

Why the Debate? How the Study of Argumentation and Debate Increases Language Proficiency

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FULBRIGHT DISTINGUISHED AWARDS IN TEACHING PROGRAM

The Netherlands

2016-2017

06/20/2017

Introduction

The determination of successful teaching strategies and the learning of English as a second language confounds even the best teachers of English Language Learners in Los Angeles. Books are published, conferences are held, but the results remain the same. The purpose of the international best practices project is to determine the strategies used by classroom teachers in the Netherlands, share best practices from this East Los Angeles school teacher, and ultimately determine the importance of Dutch best practices in the teaching of debate to second language learners. Debate participation for language acquisition, and therefore, language proficiency is not new. The most cited advantages to discourse, argumentation, and debate are oral communication competency, improved reading comprehension, highly developed listening skills, and improved critical thinking. But, what can be said for language acquisition as a linguistic continuum to proficiency? The Fulbright Distinguished Award in Teaching gave me the opportunity to seek answers to the inquiry “Why the Debate? How the Study of Argumentation and Debate Increases Language Proficiency.”

Program experience

Prior to leaving for The Netherlands, I did not have multiple expectations. I was not sure what to expect other than to apply my experience from the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program (JET). From that experience, I learned that each teacher’s experience would be different. There are no two similar experiences, and I felt that the same would hold true for the six American teachers stationed in The Netherlands.

This approach garnered interesting results. I can say this because the highlights that occurred during my Inquiry Project time were not expected, nor did other teachers on the

program experience the same highlights. At the beginning of February, I went on a school visit to ROC van Amsterdam-Airport, a vocational school that trains students for the travel and tourism industry. On that visit to a teacher that I was introduced to by the Fulbright Center in The Netherlands, I was also introduced to another teacher. The teacher that I never expected to meet would provide me with the opportunity to teach a class every Thursday for the majority of my scholarship. The course was experimental in the sense that it has never been taught before. The C-Level Cambridge Exams for language are considered proficient-level exams throughout Europe. The school offered only B-Level exams in order for the students to meet graduation requirements. The task for this class was to see if the vocational school should offer a prep class for a higher-level examination that could be helpful for students as they move towards a career.

The class met twice a week, with the teacher of record teaching the reading and writing portion of the exam on Tuesdays, while I taught the speaking and listening portion on Thursdays. I took the assignment in the beginning of February when I was beginning to miss my own classroom back in Los Angeles. I was able to lesson plan for a 90-minute block class, get to know the students, and teach them effective strategies in order to pass the exam. I truly enjoyed being in the classroom during my time in The Netherlands, and those students will forever be my students as well. I will have to await the results of the exam as the students will take the exam at the end of June. Professionally, the class allowed me to use the strategies that I have used to increase the test scores of my school's English Language Learners to a different set of English Language Learners in The Netherlands. Receiving feedback from the students that the strategies helped to build their confidence for the examination further demonstrates the need to return to Los Angeles and share the feedback I have received regarding those same

teacher strategies, which included the heavy use of visuals for learning. This strategy is one that has proven successful over my teaching career, and I plan to continue using the strategy, but also assisting other teachers in its viability for student academic and language growth.

During the beginning of the Fulbright Program, I was fulfilling the requirements of the Fulbright scholarship. I audited a class at the University of Amsterdam that was connected to my project (L2 in the Classroom) and I was spending time in the office doing research while making school visits and debate tournament visits. During this time, the Office of International Student Affairs at the University of Amsterdam asked me if I would be interested in teaching a workshop series on public speaking. The office made it clear that they have never offered this type of workshop series so I should create a registration form and a flyer. Once made, the Office of International Student Affairs sent out the information to the students that they assist during their time at the university. The public speaking workshop series was born with 17 students that I met on Tuesdays for one hour. Using a TED Talk curriculum, the students gave me good feedback about my teaching, and how much they need this skill set as they have to present and speak in discussions in their university classes, but also the importance for me to impart on the students is that young people have ideas worth sharing. The ultimate importance begins with how to share those ideas, and expressing ourselves in ways that communicate to our audiences. The workshop series is another example of a class that students need, and I plan start a TED Club when I return to Los Angeles, and encourage other teachers to do the same at their schools.

As I made school visits, I began to get return requests from teachers who wanted to work with me in the classroom. This led to two different co-teaching opportunities at schools

where the teachers wanted more discourse and debate in their English classrooms. I began co-planning lesson plans, photocopying graphic organizers for student learning, and creating possible ways for the classroom teachers to formatively assess student growth (**See Lesson Plan Attachment**). It is difficult for teachers to pick up new strategies because of the risks involved of changing their curriculum. It becomes the “no reason to fix something that is not broken” mentality. But, the teachers I worked with were willing to change their approach a little, and to see the importance of argumentation and debate. With the lack of professional development in The Netherlands, teachers are less likely to change pedagogical approaches. In both instances, the teachers and students liked the graphic organizers and worksheets that I used for teaching purposes (**See Argumentation Graphic Organizer Attachments**). Teaching and co-teaching was a great opportunity for me to teach strategies, but to continuously reflect on my own teaching practice, make the adjustments necessary, and return to the schools again for additional lessons. What I learned from the Dutch students and the adjustments made based on time availability will assist my coaching of teachers and students when I return to the U.S. We can find time to co-teach and collaborate across the curriculum, even with the limited amount of time afforded by the daily grind of teaching.

Project description

The aim of the present study is to acquire the outlook of Dutch students and teachers in the efficacy of debate as a pedagogical tool for both first and second language acquisition. Do students acquire a higher level of Dutch language acquisition and English as a foreign language through debating exercises? Using extracurricular team debate and in-class debates as the method of study, participants were 57 debate coaches and 65 secondary school students in the

Netherlands. Each group completed a survey questionnaire including nine questions using a 5-point Likert scale. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with classroom teachers, debate coaches and students during school hours and weekend debate tournaments. Overall, both groups believe that debate as a tool for learning has a positive impact on different aspects of language performance and critical thinking. However, there is a discrepancy between the two groups with their perceptions regarding writing and listening skills.

While there is limited research in the Netherlands on the efficacy of debate as a pedagogical tool for language acquisition and proficiency, the extracurricular debate community is growing in the amount of students attending tournaments and teachers who view debate as a teaching tool. In addition, students and teachers claim that debate is a positive experience that increases students' overall academic ability.

There are several lines of scope arising from this study that should be pursued. First, the survey is still active for student respondents as the Dutch school community is nearing the end of the academic year. Responses may change based on the amount of students who only practice extracurricular debate as opposed to in-class debates. Second, more in-class debates are necessary across the curriculum of language, history, science, and mathematics in order to test if debate is an effective teaching and learning tool. Lastly, the debate community in the Netherlands will need to have further research of their work in order to study the effects on learning outcomes both in and out of the classroom. While in The Netherlands, best practices for teaching debate to second language learners has developed through cross-sectionality between debate coaches in two different countries. The strategies learned while on the Fulbright Program, which are many, will be used to professionally develop debate coaches of

English Language Learners, and professional development workshops for secondary school teachers across the curriculum (**See Dutch Best Practices Presentation Attachment**).

Project Process

Over the course of the five months of the Fulbright Program, it was important to seek advice in order to develop and refine the Inquiry Project. It was not necessary to refine the topic, as it is and will continue to be relevant to the professional development of Dutch teachers and American teachers based on the thorough research from renowned international linguists Krashen, Long, and Ellis. The process of inquiry did develop over the course of five months as I began to find that speaking/discourse and debate leads to increased levels of first language proficiency. I further decided to generate some quantitative data based on language acquisition, but I decided to add writing and critical thinking to the surveys. The process went well, and I am pleased with the process, the advice and support from the University of Amsterdam, and the overall acceptance and support from classroom teachers, students, and debate organizations.

I. Resources

The resources used were mainly shipped to The Netherlands prior to my departure. There are numerous books, academic articles, magazines, and web research that I have been meaning to get to for the past two years. Unfortunately, a classroom teacher has difficulty getting to these resources while teaching, and my summers are spent at different professional development conferences and workshops. Those conferences also generate a fair amount of research that I have difficulty finding the time to finish reading and applying to my classroom. The Fulbright Program gave me an additional five months to “catch up” on most of the

resources (**See Working Bibliography Attachment**). When I was not making school visits, I was in the university office reading and taking notes on the historical and contemporary research on discourse in the classroom as a method for second language acquisition. I felt it was necessary to develop a Working Bibliography on my research so that I can continue to work with classroom teachers, my colleagues, and the wider debate community in Los Angeles in finding the appropriate academic resources necessary to demonstrate what we are witnessing in our classrooms and Los Angeles urban debate league.

A heavily used resource became available by the name of Abid el-Majidi, one of the only educators that I found in The Netherlands that uses debate as a pedagogical practice for his English language classes. He is a secondary school teacher and a Ph.D. candidate at Utrecht University. His research and classroom findings also became a resource for my Inquiry Project and is an article he recently published, "Invest in What Energizes Students to Learn: Investigating Students' Attitude towards Debate in the Foreign Language Classroom." It is the only published article in The Netherlands that looks at debate in the classroom as language acquisition and motivation. The article gave me a further sense of purpose as research on this topic is in its infancy in The Netherlands.

I further took advantage of the Fulbright Program's Travel Grant as a resource for the Inquiry Project. The Association for Development of Teaching Education and Learning is currently in the midst of a series of conferences to bring teachers and teacher educators together to discuss the current environments for the teaching profession. In particular, the conference participants aim at second language acquisition, as is seen in previous conferences, in order to bring "best practices" to the forefront of academic discussion. From what I have

seen and heard about this conference is that not only is there a heavy emphasis on English as a second language, but that plenary speakers (experts) for this conference will bring an impact of speaking into classrooms. The conference is also of importance as the participants demonstrate how their schools and university teacher preparation programs are dealing with this pedagogical shift. The conference was of direct relevance to my Inquiry Project and to teachers and teacher educators who are studying the topic outside of The Netherlands and the United States. I used some of the Travel Grant to purchase additional books to prepare for the conference.

The 14th International Conference on Teaching, Education and Learning (ICTEL) was held in Lisbon, Portugal 23-24 May 2017. Participants and keynote speakers demonstrated that English as a second language can be acquired primarily through discussion, deliberation, and debate. I made contacts with teachers who are working on Project-Based Learning in the sciences, and teachers who are currently concerned about language acquisition through literature. The goal is to collaborate with these educators to learn more about their work with the chance to collaborate across borders after my project, but also continue this effort when I return to the United States with the sharing of additional resources with American classroom teachers.

II. Methods

When I first arrived to The Netherlands, I thought it was important to get my faculty advisor at the University of Amsterdam involved in the brainstorming of my Inquiry Project. Dr. Olga Fischer sat with me as I gave her my methodology for the qualitative side of the project.

Additionally, I thought it was important to brainstorm with her the potential for a quantitative side of the project as well. The qualitative research was based on field work (**See Field Work Attachment**). School visits became direct observations of English teachers' classrooms and semi-structured interviews with teachers regarding their teaching practice, assessments for speaking and listening, and documentation of rubrics used for the speaking and listening assessments. Classroom visits also led to the sharing of English teaching frameworks set out by the school district, Dutch Ministry of Education, and the European Commission. Some of the schools were one-shot fieldwork assignments; while others became frequent visits for further follow-up questions and observations of teaching practice.

A few particular schools became co-teaching opportunities (**See Field Work Attachment**). Particular teachers wanted to know more, wanted to teach their classes with debate strategies, but did not know where to start. This is once again a demonstration for the need for teacher professional development. The team-teaching opportunities were for me to lesson plan, prepare, and teach with the classroom teacher (**See Lesson Plan and Handouts Attachment**). I refined lesson plans based on reflection from teaching assignment to teaching assignment. Any type of formative assessments was formulated by the classroom teacher with the intention of offering more lessons in the future. This allowed the Inquiry Project to exist as a more hands-on project where I was enabled to teach students, and model the style of teaching to classroom teachers.

Throughout the project, I collected rubrics and supplemental curriculum from English teachers. The teachers in The Netherlands do not have same type of "standards" that are offered in the U.S. (e.g. Common Core State Standards). There are benchmarks that are offered

to students based on local-control district decisions, so collecting rubrics for speaking and listening assessments was necessary to see what the teachers are teaching the students, and how the students are scored in the grade book. There is not a large amount of curriculum, supplemental or otherwise, for speaking and listening. Any documentation gathered is directly attributable to teachers creating their own teaching strategies. For the most part, teaching in The Netherlands is based on textbooks, and the importance of textbook publishers.

The semi-structured interviews with classroom teachers encompassed questions related to teaching strategies for speaking and listening. The same questions were asked at debate tournaments. There were multiple debate tournaments that I observed on Saturdays (**See Field Work Attachment**). There is one organization in The Netherlands that develops a series of debate tournaments, and I was able to meet with debate organizers regularly at their tournaments and in their offices. While at tournaments, I met with debate coaches and students to ask questions regarding their development of speaking and listening, and the impact debate has on student academic growth.

For the quantitative method of research, I decided to offer two surveys using a 5-point Likert scale of nine questions for each survey. One survey was for adults (classroom teachers, debate coaches, debate organizers, volunteer debate judges) because it is important to see what the adults are seeing of student academic and language growth, as they are the ones who assess student learning. The second survey asked the same nine questions of students. The students surveyed were from two sources: 1) a school in Rotterdam where the English teacher uses debate as a pedagogical approach to teaching English, and 2) students of the debate tournaments / extracurricular debate. For the students of extracurricular debate, the survey

administration was assisted by the debate organization DebatUnie (the organization was instrumental in collecting student survey results). The results from the surveys were collected from 57 adults and 65 students. The data generated from the surveys included positive results for the debate community, and further solidifies the need for discourse and debate across the curriculum during the school day (**See Ministry of Education Presentation Attachment for survey results**).

III. Participants

All school visits, multiple school visits, co-teaching, individual teaching, and debate tournament organizational participants are noted in the Field Work Attachment. The Fulbright Center located in Amsterdam sent my Inquiry Project to a couple of teachers who participated in a teaching program for two-weeks in Amherst, Massachusetts. There were a couple of teachers that I began observing in January, and they began introducing me to other teachers at their schools (ROC van Amsterdam-Airport and ROC van Amsterdam-Southeast). From this small network of classroom teachers, they began asking their “teacher friends” if I could visit their schools, which were located around the country. There were also two teachers that I was placed in contact with through the Dutch Ministry of Education. The classroom teachers and school visits made up the backbone of the inquiry project.

I contacted multiple debate organizations when I first arrived in The Netherlands. Extracurricular debate is growing in the country, and there are organizations that offer a series of debate tournaments, and there are debate organizations that focus on one tournament per year. I also reached out to a debate organization that has a larger international scope (International Debate Education Association), and the Dutch center that prepares students for

the Model European Parliament. I thought that these organizations are the most likely to demonstrate student academic and oral language growth, as well as seek access to students who participate in debate. Of all of the organizations contacted and the meetings that occurred with debate tournament observations, DebatUnie located in the city of Leiden was by far the most helpful to the inquiry project with access, observations, meetings to share curriculum, and ideas.

There are also two other opportunities that came to me while working on the Fulbright Program. I did not expect to individually teach while I was in The Netherlands, but early on during the project I was asked to teach a class at ROC van Amsterdam-Airport, and I was asked by the University of Amsterdam to teach a series of public speaking workshops to international students. During my Thursdays teaching the Cambridge Exam Prep class at ROC van Amsterdam, I taught 12 students for the Speaking & Listening portion of the Cambridge exam. At the University of Amsterdam, I led workshops for 17 students. Both opportunities were meant as teachable moments as I miss my classroom back in Los Angeles. The participants were not part of the larger Inquiry Project, but an opportunity to teach speaking and listening skills.

Results of Project Inquiry

Understanding the best practices of Dutch debate teaching not only answered my inquiry into second language acquisition, but it began a deeper look into first language acquisition. Although teacher professional development is lacking in The Netherlands, I have proposed a teaching debate conference to the Ministry of Education and to different debate organizations. The findings point to the importance of teacher professional development in order to provide more argumentation and debate for language acquisition/proficiency. There

are multiple frameworks for argumentation that are offered throughout Europe for the expressed purpose of extracurricular debate, and especially parliamentary debate. There is very little offered in the form of teaching argumentation and debate during the school day. Teacher education programs in The Netherlands do not offer these types of strategies to beginning teachers, whether it be for critical thinking or language acquisition. Through reflection, I found that my teaching strategies work in The Netherlands and teachers are interested in those strategies for increasing their students' abilities for speaking and listening. I found that there are commonalities to argumentation. For example, a common European approach for an argument is the following:

Statement: why do I think something?

Explanation: Why is this logical?

Evidence: Why is that true in real life?

Impact: Why should that matter?

With a few minor changes, this is what is known as the Toulmin method of reasoning that is taught in the U.S. among debate coaches, and teachers of argumentative writing.

There are other approaches to teaching argumentation in The Netherlands (**See Dutch Best Practices Presentation Attachment**). Ultimately, I look to the surveys and the answers of everyday teachers, debate coaches, and secondary students in The Netherlands. The questions planned were the following: Do you believe that debate increases a student's critical thinking (analysis, problem solving) beyond the everyday classroom? Do you believe that debate if used in classroom instruction can improve the learning of new material? Do you believe that debate increases a student's Dutch language writing skills? Do you believe that debate increases a

student's Dutch language vocabulary skills? When students debate in English, do you believe that debate increases a student's English language writing skills? When students debate in English, do you believe that debate increases a student's English language vocabulary skills? Do you believe that students who are taught debate in the classroom and/or participate in debate tournaments increase their ability to develop logical analysis and use of evidence in speaking and writing? Do you believe that students who are taught debate in the classroom and/or participate in debate tournaments increase their listening skills? Do you believe that students who are taught debate in the classroom and/or participate in debate tournaments increase their language structure and organization in speaking and writing?

Interestingly, most survey participants agreed or strongly agreed with the question prompts (90-percentile). The differences occur with adults agreeing that listening and writing do improve with debate, while the students scored their answers for agreement in the 80-percentile (**See Ministry of Education Presentation Attachment for survey results**). Overall, the adults and students surveyed are contributing to the research already made prevalent in the U.S., regarding the impact of debate on critical thinking, first language proficiency, and second language acquisition.

Relevance and Application

Regarding the work in The Netherlands, there will be a new bilateral partnership between the Los Angeles Metropolitan Debate League and Debat Unie. This partnership will include the exchange of ideas and merchandising. Eventually, the goal will be to have a virtual debate tournament between the students of both organizations. Regarding The Netherlands, my recommendations to the Ministry of Education, debate organizations, and teachers is to

have an education conference for classroom teachers. The one-day conference is a professional development conference for teachers to learn how to bring argumentation and debate into the classroom and across the curriculum. Furthermore, I have proposed a debate summer camp with Debat Unie to prepare their students for the upcoming debate year. Summer Debate Institutes are not common in The Netherlands, and we will use the Los Angeles Metropolitan Debate league summer camp in August as a starting point for ideas of how to bring this idea to fruition in The Netherlands.

Both the qualitative and quantitative elements of the research for the Inquiry Project are relevant to my return to the U.S. I have already been invited to offer a workshop at the National Speech & Debate Association's national education conference in Denver. The workshop is entitled "International Best Practices: Strategies for Teaching Debate to First and Second Language Learners." The California High School Speech Association has invited me to participate on their Curriculum Committee, and the Los Angeles Metropolitan Debate League will begin a Curriculum Committee in August. Other than the workshop of offering the best practices PowerPoint presentations by Dutch educators, I will further collaborate with Dutch debate educators in July and August of how to create graphic organizers that can be used in U.S. classrooms so that the teachers that attend the workshop will have "takeaways."

Ultimately, the Inquiry Project is an international best practices project that will lead to professional development opportunities for me to coach fellow English teachers, content-area teachers, and other speech and debate coaches. The imperative is the understanding of the research makes the need for discourse, argumentation, and debate in the classroom to assist our every growing second language learning population in Los Angeles, California.