

Webinar – Answers to participants' questions.

There were a lot of questions at the end of the webinar and many of them were very similar, so I have tried to write general answers that hopefully will satisfy all of them.

Preparation.

Many of your questions were about preparation, ideas for topics, getting the students up to the right level etc.

I think debating can be useful even with younger students. If you do a Google search 'ideas for debating', you can find lots of websites with material suitable for different ages – middle school, secondary school etc. By all means include topics such as literature, art, music. As long as you give the students the necessary vocabulary to discuss the subjects, you can do anything you think they will enjoy. And of course if students come up with ideas themselves that they are eager to discuss, that's even better.

A couple of teachers were concerned about their own level of proficiency and pronunciation. Don't worry about that too much. We're all on a learning curve. My advice is that if you're not sure about something, just tell your students and look it up together. You are their guides towards a better command of English, you don't have to be models of perfection. There are also many pronunciation websites online to help you. howjsay.com is one, but if you just do search for the word you need + pronunciation, you'll soon find an audio file on line on line to help you. It would be great to do this once or twice in class so that students start doing it at home.

While preparing they should use as much English as possible. They'll feel like idiots speaking to each other in the target language at first, but just encourage them towards it gently. Getting them to think in English is not an overnight process, but will happen gradually, the more they speak in class, which is why EVERY LESSON should have some kind of pair work. The idea of the information exchange

with gaps that students have to complete by asking each other questions is a great way to get students to 'speak' the language and get used to asking each other questions.

Managing the class.

I completely understand that if they're a lively group this can be tricky. Perhaps you could set out a few guidelines at the beginning. Tell them you have a little flag (or something like that) that you're going to wave if they get too noisy, and then do it. I've used this technique a few times and it usually works. It's just a reminder that the objective is for all of them to speak, not to have a battle of words until the loudest shouter wins. You could also write a good aphorism on the board and point to it now and then during the debate. Something like.... 'We cannot learn from one another until we stop shouting at one another - until we speak quietly enough so that our words can be heard as well as our voices. Richard M. Nixon. (Again, I simply googled 'shouting in a debate + aphorism' to get that one!

The focus of all your preparation should really be on building up students' confidence as well as their language. It's not easy for most people to speak in public. I do it all the time and I still hate it! The more you include simple pair work activities in your lessons, the more the less confident students will get used to speaking with a listener in a situation that feels comfortable. They will certainly be afraid of making mistakes, so try to let them know that their mistakes matter far less than their ability to communicate. Mistakes can also be useful for the whole class.

The way you manage the actual debate is completely up to you. Whether you do it Oxford-style (google that) or a freer approach, with or without a jury, the aim is really to get them communicating, so you can decide what works best for your students and of course you can always experiment and ask them what they think. They'll collaborate if they think their part of the decision-making process.

Evaluation

This is a much more difficult issue for me to talk about, as I am against marks and scores in general, but I understand that you will need to give them some kind of evaluation both for their performance and for the follow-up video. They should certainly watch these video's in class – they'll be proud of any effects they've

included! I wonder if it might be possible for you to discuss the marking system with the students beforehand. If you tell them that the aim is to debate in English, using the right language etc. you could decide together on a fair system for awarding points – and perhaps for removing them when people shout the others down – in order to arrive at a marking scheme. That could be a neat trick to ensure their collaboration and good behaviour on the day.

Follow up

Going through language mistakes is important – don't make it take too long or it will become boring – do it as a homework if necessary, and of course after mini-discussions/presentations you can always take note of their mistakes and talk about them constructively. Individual mistakes are a means for the whole class to improve.