



PEDAGOGICAL CONDITIONS FOR ORGANISING DEBATE-BASED INSTRUCTION IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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Debate is widely recommended as a means of developing students' thinking alongside their language proficiency, and the empirical case for it is broadly favourable [1; 2]. What the literature supplies far less often is an account of the conditions under which the format actually delivers those benefits. This matters practically: a lesson that carries the name of a debate but not its structure produces an ordinary discussion, and the teacher has no diagnostic by which to tell the difference. This paper sets out four conditions for organising debate-based instruction, identifies the observable symptom of each condition's failure, and describes two organisational parameters — scaffolding and motion design — that govern the course as a whole.

Condition one: psychological safety during idea generation. Amabile demonstrated that creative output is highly sensitive to evaluation pressure [3]. In ordinary classroom discussion, generation and evaluation occur simultaneously, and the first acceptable argument terminates the search for better ones. The generation phase must therefore be protected explicitly: judgement is prohibited, every proposal is recorded including the implausible ones, and the phase closes on a timer rather than on the group's sense of completion — since that sense arrives early. The rule applies to the teacher as much as to peers.

Condition two: real-time response rather than recitation. The rebuttal phase is the only one that cannot be rehearsed, and this is precisely what makes it valuable for creative thinking. If speakers are permitted to read from prepared



notes, the phase becomes a delivery exercise and the cognitive demand disappears. The requirement is consistent with output-oriented accounts of second-language development, in which pushed production under real-time constraints drives the shift from semantic to syntactic processing [4].

Condition three: compulsory perspective reversal. Competitive argumentation entrenches positions unless reversal is enforced. Requiring a team to construct the strongest version of the case it has just attacked is the most direct classroom operationalisation of cognitive flexibility available. It is also the stage most frequently dropped when time runs short.

Condition four: assessment that separates creativity from fluency. Learners produce what is rewarded. A confident and accurate speaker will score highly on any oral proficiency scale while advancing a single unoriginal argument; a learner with weaker control may produce three original, well-warranted lines. Unless these are scored on separate scales, gains in creative performance cannot be distinguished from gains in fluency, and the creative dimensions of the rubric will be treated by students as decorative.

Table 1. The four conditions, their requirements and failure symptoms

Condition	What it requires of the teacher	What it requires of the format	Failure symptom
Psychological safety in generation	Withhold all evaluative comment	Fixed time limit; every proposal recorded	A short list of conventional arguments
Real-time response	Refuse to rescue a floundering speaker	No reading from notes during rebuttal	Rebuttals do not address what was said



Condition	What it requires of the teacher	What it requires of the format	Failure symptom
Perspective reversal	Assign reversal without prior warning	Reversal built into every cycle	Positional rigidity grows across the course
Separated assessment	Report two scores, never one	Distinct scales for creativity and fluency	The same students top the list before and after

Three of the four conditions require the teacher to withhold action rather than to take it. This is worth stating plainly, because instructional training tends to develop the opposite reflex. The teacher who intervenes to correct an inaccurate form during generation, or to supply the argument a struggling speaker cannot find, is acting on a well-formed professional instinct — and disabling the mechanism the lesson depends on.

Scaffolding and motion design. Two parameters operate across the whole course rather than within a single lesson. The first is linguistic scaffolding. Creative content in a second language is bounded by the means available to express it, so exponents are supplied stage by stage: defining and delimiting, tentative proposing, warranting, rebutting and conceding, reconstructing. Scaffolds are withdrawn progressively; permanent scaffolding produces fluent recitation of frames rather than independent construction. The second is motion design. Motions are graded by cognitive demand — factual first, then value, then policy, and finally counter-intuitive motions for which no ready-made position exists.

The two parameters move in opposite directions, and their crossing point is where learners begin to argue independently.



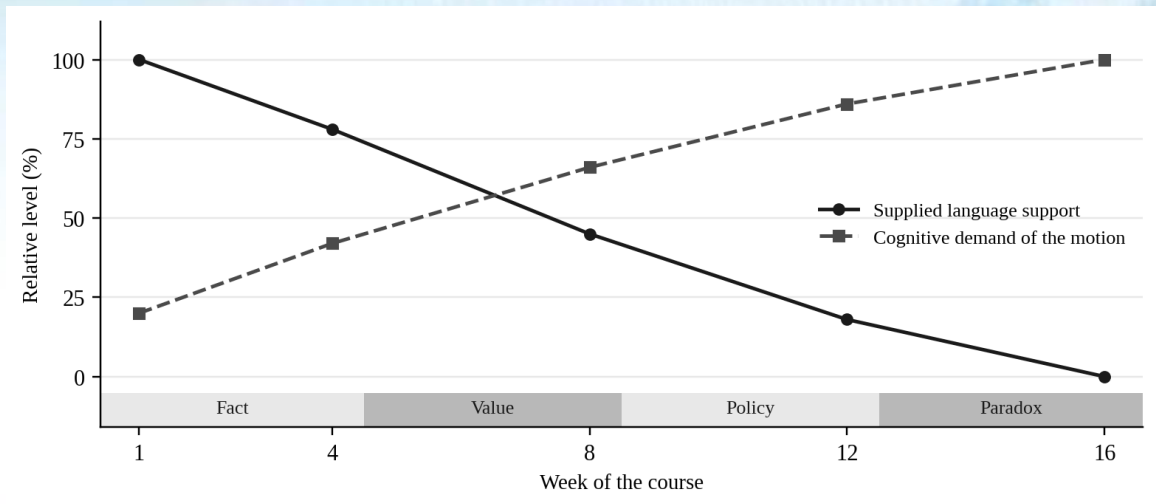


Figure 1. Progressive withdrawal of language support against rising cognitive demand of motions

Roughly half of all motions are drawn from content the learners already command — their own specialisation, or topics already covered in the syllabus — so that the language load is the only new demand. Where both the content and the language are unfamiliar, learners default to the safest available formulation and the originality dimension collapses.

Cultural adaptation. One further condition deserves mention. Competitive public disagreement carries different social costs in different educational cultures, and where open contradiction of a peer is marked as impolite, the format requires explicit reframing: the debate is a role, positions are assigned rather than held, and the reversal stage — in which every learner is seen to argue both sides — makes that visible to the group. Without this reframing, the strongest students may withhold their best arguments in order to avoid appearing confrontational, which produces exactly the outcome the format was adopted to prevent.

The conditions set out above are not recommendations of equal weight with the format itself; they are what makes the format function. They are trainable, but they are not intuitive, and teacher-preparation programmes should treat them accordingly.



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