

Who to Argue with: Japanese EFL Students' Preference for Student-teacher or Student-student Debate Format

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Abstract

This paper examines English language learners' preference for student-teacher and student-student debates based on a study of second-year students at a Japanese university. The paper first discusses the amorphous nature of academic "debate", then presents a literature review addressing the benefits and drawbacks of debate in the language-learning classroom. In the ensuing study, 45 students first debated their instructor one-on-one and then debated a classmate in the same fashion. Afterwards, they completed a survey indicating which of the two modes they preferred, along with the strengths and weaknesses of each mode. Results showed that while students were generally satisfied with both formats, they preferred to debate the instructor since the discourse proceeded naturally and the dynamic closely resembled the target language environment. The findings may be of particular use to EFL teachers whose students intend to study abroad in an immersive all-English environment.

Keywords

Debate, discourse, second language, L2, anxiety

1. Introduction

"Honest disagreement," said Gandhi, "is often a good sign of progress." Left unstated is just what sort of progress, and for the language learning classroom, it very well may be students' communicative competence. How so? Disagreement in the form of debate provides students with some of the best opportunities to become active participants in the classroom, not just passive observers or vessels to be filled with knowledge. Debate, after all, appeals to students' moral compass, their ego, their competitive spirit. Tell a student that smoking should be allowed on airplanes and chances are you'll get a visceral reply, with the student using all of their linguistic tools to get their point across. Put plainly, debate motivates people to communicate. This paper first addresses the meaning of "debate" in the ESL/EFL classroom and discusses its benefits and drawbacks. Next, it addresses two formats of debate, student versus student ("student-student") and student versus teacher ("student-teacher") and presents the advantages and disadvantages of each format. Finally, it presents a study of EFL students at a Japanese university and discusses which of the aforementioned debate formats they preferred.

2. Literature Review

2.1 What is "Debate"?

Most linguistics papers on debate begin with an historical accounting of the topic going back to the ancient Greeks,

which will be spared here. However, just what constitutes a proper debate in the modern ESL classroom could itself be a topic of debate. Anglocentric research typically associates second-language classroom debate with British Parliamentary Debate, a highly structured format familiar to instructors from Commonwealth countries—but largely unknown to those in other parts of the world. In the non-Anglocentric classroom, however, debate can mean many things. Kennedy (2007), for instance, discusses a wealth of different debate formats, from single students arguing against each other to an entire class split into two opposing sides. In some formats, the audience members are passive observers while in others they are active participants. In some, the debaters only establish a stance; in others, they must present solutions. In a fishbowl debate, three groups take turns sitting in the middle of the room discussing their singular support for an issue. In a four corner debate, students choose one of four positions, “strongly agree,” “agree,” “disagree” and “strongly disagree,” and occupy a corresponding corner of the room. The point is, debate in most ESL classrooms is malleable and ever evolving.

2.2 Whether to Debate

Perhaps the greatest question about debate in the ESL classroom is whether to do it in the first place. While a modest amount of literature addressing the question exists, the bulk of scholarly works takes on the issue more obliquely, for example, discussing debate in certain non-ESL language-learning classrooms or parsing debate problems and solutions (rather than its viability). For this literature review, all such works have been incorporated and inferences have been drawn where appropriate.

2.2.1 The Argument For

One of the most commonly reported benefits of introducing debate to the language learning classroom is that it boosts students’ speaking confidence (Nguyen, 2020; Hattin, 2021; Jouini, 2019; Lustigova, 2011; Amiri et al., 2017; Al-Mahrooqi & Tabakow, 2015; Zare & Othman, 2015). Language learners often lack exposure to oral argumentation in the target language and when first confronted with it find it a daunting task. They have been known to shy away from debates, stalling or demurring during the preparation and implementation of them (Amiri et al., 2017), sometimes skipping the assignment altogether. However, when they get past their initial fears, they usually end up completing the debate competently and finding that they can, in fact, argue in the target language. Jouini (2019), for example, found that 91% of EFL students in Tunisia believed that debate enhanced their English-speaking confidence while Zare and Othman (2015), in a study of a Malaysian EFL debate class, emphatically reported, “One of the outcomes of the study ... was that the debates helped the students lose the fear of talking in front of their classmates and boost their confidence to talk” (p. 166).

A second common benefit is that debate develops critical thinking (Iman, 2017; Gulnaz, 2020; Hattani, 2021; Zare & Othman, 2015; Aclan & Aziz, 2015). Traditional learning in some cultures, such as in China, Japan, and Korea, as well as in Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Kuwait, emphasizes receptive skills to go along with an unquestioning acceptance of what the teacher or textbook states. Most students in these cultures have spent little time debating in a first or second language, so asking them to deconstruct an issue, identify the different sides and present their strengths and weaknesses adds a significant layer of complexity and confusion to the language learning classroom. Through schema building and scaffolding, however, instructors can walk their students through the process and teach them to be adept political and social critics. Iman (2017), for instance, presents the hierarchical models of critical thinking developed by John Dewey and Benjamin Bloom, stating that teachers must build up their students’ ability to debate by first getting them to understand the problem, then having them organize the information, create a defensible hypothesis, and finally analyze the validity of opposing viewpoints.

A third benefit is that students become less afraid of confrontation (Jouini, 2019; Iman, 2017; Al-Mahrooqi & Tabakow, 2015; Zare & Othman, 2015). Some cultures, particularly those mentioned in the paragraph above, emphasize group harmony over individual expression, and, consequently, students from these cultures can feel uncomfortable when asked to openly disagree with classmates. They have experience dissenting, mind you, but it is either done in private or in an indirect fashion where the stance must be inferred. Exactly why such students feel uncomfortable with open disagreement varies. While some students may have been raised to be as complaisant as possible, to be “good citizens”, others may worry about losing the argument since saving face plays an important role in East Asian cultures. Fukuda (2003), for instance, in discussing student discomfort during debate, stated that “before the debates only 30.8% of the students were not afraid of expressing their opinions when they were not the same as others,” but that “the knowledge or skills which came from the practice in the debates led the students to become more accustomed to expressing opinions” (as cited in Iman, 2017, pp. 417-418).

Other less-frequently reported benefits of debate in the ESL classroom include enhancing student fluency (Aclan &

Aziz, 2015; Hattani, 2021; Iman, 2017), deepening student knowledge (Gulnaz, 2020), and developing student empathy and open-mindedness (Hattani, 2021).

2.2.2 The Argument Against

Debate in the language learning classroom has its drawbacks, however, and one of the most commonly reported is that it simply takes up too much time (Nguyen, 2020; Wahyuni et al., 2020; Koga & Sato, 2013). Instructors have found building up students' rhetorical skills and knowledge of the subject matter can be slow going, taking weeks, if not months, and often eating into the time allotted to other activities. Learning the target language is hard enough, but when reasoning is thrown into the mix, students often assume too much of a cognitive burden. Nguyen (2020), in discussing Japanese EFL students' opinions on classroom debate, noted that one student stated, "It's hard to speak in English about topics that are hard to discuss even in Japanese" while another student added, "The rebuttal is hard because it requires many skills... you have to listen, think, make sentences, and then talk" (pp. 81-82). Further, the inherent structure of debate contributes to its lengthiness, with the general rule that the more structured the debate, the longer it will take to complete. Wahyuni et al. (2020), for instance, found British Parliamentary Debate, which features eight participants who speak for seven minutes each, to be particularly unwieldy. "If the number of students is 30," the researcher stated, "it means the lecturer needs five days to give at least one opportunity to each individual to deliver their 7 minutes of speech" (p. 145).

A second limitation to debate in the language-learning classroom is that it can cause student anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986; Zare & Othman, 2015; Hattani, 2021; Koga & Sato, 2013; Lustigova, 2011; Amiri et al., 2017), and a primary reason for this anxiety is that students fear disagreeing with their classmates. In particular, some students feel irked when classmates disagree with them and consequently assume that the classmates harbor reciprocal feelings (Zare & Othman, 2015). Other students, meanwhile, possess a basic fear of speaking in front of classmates – "stage fright" – especially in front of those whom they don't know very well (Zare & Othman, 2015; Hattani, 2021; Lustigova, 2011). Still others fear that their self-perception as competent foreign language speakers will be undercut during lengthy speaking activities, that essentially they will be "exposed" (Horwitz et al., 1986; Suzuki, 2017; Phillips, 1992; Kitano, 2001; Liu & Jackson, 2008). Horwitz et al. (1986), for instance, states, "Because complex and non-spontaneous mental operations are required in order to communicate at all, any performance in the L2 is likely to challenge an individual's self-concept as a competent communicator and lead to reticence, self-consciousness, fear, or even panic" (p. 128).

A third disadvantage is that debate often lacks authenticity, which may surprise some readers since debate is undertaken in nearly all walks of life, from business and government to lecture halls and dinner tables. One would think that duplicating real world argumentation would be the one thing that language class debates have going for them. However, they are often structured so as to either oversimplify an issue, requiring participants to be either fully for or against it, and forcing one side to defend an untenable position (Tumposky, 2004). In the real world, for instance, few people would get far arguing that shoplifting should be legalized or smoking in restaurants tolerated. In these debates, the discourse always feels a bit ridiculous, like a fun role play that prepares students for a turn at more serious dialectics.

A second issue, and one prevalent in Japan, is that students often memorize their argument and repeat it word for word when their turn comes (Koga & Sato, 2013), leading the activity to resemble more of a speech contest than a debate. Further, these same students' rebuttals, which could not be memorized, tend to be shorter and grammatically less complex, resulting in a debate with overall stilted and uneven discourse. Few debates in the real world indulge such shifts in rhetorical quality, leading Koga and Sato (2013) to conclude that "learners with high willingness to communicate and possibly high language proficiency may hope to have more authentic tasks in which they can practice spontaneous speech in a real communication context" (p. 303).

2.3 Who Should Do the Debating?

Given the uneven discourse inherent in student-student debates, as discussed above, it is natural for instructors to want to either selectively insert themselves into debates or fully represent one of the sides. While the former situation sees the instructor act more as a facilitator, moving the debate along by recasting students' points and probing for clarification, the latter situation sees the instructor step in as a competitor, significantly changing the dynamics of the activity. Although no known research addresses the benefits of student-student debates vis-a-vis student-teacher debates, plenty of research addresses such *conversations*, which we will sensibly assume may apply to debating.

2.3.1 Student-student Debate

One of the primary advantages of student-student debate is that it removes the instructor as the locus of attention, allowing the students to share their opinions and personalities with one another. Nguyen (2020), in discussing the benefits of student-student debates, states, "Those who like thinking about societal issues can enjoy talking about their opinions

and listening to others' opinions" (p. 83). A second benefit is that students break out of the typical IRE – Initiation, Response, Evaluation – discourse patterns common in student-teacher exchanges (Zhang, 2011; Matsui, 2014). Whereas teachers often ask a question, receive an answer and follow up with a comment, a pattern which reinforces their status as a figure of authority and knowledge, student-student discourse patterns are more balanced, thereby putting debate competitors on equal footing.

The primary disadvantage of student-only debate is that the students may not use the target structure (Koga & Sato, 2013; Zhang, 2011). While it is certainly advantageous for the students to speak freely, unencumbered by form, they may take such freedom to unproductive ends, disregarding basic grammatical rules and lapsing into overly simplified speech. Indeed, there is less noticing and self-correcting when the instructor isn't involved.

2.3.2 Student-teacher Debate

Regarding benefits of student-teacher debates, research indicates that students are often motivated to communicate at their highest competence when they interact with their instructor. Koga and Sato (2013), for example, stated that students in one study showed greater willingness to communicate because they "saw the teacher successfully using English and might have thought that they would like to become a person who was able to speak English well" (p. 302). Davis (2001) echoed the sentiment, adding that students may "perceive a link between their relationships with their teacher and their classroom success or they may simply view their teacher as possessing attributes that are important to have" (p. 449). In short, students often hold up their teachers as role models and try to emulate them.

A second benefit is that the student and teacher can co-construct language through their interactions (Gibbons, 2003; Gibbons, 2018). More precisely, the instructor can communicate in a register and at a linguistic level suitable to the learner while the student can appropriate certain syntactical and lexical items for their own usage. The instructor can also recontextualize the content, emphasizing information they deem useful and omitting that which they consider irrelevant. Note that while the above paragraph deals with motivation, this one addresses the business end of the affair: production. Students don't merely aspire to speak like their teacher – they are actually duplicating them, repeating what the teacher has said immediately after they've said it. Arao (2004), for instance, in analyzing EFL students' e-mail communication with their instructor, found that the length and linguistic complexity of student messages increased over time, adding, "[S]tudents can learn and imitate their teacher's way of answering their messages and pick up new expressions through reading messages from a teacher" (p. 91).

Of course, student-teacher debate has its shortcomings. The activity is, by its very nature, a linguistic assessment – an oral test – and can cause great anxiety among language learners, manifesting in poor performance and visible distress. Phillips (1992), for instance, in studying French language learners on one such test, stated that several were "panicky" and "went blank", adding, "there was a significant inverse relationship between the students' expression of language anxiety and their ability to perform on the oral exam" (p. 18). They produced shorter sentences and fewer dependent clauses than less-anxious students, suggesting that student-teacher debates may be more of a test of how students manage anxiety than produce in the second language. Zhang (2011), meanwhile, found that the turn-taking patterns common among teacher and student (referenced earlier in this section) tended to cause stress among Chinese ELLs, adding that over time, "even some active students were gradually not inclined to answer teachers' questions" (p. 31). The takeaway here is that student-teacher debates run the risk of being either an assessment or interview rather than what they should be – a rhetorical sparring among equals.

3. Methodology

The study took place over the course of eight weeks in the fall semester of 2021, in two sections of a required EFL debate class at a university in Osaka, Japan. Each section met once a week for 90 minutes.

3.1 Participants

The participants consisted of 45 second-year students for whom Japanese was the L1 and English the L2. All of them were 20-21 years old, with 28 (62%) females and 17 (38%) males. Many of them had been exposed to English language and culture via trips abroad or brief homestays and their average TOEIC score was 730, which roughly translates to a 6.5 on the IELTS test, or a 566 on the TOEFL (paper-based).

The instructor was a 53-year-old American male who had been working at the university for four and a half years and had taught several of the students in previous semesters. He had taught the debate course in each of his four years at the university and was well-acquainted with its materials and demands.

3.2 Process

The first debate was student-teacher, with the debate question being, “Should this university commission Frank Gehry to design a class building?” To prepare, students took notes on a videotaped lecture that extolled Gehry’s architectural achievements. Next, they took notes on three articles that addressed structural problems with Gehry buildings. After this, they worked in small groups to brainstorm support for both affirmative and negative answers to the debate question. There was then a classwide sharing of answers until at least six pieces of support had been given for each side. Finally, students were placed into pairs and took turns debating each side of the issue. During both practice and actual debates, they were allowed to support their argument with any information they wanted.

For the actual debate, the student and teacher sat face to face in an empty classroom. The students were allowed to refer to notes during the debate but not allowed to read a prepared speech. To further mitigate rote recitation, they were not told which side of the issue they would argue until about 10 minutes before they were to debate. To begin the debate, the instructor repeated the debate question and proceeded to give a piece of support for his side. While the student was then encouraged to provide a rebuttal, he or she was allowed to merely acknowledge the point before introducing one of their own. One of the goals of the assignment, as well as the course, was for the students to become nimble debaters who were able to respond to, and initiate, strategic shifts in the conversation.

The student and teacher would then spend about seven minutes introducing and rebutting points, after which time the instructor would announce that the debate had finished. The instructor then provided the student with their grade on the debate, commenting on their grammar, fluency, and strength of argument.

The second debate was student-student, and many aspects of the preparation were the same. The debate question was “Should Japan ban fast food restaurants such as McDonald’s and KFC?” Students first took notes on two videos, one discussing a worldwide obesity epidemic and the other addressing the harms of eating at McDonald’s. Next, they watched two videos in support of fast food restaurants, the first one arguing that working at McDonald’s builds character and the second one discussing the “investment” the company makes in its employees. As with the first debate, there was brainstorming and sharing of ideas, as well as debating practice.

For the actual debate, two students argued head-to-head in an empty classroom while the instructor sat nearby and moderated. As this was also an assessment, the instructor took notes regarding the grammar, fluency and argumentation of the participants. Students were randomly assigned their partners on the day of the debate and, as with the first debate, didn’t know which side they would support until about 10 minutes before their turn. The debates took about seven minutes and generally followed the same procedure as the first. A notable difference, though, was that the instructor declared a winner, based solely on argumentation, at the end of the debate.

3.3 Instrument

After both debates were completed, students were given a questionnaire that elicited both quantitative and qualitative data. On the quantitative portion, they were asked which of the two formats they preferred, with three options being given: “student-teacher”, “student-student” and “no preference”. Then, on a five-point Likert scale, they were asked to rate each debate according to five criteria: satisfaction, usefulness, ease, enjoyment and self-performance. The five options were: “excellent”, “good”, “average”, “not very good” and “poor”. On the qualitative portion, students were asked to write the reason for their preferred format, as well as what they liked and disliked about each of the formats.

The questionnaire was given to two full-time EFL instructors, who validated its content and made minor suggestions on wording. It was also trialed with 12 EFL students from other courses, and the students reported no difficulties in completing it.

3.4 Research Questions

The research was guided by the following two questions:

- 1) Of the two modes of debate, student-teacher and student-student, which did the students prefer and why?
- 2) What did the students consider to be the strengths and weaknesses of the two modes?

4. Results

Regarding debate format preference, 64% (n=29) of the students said that they preferred student-teacher debate while 20% (9) preferred student-student debate and 16% (7) didn’t have a preference.

As for why students preferred student-teacher, 59% (17) indicated that the overall communication was easier, with several respondents using some form of the word “smooth”. For instance, one student reported, “*Because the teacher interpreted what I said, I thought I could debate more smoothly,*” while another stated, “*It was easier to debate with the*

teacher, because the flow of conversation was smoother.” Meanwhile, 14% (4) cited an affective component, stating that they felt more comfortable debating the teacher. One student simply remarked, “Talking with the teacher is more comfortable for me,” while another explained, “I felt ashamed when I debate in student-student style.” Further, 7% (2) said that they found the teacher’s points interesting or salient, and 7% (2) said that they could learn more from student-teacher debate.

As for why students preferred student-student debate, 25% (3) stated that it was more comfortable or relaxing and another 25% (3) said that their debate partners were at the same linguistic level. One student tied the two reasons together, writing, “When the partner of debate is a student, I can relax more. The reason why I can relax more may be because I know both I and she/he are at the same level.” Further, 17% (2) preferred the mode because it was more challenging and an additional 17% (2) replied it was more fun. One student similarly linked the two reasons, explaining, “I found it harder to debate with a student because I had to make my opinion extra clear and simple, but I thought it was more challenging and fun.”

Regarding the reason for not having a preference, 43% (3) said that the modes were equally enjoyable while 29% (2) said that they were equally stressful.

Next, paired t-tests were performed to compare students’ opinions on the five criteria – satisfaction, usefulness, ease, enjoyment and performance – of each mode. If the p-value was less than the significance level (.05), then we could reject the null hypothesis, meaning the results were different enough to conclude that one mode was “better” than the other.

Table 1. t-tests comparing student-teacher and student-student modes of debate

	Student-teacher	Student-student	p-value
Satisfaction	4.36	3.91	0.005
Usefulness	4.47	4.18	0.003
Ease	4.09	3.93	0.267
Enjoyment	4.51	4.20	0.055
Performance	3.49	3.38	0.429

As can be seen in Table 1, two of the criteria, satisfaction and usefulness, rejected the null hypothesis. In both instances, students rated student-teacher higher, and we can therefore say with confidence that they derived greater satisfaction from, and attributed greater usefulness to, debates with their instructor.

The remaining three criteria – ease, enjoyment, and performance – failed to reject the null hypothesis. Thus, their values are not different enough to be able to compare the modes.

Next, students provided comments on what they liked and disliked about each mode. Regarding the benefits of student-teacher (n=61), 18% (11) remarked how the instructor easily understood – and where necessary, facilitated – what the student was trying to say, with one student asserting, “If I cannot say what I want to say clearly in English, the teacher will help me, so I can debate without any stress.” Additionally, 13% (8) said they could practice listening and speaking with a native English speaker, and another 13% (8) appreciated the smooth flow, or fluency, of the conversation, with another student remarking, “I liked how it was smooth, fast and how the teacher was supporting my English while arguing.”

Regarding comments on the benefits of student-student debate (n=56), 23% (13) noted that students felt less anxiety, with one student stating, “I was able to relax and talk more casually.” Meanwhile, 20% (11) enjoyed hearing classmates’ viewpoints and sharing their own, and 14% (8) stated that the mode was overall more enjoyable. Observed another student, “It was really fun that non-native people debated in English.”

Concerning the limitations of student-teacher (n=47), 28% (13) of the comments noted high student anxiety while 21% (10) reported no limitations, and 17% (8) discussed struggles with the debate content, which they found to be too academic or sophisticated. Noted one student, “I feel less confident because the partner is a teacher and the debate is going to be high level. They ask sharp questions, so it is harder to convince them of my point.”

As for the limitations of student-student (n=46), 30% (14) reported comprehension issues, with one student stating, “It was hard to understand what the other student was trying to say, and I wasn't sure if he understood what I said.” Meanwhile, 24% (11) cited awkwardness in the debate flow, with another student claiming, “There were some students that couldn't explain their argument in English which made the argument very difficult.” Also, 9% (4) noted discomfort

over having to disagree with a classmate, and 9% (4) disclosed feeling general anxiety.

5. Discussion

The present study revealed that the majority of students preferred to debate the instructor, which aligns with prior research into student-teacher conversation. Gibbons (2003; 2008) discusses the importance of the instructor's ability to recast what a student has said, noting that this greatly aids in the flow of the conversation. Similarly, students in this study remarked several times how "smooth" the debate between student and teacher was, with others mentioning its "natural" pace, and while students can't be expected to know the term "recast," we can assume that they are, in part, referring to the instructor's liberal use of recasts. Indeed, numerous times during the debates, the instructor took students' ambiguous remarks and distilled them into clear, concise statements that both participants understood (if not necessarily agreed upon). Said one student, "*The teacher led me to say what I wanted to say.*" Such recasts ultimately put the debaters on more equal footing, with the student's linguistic limitations pushed to the background and their syllogistic skills brought to the forefront. Recasts also aid in student uptake of the target structure (McDonough & Mackey, 2006), and several students in this study noted that they learned new syntax and vocabulary from the teacher. Said one student, "*If you want to learn high level English this way is much better.*"

Second, while none of the students explicitly mentioned striving to perform at their highest competence during their debate with the instructor, as mentioned in Koga and Sato (2013), a few acknowledged student-teacher debate as a welcome challenge. One student commented, for instance, "*It's challenging to debate with a teacher, so we can improve our speaking skills more,*" and another added, "*I could have a debate which was academic.*" It seems, then, that for those students who have a competitive spirit or desire academic challenge, debating the instructor may provide greater satisfaction.

In this same vein, the role of learner self-image may also come into play. Ueki and Takeuchi (2012; 2013) have posited that language learners possess greater motivation when they are in an environment where they can clearly envision their idealized L2 self. The researchers break down this self-image into micro and macro components, with the former being a more immediate vision of success in the classroom, and the latter being a long-term vision of integration into the L2 culture. While it is relatively easy for EFL students to attain their micro self-image via good grades, it is considerably more difficult to fashion their macro self-image, as there is "no clear-cut target reference group ... into which they would like to integrate" (Ueki & Takeuchi, 2013, p. 26). This is arguably why student-teacher debate would appeal to students. When they debate their native-English-speaking teacher, they get a clear, concrete image of their future selves functioning in the L2 culture. In fact, many of the students in the present study had been planning to attend universities in the United States, Canada and England the following semester, and it is possible that student-teacher debate served as a sneak preview of what they hoped would be a fulfilling time abroad. EFL instructors who have students that plan to live abroad, then, would do well to consider debating their students.

That said, students in the present study reported anxiety as the greatest limitation of student-teacher debates, which corresponds with the research by Phillips (1992). Regardless of how pleasant and accommodating the instructor was, the debates were still assessments and students likely felt pressure to perform at a high level. However, the nature of the course may also have contributed to the students' anxiety since it was, after all, a university academic debate course in which *all* debates were assessments, and the students were being graded on fluency, form, and argumentation. Unfortunately, a point that couldn't be teased apart in the present study is whether the anxiety was due to debating the instructor or taking an oral test.

It is also worth mentioning that not all anxiety is bad. Andrade and Williams (2009) discuss "facilitative anxiety" as an impetus for students to work harder and focus more intently. Though this type of anxiety wasn't tested for in this study, the instructor saw evidence of it during the debates. Some students sat down with the teacher, smiled nervously, took a deep breath and proceeded to argue at a very high level, earning an excellent grade.

In their comments, students mentioned that they enjoyed both debates, so their preference for one over the other shouldn't be considered "like vs. dislike". In fact, students provided a variety of positive comments regarding student-student debates, including that they could speak more casually, bond with classmates, and share their ideas with a like-minded opponent. Regarding this last point, Nguyen (2020) found that the most-cited benefit of student-student debates is that Japanese students found "joy" in communicating their ideas with one another. It seems, then, that when it comes to debate, students exhibit great peer curiosity, or a desire to draw out their classmates' views on topics of substance. This curiosity may be stronger in Japan, however, because in general Japanese people avoid discussing controversial issues in class or elsewhere. Academic debates, though, give a societal green light, freeing the students to elicit classmates' opinions without fear of disapproval.

6. Conclusion

The present study revealed that the majority of students in a university EFL course preferred debating their teacher even though he possessed far greater competence in the target language. At first glance, this may seem odd, but when aligned with relevant research, it makes sense. First, students appreciate the ability of the instructor to recast what they've said, taking their awkward or incorrect statements and distilling them into their essential meaning. Consequently, the debates proceed more smoothly and naturally, as several students noted. Second, students simply enjoy the challenge of debating a native English speaker. The debate becomes an *event*, something they look forward to. They have many opportunities to argue with classmates but few to spar with instructors. Third, students get the chance to see their ideal L2 selves functioning in the target culture. By debating their native-English-speaking instructor, they are put on the spot and asked to defend their opinion in English at a "normal" pace, an activity which essentially replicates the L2 environment.

Student-student debate also has its merits, the primary of which is that participants experience less anxiety. Students don't feel like they are being assessed or that they have to perform "up" to the level of the teacher. Instead, they can have a debate for debate's sake, pushing grammar and form into the background.

Students in the present study found value in both debates, and teachers shouldn't see them as an "either or" proposition. However, survey results indicated that students found student-teacher debates to be more useful and satisfying than student-student debates. The word "useful" particularly resonates here because many of the students in the study had plans to study abroad the following semester. Consequently, teachers with students whose language-learning goals include living overseas should strongly consider having student-teacher debates; the students would likely find it very valuable.

Finally, a word must be said about the practicality of student-teacher debates. With this format, the instructor assumes a much greater workload than with student-student debates. He or she must not only meet one-on-one with every student and debate with enthusiasm and focus, but assess the students, as well, which can be draining. Also, while the instructor is busy debating, the class is left unsupervised, which could lead students to feel at loose ends. However, if the instructor accounts for both of these eventualities, he or she might find that student-teacher debates are just what the students want and need.

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