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TEACHER'S TOOLKIT

DEBATING IN ESL CLASSROOMS

2025 Edition



INTERNATIONAL PHONETICS &
PHONOLOGY ACADEMY



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Teacher's Toolkit: Debating in ESL Classrooms

by IPPAcademy

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1st Edition

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About Us

About IPPAcademy

At IPPAcademy, we're passionate about empowering educators to inspire students worldwide. As an approved CPD Provider and member of the London Teacher Training College, we offer self-paced, high-quality courses designed to enhance your teaching skills and advance your career.

From ESL instructor training to child psychology, our programs provide practical tools and professional credentials to help you succeed.

Whether you're a new teacher or a seasoned educator, IPPAcademy is your partner in creating engaging, impactful classrooms. Explore our certificate courses to take your teaching to the next level.

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What is in This Guidebook?

This free toolkit is your go-to guide for integrating debates into your ESL lessons. You'll find:

- **Benefits of incorporating Debate into your ESL Classroom**
- **Step-by-Step Guide to Creating Engaging Debate lessons**
- **Practical Resources and Tips**

Whether you're a new teacher or a seasoned educator, this guide offers actionable ideas to elevate your teaching. At IPPAcademy, our mission is to empower educators like you with innovative tools to inspire students worldwide. Ready to make learning fun? Let's dive in!



Why Debates Matter for ESL Learners

Imagine your students confidently sharing their opinions on “Should phones be allowed in class?” or “Is city life better than rural life?”

Debates are a powerful tool for ESL classrooms, helping students grow in ways that go beyond language. Here’s why they’re an absolute game-changer:



Boost Language Skills: Debates encourage students to argue and explain in English. It forces them to explain clearly, listen actively, and expand their vocabulary with topic-specific words (think “recycling” or “technology”).



Build Confidence: Taking a stance and defending it helps even shy students find their voice. Structured roles (like opener or rebutter) make speaking less intimidating.



Sharpen Critical Thinking: Debates challenge students to analyze different perspectives, weigh evidence, and respond thoughtfully—skills they’ll use in school, work, and life.



Foster Teamwork and Empathy: Working in teams and arguing opposing views teaches collaboration and understanding, creating an inclusive classroom vibe.

Session 1: Why Debate?

Debates are also incredibly versatile. Whether you're teaching teens, adults, or even advanced younger learners, you can adapt topics and formats to fit their needs.

This toolkit will show you how, with practical tips and ready-to-use resources.



Did you know?

Research shows that oral activities like debates can improve ESL fluency by up to 20% in six months (Nation, 2013, Teaching ESL/EFL Listening and Speaking).

Session 2: Benefits and Preparation Basics

Preparing for Success: **Student Levels, Groups, and Materials**

Let's set you up for a smooth, stress-free debate experience. A little planning goes a long way, and we've got you covered with simple steps to make your first debate a success.

Whether you're teaching a small group or a full class, here's how to get started:



Assess Your Students

Debates work best for intermediate (B1-B2) and advanced (C1-C2) ESL learners who can form sentences and follow arguments.

For beginners (A1-A2), use simpler topics and extra language support (we'll cover this in Session 3).

Try a quick survey to gauge readiness: ask, "Do you feel comfortable speaking in a group?" or have students rate their confidence (1-5). This helps you tailor the debate to their level.

Session 2: Benefits and Preparation Basics

Set Up Groups

Divide your class into teams of 3-4 students for a balanced debate. Assign roles to keep things organized:

- Opener: Starts with the main argument.
- Rebutter: Challenges the other team's points.
- Closer: Wraps up with a strong summary.

For a class of 12, try 2 debating teams (3 students each) and 1 judging team (6 students) to keep everyone involved. Rotate roles for future debates to give everyone a chance to speak.



Session 2: Benefits and Preparation Basics

Manage Time

Plan for 20-45 minute sessions to fit busy schedules:

- 5 minutes: Brainstorm arguments in teams.
- 10-20 minutes: Debate (alternate speakers).
- 5-10 minutes: Reflect and give feedback.

Use a timer app or stopwatch to keep things fair and on track.

Pro tip: Start with shorter debates (20 minutes) to build confidence, then extend as students get comfortable.



Session 2: Benefits and Preparation Basics

Gather Materials

Keep it very simple!

- (Optional) A whiteboard or paper for brainstorming topics and rules (like the Topic Brainstorm Sheet included in session 4)
- Copies of support worksheets (like the Debate Phrase Bank or Debate Planner included in session 4).
- You can simply show a short YouTube clip of a mock debate or some background information of the desired topic

No fancy tools? No problem—pen, paper, and enthusiasm are enough! The important part is getting them started!



Session 3: Step-by-Step Guide to Running a Debate Lesson

In this session, we prepared a step-by-step guide that will walk you through everything you need to create engaging, confidence-building discussions that get your students talking and thinking.

At IPPAcademy, we're all about practical tools that make teaching easier and more impactful. This module breaks down the debate process into five clear steps, complete with tips and examples.



Choose Engaging Topics

A great debate starts with a topic that sparks curiosity and conversation. Your goal is to **pick something relatable, age-appropriate, and just a tad controversial to keep students engaged without causing conflict.**

Criteria for Great Topics

Choose topics that are:

- **Relatable:** Connect to students' lives (e.g., school, technology, daily choices).
- **Simple or Scalable:** Easy for beginners (e.g., "Is it better to live in a city or village?") or complex for advanced learners (e.g., "Should social media be regulated?").
- **Balanced:** Have clear pros and cons to encourage debate.

Session 3: Step-by-Step Guide to Running a Debate Lesson

Topic Ideas by Level

- Beginners (A1-A2): “Should pets be allowed in school?” / “Is summer better than winter?”
- Intermediate (B1-B2): “Should homework be banned?” / “Is fast food unhealthy?”
- Advanced (C1-C2): “Is AI good for education?” / “Should single-use plastics be banned?”

Involve Students

Boost engagement by letting students suggest or vote on topics. Try a quick whiteboard poll: “Which topic sounds fun: phones in class or less homework?” This makes them feel invested!

Cultural Tip

Avoid sensitive topics like politics or religion, especially in diverse classrooms. Stick to universal themes like environment, education, or technology.

For example, “Should everyone recycle?” is safe and sparks lively discussion.



Pro Tip

It's best to write the topic as a question instead of a statement, to clarify sides (e.g., “Should students wear uniforms?”). This helps students understand the pro/con structure.

Session 3: Step-by-Step Guide to Running a Debate Lesson



Set Clear Rules

Clear rules create a safe, fair space for debate, helping students feel confident and respected. Keep them simple and visible for everyone to follow.

Sample Debate Rules

- **Time Limits:** 2-minute opening statements, 1-minute rebuttals, 1-minute closing statements per team.
- **Respect:** Focus on ideas, not people. No interruptions or personal comments.
- **Listening:** Actively listen to opponents to prepare rebuttals.

How to Share Rules

Write them on a whiteboard or print a handout for reference. **Go over them before the debate starts!**

Inclusivity Tip

For shy or beginner students, allow written notes or let them share a short point to ease them in. Pair them with confident peers for support.



Pro Tip

Practice the rules with a quick demo. For example, role-play a 1-minute mini-debate on “Cats vs. dogs?” to show how timing and respect work.

Session 3: Step-by-Step Guide to Running a Debate Lesson



Provide Language Support

Debates can feel daunting for ESL students, so pre-teaching key phrases and vocabulary builds confidence and fluency.

Teach Debate Phrases: Share a “Debate Phrase Bank” (see resource in Session 4) with phrases to help students agree, disagree, or summarize. Examples:

- Agreeing: “I agree with this point because...” / “That’s a great idea, and I’d add...”
- Disagreeing: “I respectfully disagree because...” / “On the other hand, I think...”
- Summarizing: “In conclusion, we believe...” / “To sum up, our team argues...”
- Asking Questions: “Can you explain why...?” / “What evidence supports your point?”

Activity: Spend 5 minutes practising phrases in pairs. For example, students take turns agreeing or disagreeing on a fun topic like “Is pizza the best food?” This builds fluency and reduces anxiety.

Vocabulary Support: Pre-teach 5-10 topic-specific words. For a debate on “Should homework be banned?” teach words like “stress,” “learning,” “free time,” or “discipline.”



Pro Tip

For beginners, focus on 3-5 simple phrases and practice them chorally. For advanced students, encourage complex phrases like “From my perspective...” to stretch their skills.

Session 3: Step-by-Step Guide to Running a Debate Lesson



Facilitate the Debate

Now it's showtime! Your role is to guide the debate, keep it fair, and make it fun.

Setup: Divide students into pro and con teams (e.g. 3-4 per side). Assign roles: opener (starts the argument), rebutter (challenges opponents), closer (summarizes).

Debate Flow (20-30 minutes):

- Warm-Up (5 min): Teams brainstorm arguments using the “Debate Planner” (below). Example: For “Should phones be allowed in class?” list pros (e.g., learning apps) and cons (e.g., distractions).
- Debate (10-20 min): Alternate speakers (pro, con, pro, con). Use a timer for fairness. Encourage rebuttals: “What do you think of the other team’s point?”
- Wrap-Up (5 min): Each team’s closer summarizes. Optionally, have a class vote on the strongest argument (not the “right” side).

Your Role: Moderate by signaling time, enforcing rules, and praising effort.

Tech Option: If possible and permitted, record the debate (e.g., on a phone) for students to review later. **It's extremely useful for students to self-evaluate.**

Session 3: Step-by-Step Guide to Running a Debate Lesson



Evaluate and Reflect

Help students process what they learned and celebrate their efforts. Here's how:

Teacher Feedback: After the debate, share 1-2 points of praise per team (e.g., “Great teamwork!”) and 1 area to improve (e.g., “Try using more evidence next time”). **Keep it positive and non-judgemental (super important)!**

Student Reflection:

Use the “Reflection Sheet” (session 4) with questions like:

- What new words or phrases did I learn?
- What was challenging about speaking or listening?
- How can I improve for the next debate?

Peer Feedback:

Optionally, have students share what their teammates did well (e.g., “Clear speaking” or “Good examples”).



Pro Tip

End with a class discussion: “What was fun about the debate? What surprised you?”
This reinforces learning and builds community.

Session 4: Useful Resources and Templates



Debate Phrase Bank

Purpose: Help ESL students speak confidently during debates with ready-to-use phrases.



Debate Planner

Purpose: Guide students in organizing their arguments for a clear, confident debate.



Topic Brainstorm Sheet

Purpose: Engage students by letting them suggest and vote on debate topics, making lessons relevant and fun.



Reflection Sheet

Purpose: Help students reflect on their debate experience to reinforce learning and build confidence.

Conclusion

You've explored the Free ESL Debate Toolkit: Engage Your Students with Dynamic Discussions, a resource crafted by IPPAcademy to transform your ESL classroom into a hub of lively, meaningful conversations.

Key Takeaways:

- Debates supercharge fluency, confidence, and critical thinking by encouraging structured arguments and teamwork.
- Choose relatable, age-appropriate topics and set clear rules to create a safe, engaging environment for all learners.
- Pre-teach key phrases and vocabulary to empower students, from beginners to advanced, to participate fully.
- Leverage resources like the Debate Phrase Bank, Debate Planner and Reflection Sheet to streamline planning and spark excitement.

These practical strategies reflect IPPAcademy's commitment to empowering educators with hands-on tools that work in real classrooms. Whether you're teaching ESL to teens, adults, or young learners, this toolkit helps you create lessons that inspire and connect.

We're thrilled to support your journey! Share your debate success stories on Instagram @IPPAcademy!

As an approved CPD Provider (CPD QS (U.K.)) and member of the London Teacher Training College, IPPAcademy offers self-paced, high-quality courses designed to enhance your teaching skills and advance your career.

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