and allowed the teacher to influence the process of debate, while considering the language level skills of the individual students. (Southan, 2002).

Any limited knowledge of grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary needed to be sensitively addressed by the teacher, but not by interrupting the flow of communication. Instead, notes were taken while the pairs or groups were talking and then the problems were addressed to the class after the activity without embarrassing the student who had made the error.

The errors were written on the board and corrected with the interaction of the entire class.

If a speaking activity seemed to be stagnating, the teacher sometimes needed to assume a role-play, asking additional discussion questions, clarifying instructions or stopping an activity if it was indeed too difficult. During the preparatory stages, the teacher circulated around the classroom to ensure that students were on the right track and see if they needed help while working in groups or pairs. The teacher could also thus diagnose the problems faced by the students who had difficulty in expressing themselves in the target language and provide more opportunities adjusted to these students’ needs.

Ultimately, the teacher’s role was also very critical in overcoming the nervousness of the debating students. Among others, the following approach proved to be very successful. I, for example, prompted the students to imagine that the room was full of people who were begging and crawling before them, simply because they wanted to listen to their speech. Through this technique, students gradually gained sufficient confidence.

## Conclusion

Present study was aimed to develop speaking skills of the ESL students through simplified debates. The findings indicate that both students and teacher found such teaching – learning tool very useful and highly effective. The study also indicates that used approach brings substantially more positive effects, not only improvement of students’ speaking skills. Rights activist Jesse Jackson has been credited with expressing his thoughts on debate in the following manner, “Deliberation and debate is the way you stir the soul of our democracy.” Although he was referring to American democracy with his words, the essence remains pertinent to the concept of democracy in its truest

sense, i.e. power staying with the people. In her essay entitled "The Debate Debate," associate professor Nancy Rennau Tumposky (2004: 52) also links the maintenance of debate, as a method of learning, to democracy, "finally, and perhaps most significantly, debate's resilience is no doubt partly attributed to its associations with two powerful concepts: critical thinking and democracy." With the stand which Central Europe has taken with regard to democracy, specifically after the Iron Curtain fell in the late 80s and early 90s, the importance of demonstrating to students that their opinion counts has become increasingly pertinent. In a region of the world where silence was formerly lauded and adhering to the status quo was a virtue, the relevance of debate becomes all the more essential, given this historical background. Debating opinions and issues, laws and amendments is a privilege; the ability to do so diplomatically, with well-formed initiatives for action is an opportunity.

In the university context, this power can be understood in terms of training individuals who are interested in the improved functioning of inter-human relationships whether that is to a larger international extent or in one-to-one interactions. A country is composed of its citizens and the values they purport, demonstrate and put forth on a scale, eventually larger than their own immediate surroundings – where strategic thinking, fair practice and mutual understandings take centre stage. Teaching is not merely transferring knowledge to students, but also helping them to develop a deeper understanding of themselves (Browden & Ference, 1998: 22), as well as the ability to think individually and responsibly within the greater context of society and to display empathy (Tumposky, 2004: 53). Eventually, this newly-gained awareness of themselves can lead students to more effective contributions to society.

For the teacher, the goal – both short and long term – should be to make a change for the better. And debating at any level can aid the teacher in reaching this goal. As students are not only allowed to debate, but supported in their discussions and taught the mechanics of successful, responsibility thinking, the future can only hope for increased accountability from these individuals for the world. Debates – even in simplified formats – belong in our classrooms.

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