

ACCENTING DEBATE

INCREASING DEBATE PARTICIPATION

BY ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

&

LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENCY STUDENTS

by
Sylvia Beltran & Sue Lowrie

“In the beginning, I dreaded debate. Truthfully, I knew nothing about it, but the idea of getting in front of others to “argue” and to think quickly on my feet, scared me. During the summer debate camp, I believed that I would be a poor debater since I did not possess good speaking skills. Also, to further complicate things, I did not comprehend anything that was being taught to me. I just felt as if debate was too overwhelming, and I wanted to quit, but I knew better than to do that. . . . When I got up there to give my speech and present evidence, I felt as if I knew what I was doing. I felt in control, and I enjoyed the idea. As the season progressed, I further enhanced my speaking skills and my thinking abilities . . . I learned so many things that I did not think I would ever learn or even hear about in a classroom or in life . . . Now, I know that I am ready to take on another challenge and work my hardest to reach my full potential. I believe that I am ready to prove to myself and others that I can achieve anything that I set my heart and mind to.”

This is a statement written by a debater whose first language is not English to describe the challenges of high school debate to an English as a Second Language (ESL) student and the rewards from overcoming those challenges. This debater is a participant in the Southern California Urban Debate League (SCUDL), just one of the many Urban Debate Leagues (UDLs) funded via generous grants from the Open Society Institute. The UDLs have brought debate to underserved high schools across the United States. The face of debate is starting to change in a positive direction, with more high school students than ever participating in Tuscaloosa, New York, Baltimore, Kansas City, San Francisco, St. Louis, Chicago, Detroit, Atlanta, New Jersey, Providence, and Southern California. UDLs have been successful in reaching out to underprivileged students, offering debate to many who would never have had the opportunity otherwise. But, if we are to truly embrace the goals of the national Urban Debate League project, “that debate be accessible to those students most in need of the skills and benefits which it provides” (Open Society

Institute), we must constantly evaluate which populations most need outreach. Two of the groups that have been underrepresented in high school debate are ESL and Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students. In order to bring additional diversity to the high school debate community, educators and administrators should take steps to include these populations in their school and regional programs. This article will discuss some of the challenges unique to recruiting and retaining participation by ESL/LEP students and attempt to offer some suggestions to begin broadening debate outreach to this population.

Participants in forensics in some areas of the United States may not see ESL/LEP populations as an important issue in their communities. In Southern California, we must be particularly concerned with these large and growing populations. Many of our schools have populations that include over 30 different first-languages. Realistically, no community will go untouched by the challenge of effectively integrating ESL/LEP students into the educational system. In the 10 years prior to 1997, “the number of school-

age children and youth who speak languages other than English at home increased by 68.6%” (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Inc., 1997) and these numbers continue to grow. As major urban areas become more and more crowded, newcomers to the United States will be forced to settle in new areas. We should use debate to develop important capabilities in ESL/LEP students and to improve the contrast between these populations and English-speaking communities.

Policy debate is not an easy activity for any high school student. It combines public speaking, which most people dread, with an intellectual component that demands research and a highly specialized knowledge base. For ESL/LEP students, this activity can seem especially overwhelming. Yet, it is these students that are most in need of the benefits that debate has to offer. Debate teaches many “important academic skills that often are ignored in ESL classrooms,” including “development of the abilities to disagree, to argue, and to persuade” (Macdonald, 1990). The high school debate commu-

nity will also benefit from the involvement of these students. They bring new perspectives and new voices to what is often a monolithic activity. Three things will help in facilitating the inclusion of this student population in high school debate: targeted recruitment, increased cultural awareness and positive reinforcement.

Targeted Recruitment

The first step in increasing debate participation for any group is outreach. UDLs have helped to provide the resources and support that many schools need for successful debate participation by populations previously excluded due to funding concerns. UDLs and other programs functioning in schools with high ESL/LEP numbers may find a need to offer alternative recruiting efforts toward these populations. Debate coaches should establish a relationship with an ESL/LEP instructor or the counselor who works with this population on their campus. Some urban schools lack the resources for specialized ESL/LEP instructors. If this is the case, administration should be able to provide you with the classes ESL populations are placed in; you can then approach those instructors or target those classes for recruiting efforts. For instance, several schools sponsor organizations that seek to create fellowship and opportunities for specific ethnic groups on the campus. Recruiting efforts could be directed at those clubs, as well as specific ESL/LEP classes.

ESL/LEP students are sometimes ignored when teachers are recruiting for academic extracurricular activities. Linguistic barriers many times translate into incorrect assumptions about this population's intellectual capabilities. Instructors who teach these students on a daily basis are valuable resources to answer questions, provide guidance when dealing with parents and students, and to provide coaches with an ESL/LEP student base that can succeed in high school debate. Peer groups are also important recruiting tools in high schools. Once you are able to get a few students from the ESL/LEP population participating and enjoying debate, you will find it easier to recruit from these populations.

Increased Cultural Awareness

Once ESL/LEP students have been reached and are attending meetings or classes, awareness of their needs is necessary for continued participation. Studies have shown that ESL students, in particular, need to feel included and valued in activities they participate in to counteract the shyness and fear they may be experiencing at school (Watt, Roessingh & Bosetti, 1996). The barrier that language can create for everyday communication, let alone active participation in an activity like debate can seem overwhelming to ESL/LEP students. Structuring team meetings in a way that provides a positive atmosphere with supportive relationships fostered between team members is important. Assigning supportive English-speaking mentors or "partners" to these students may help by providing a peer to go to with questions and concerns and who can serve as an advocate for them in tough situations. This relationship benefits both the ESL/LEP students and your English-speaking students by providing them with knowledge and skills they can use in their communities and their future workplaces.

Coaches and teachers have a unique opportunity to serve as a role model to their students, encouraging cultural awareness and open-mindedness in their classrooms and your debate rounds. According to Weismantel and Fradd, ESOL and Child Development specialists, "leaders validate the efforts of students" when they "plan public occasions when LEP students . . . participate and are rewarded; [when] they are visible" (1989, p. 13). Debate can supply this public forum. The Southern California Urban Debate League has begun to offer a rookie division for first-time competitors, which rewards participation instead of competitive success. This format guarantees all first-time participants the reward they need to continue participating. In subsequent competitions, each round offers a chance for public recognition and visibility and awards are plentiful.

Even if your school does not have large ESL/LEP populations, cultural awareness must be developed in students and judges. As more and more UDL students become active on the debate circuit, cultural awareness deserves some

attention. Given the possibilities for debaters and judges to comment on accents and speaking skills, these issues are particularly important when dealing with ESL/LEP students. Cultural awareness probably does not top the "to do" list for debaters and coaches in preparing for local league tournaments or invitational competitions. Even in areas with high ESL/LEP numbers, students, coaches and judges may not be accustomed to encountering these students at their local tournaments. Still, this issue warrants discussion at a team meeting before tournament competition. Teachers and coaches should make sure that competitors and judges do not view linguistic difference as deficit. They should be encouraged to listen closely to those with accents and discouraged from highlighting accents or grammatical differences. Discussions of cultural differences are helpful as well. If you are lucky enough to have a diverse school population, utilize your student body knowledge to educate yourself, your students and your judges. If your school is not as diverse, seek information from others at tournaments. The more we, as individuals, educate ourselves, the more we can share that knowledge with others.

As a coach or administrator, it is also important to take cultural differences into consideration when dealing with parents of ESL/LEP students. In addition to all of the barriers between schools and parents, the inability to communicate in English silences the voices of parents who might otherwise vocally support and encourage their children's involvement in academic pursuits like debate. Culture plays a part in expectations on high school students as well. Many of our SCUDL participants are expected to care for younger siblings, contribute to family finances with after-school jobs, in addition to excelling in their academic studies. Cultural norms also may influence parental expectations regarding participation in debate with regard to gender and religion. The difficulty for ESL/LEP students lies in the fact that parents often do not communicate in English, and conveying the benefits debate has to offer their child can be extremely difficult. Certain steps can be taken, such as providing newsletters and permission slips

in multiple languages, to increase the likelihood of open communication. Once the parents come to understand the academic benefits of debate, they become much more supportive of the program. You may also have to make allowances for after-school jobs and family responsibilities. Attendance at meetings and tournaments is important, but flexibility is often important in gaining parental support. Your students can also provide you with insight into their parents' concerns and hesitations, which you can then target in communication efforts.

Positive Reinforcement

Positive reinforcement is a tool that has been proven valuable in a number of academic forums as a means of keeping students engaged and enthusiastic. Positive interactions can be especially influential to ESL students and "personal concern from the instructor is one of the biggest motivating factors in working with ESL students" (Marques, 1997). Unfortunately, many high school coaches report that students have been driven out of debate by negative interactions with competitors, judges and coaches. These negative experiences influence all young debaters, but can be especially hurtful and devastating to those who do not claim English as their first or primary language. We have had occasions where ESL/LEP students were told to "go home and practice English" before coming to another tournament by a judge. These students have not returned to a tournament, and probably never will. ESL/LEP students who lack confidence in their linguistic abilities may never feel their English is "good enough" to compete. There are a few easy things we can do to facilitate interactions that keep all debaters, but especially ESL/LEP students, participating.

Develop empathy. Coaches should work to develop empathy in their debaters and judges. This can be a relatively simple first step towards positive interactions. Ask them to remember their first debate experience, whether as a competitor or as a judge. Make sure they focus on remembering their anxiety, their fear of making a mistake, the confusion they felt when unfamiliar terminology was used. Now ask them to imagine being in

the same situation, but with all other competitors and judges speaking a language with which they are only somewhat familiar. Finally, ask them to think how they would like others at the tournament to treat them in this situation. This is a valuable exercise for experienced participants in debate to review every few tournaments. It is easy to forget our experiences with being new to this activity and to treat others accordingly. With the constant reminder of how it feels to be new and fearful, students and judges are more likely to be supportive to ESL/LEP students, as well as all novice competitors.

Be generous with praise. ESL students often "feel embarrassed or ill at ease because of their speech errors" (Marques, 1997). Debate places them at constant risk of this embarrassment. It is important that coaches and judges recognize the power of their feedback with these students. Praising ESL/LEP students for their participation in the debate round, as well as pointing out places where they performed well is of utmost importance. What seems like constructive criticism to those with confidence can seem like devastating insults to an ESL/LEP student. With regard to oral critiques, encourage your judges to focus on positives rather than areas to improve in any oral criticism. Ballots should reflect strengths first and weaknesses later, without the use of insulting or demeaning language.

ESL/LEP students are well aware of their accents and their vocabulary limitations. They do not need to be told to work on their enunciation or their vocabulary. They do need to be encouraged and given suggestions for arguments to make, ways to improve their organization, and all the other things that every high school debater needs. Remember, THEY are not the only ones in the room with an accent – theirs is just different from your accent and other students' accents. When you speak to them, they hear your accent as much as you hear theirs. It is important that we remove the focus from accents and linguistic differences and shift it to improving debate performance.

Conclusion

UDLs have been a driving force in many efforts to increase diversity within

the ranks of the high school debate community. Despite their success, there are still communities not adequately represented in debate. In Southern California, we have a very diverse group of high school students; many come from families who are recent immigrants to this country and English is not the primary language used in their homes. Limited English language proficiencies mean that ESL/LEP students face not only the socio-economic barriers of English-speaking UDL students, but also language barriers as well. In encouraging participation in debate programs, UDLs have reminded us that we must never forget those who are at the margins of our communities. In working to change the face of debate, we must also change the sound of debate. To increase diversity in the participants, effort must be focused on targeted recruitment, increased cultural awareness and increasing positive reinforcement for ESL/LEP populations. These students will not only benefit from high school debate programs, but more importantly, they offer new perspectives and voices that add immeasurable value to the competitive debate experience for teachers, students and judges.

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(Sylvia Beltran, Executive Director, and Sue Lowrie, Director of Programs, both from Southern California Urban Debate League)