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# Welcome to Debate

Hundreds of millions of people in China are learning English. For many students, speaking in English is quite challenging. Debating in English may be more so because students might think the concept of an argument is negative and they consider it a form of quarreling. Therefore, while debating is a great way to develop their oral English skills, students may not even want to participate.

However, debating does not have to be unpleasant and difficult. In fact, the comment I hear most from students I have trained is “debating is fun!” As you learn to debate it becomes easier and more enjoyable. If you have opportunities to compete in tournaments you will find the excitement of competition also creates an atmosphere where you make new friends. Even though you may have a heated argument with students from the other side, debates usually end with a handshake and friendly conversation. You will find debating to be a fun activity, where you are allowed to be competitive, but develop interpersonal relationships along the way.

Of course, students do not debate just for fun. They strive to learn debate for great gains in their thinking and speaking abilities in English, so that they will better participate and be more competitive in a globalized world.

## Why Debate

### Development of Applied Skills

In a scientific survey, human resource professionals were asked what applied skills were most needed for the 21st century workplace. Those professionals did not focus on reading and writing or even computer skills. Rather, the three utmost skills they think important to be competitive are:

- Oral Communication
- Professionalism/Work Ethic
- Teamwork/Collaboration

These are the same skills that can be developed by debate.

## Oral Communication

Debating in English is like a short-term immersion into an English language environment. It will help you with three aspects of oral communication.

First, it will help your fluency and speed. When you first start learning debate, you may need to think and search for proper words. But with practice and experience the words will come faster.

Second, debate will help you with increased accuracy in thinking and language use. It is as though the debate is a group collaboration effort to improve your oral English clarity. In debating, the other team, by arguing against you, is actually asking you to be more accurate in your language and your ideas. The judge or your teacher will also give comments to help you to increase your ability to express yourself accurately in English.

Third, debate will help you with the complexity of your thinking and language. You will research new ideas, acquire new concepts and vocabulary in the process. You will find new ways to express yourself. As you do these things, your language and thinking will become more sophisticated, and you will move on from just memorizing and reciting from a textbook. You will increasingly be required to form and express your own thoughts that others can understand. As this process develops you will feel more self-confident in speaking, either to one person or in front of a large audience.

Debate will help you to present a professional image to the audience. To be a good debater, you will have to do research and preparation. You will need to meet time schedules. Everything from practice to tournament trains you to act in a professional manner. In professional life this is referred to as “having a high concern for the task.” In other words, you are able to get things done.

## Teamwork/Collaboration

Teamwork or collaboration goes beyond just building good relationships. Debate involves working within relationships to solve problems with other people. This means developing the abilities to express ideas, hear the ideas of others, analyze and evaluate arguments, establish criteria for the best results while working within a group. Debate is a team effort. You will need to divide assignments among teammates. You will practice with others to help everyone’s improvement. And you will have partners who will count on you to do your best. In professional life this is referred to as “having a high concern for people.” In other words, as you get things done you build strong relationships.

## Development of Other Skills

### Critical Thinking

The most powerful influence that debate will have on your life is the ability to think better. There is a great deal of research pointing to the intellectual benefits of debating. Research has also shown that people may not think as well when speaking in a second language as they do in their first language, UNLESS they are trained to think in their second language. Debating is not an easy thing for most people, even in their native language. It takes real courage to debate in a second language. But, through the activity of debating, you can learn how to better analyze and evaluate thinking and how to present your ideas in organized and persuasive ways. Ultimately, debating will develop your confidence in reasoning.

The end result of debating in English is to develop your critical thinking skills while orally communicating. Development of your thinking is woven into the development of your speaking. It is accurate to say that students learn to be better thinkers so they can become better debaters and students become better debaters as they become better thinkers.

### Researching and Writing

As a debater you will be responsible to educate yourself on a wide range of topics by reading and researching in depth. You will discover new models of writing with the reading you do. You will also learn how to make logical arguments supported with evidence. This type of extensive “input”—by reading widely, and “output”—by producing arguments and logical reasoning, helps you to form a good writing style. Most debaters claim that debating helps them to improve as writers as well as speakers.



### Listening and Note-taking

Active listening is another skill you will develop. Debate requires you to closely follow and think about what the other debaters say. You also need to take detailed notes in order to effectively refute what the other team argues and put forward your own arguments. This type of critical listening encourages debaters to be actively engaged in thinking.

### Worldview

Your viewpoint on the world will start to change with debating. Some people claim that they find “their voice” through debating and develop who they are as a person. You will become more involved with understanding national

and international issues. As you explore these issues you will begin to see the world as more complex, which allows you to understand the values of other people which, in turn, should increase your crosscultural awareness. You will find yourself becoming more fair-minded as you see that there are many ways to view the world.

## Competence and Confidence

As you learn to debate you will also increase your autonomy in learning and better learn how to work out issues and solve problems by yourself. You will become better able to persevere in the face of challenging intellectual activities that you come across in your life. This type of confidence often comes when you become better at expressing your ideas.

## Getting Started

Since debating is a skill, you cannot learn to debate by reading a book. You cannot learn to debate by listening to lectures. The only way to learn how to debate is by debating. You must go through the steps and make mistakes along the way. Initially, you may be concerned with losing face. And like students around the world, you have taken so many exams that you are used to a question having only “one” correct answer. But now in learning debate you will make mistakes—lots of them—and you will come up with your own answers. You may present arguments that are irrelevant or illogical because you don’t have enough information or understanding of the topic. You may miss an argument because the other team is speaking so fast that you can’t understand them. You may run out of time before you run out of ideas or run out of ideas before you run out of time. These are all parts of the learning process. This is the way of developing into a better speaker and a better thinker.

The “Five Ps” for effective speaking can help your improvement: Preparation and Practice Prevent Poor Performance.

In debating, if you want to be successful, you will need to prepare properly. First, you will need to prepare your body with the right food, sufficient sleep and plenty of water. Second, you will need to prepare your mind with proper attitude, lots of reading and discussion. Third, you will need to do other preparations prior to the debate, such as topic research, gathering materials like pens and paper.

But more than anything else, if you want to be successful, you will need to practice. Sometimes you can practice alone. If you read something you think you might use in a debate, you can practice putting the ideas into your own words. Even after a debate, you can give a speech which you already gave during the debate round over again to try out ways to improve it. There are exercises in this book designed to encourage you to practice by yourself. You should also practice with your partner. Sometimes you will know the topic area you are going to debate. You and your partner can discuss strategies or major arguments you will present or you think the other team will present. Some debaters will even simulate a full debate to develop better strategies and ideas to support their position and attack the ideas of the other team.

In the classroom, listening to other debaters in action is another opportunity to practice. Even as an audience, you can have a learning experience by listening to the arguments, taking notes and weighing the arguments on both sides. You will be training your brain by watching the debate and imagining how you would argue if you were one of the debaters.

You can maximize your efforts at becoming a good debater if you will do the following:

**Read the assigned chapter before coming to class.** This book is not written so that you can be better in written examinations. But, the book is designed so you can learn skills in a systematic fashion. Reading will be the beginning. It will familiarize you with what you are going to learn in class and help you to make the most of the class.



**Take the assignments seriously.** The book and your teacher will provide many opportunities to develop your skills. You should try your best to finish the assignments. When debating in class, always give your best performance.

**Learn to be a great note-taker.** If you miss what the other debaters are saying during a debate, it will be difficult to provide a good analysis and evaluation of their arguments. Your short-term memory cannot go far. Good notes will help you to recall. Therefore, practice taking notes as much as possible—in practice debates, when observing others, or during your lecture classes. When you have a break after taking the notes, speak the notes aloud, try to explain everything you have noted down. Not only will this reinforce your memory of ideas, it will train you to explain the arguments of others.

**Practice as much as possible.** You should develop a habit of practicing your speeches outside of class. You can practice in a group or with your partner. But you will especially need to practice by yourself, trying out new ideas and explaining the ideas of others. Ultimately, the people who perform the best are the ones who practice the most.

**Go to debate tournaments.** Competition can bring out the best in you. It can provide new opportunities for you to perfect your skills. In competition you will need to collaborate with your partner, listen to the arguments of different people, and learn from the comments of the judges. This type of practice becomes a laboratory for ideas that cannot be duplicated in the classroom. It may be a tournament co-organized by your school with other schools or an “intramural” tournament where only the students from the same school compete against each other. As a beginner if you do not have the confidence to participate in a tournament, you can just go to watch others debate. Sometimes this type of modeling can help you to see what you need to do.

**Learn to seek and accept constructive criticism.** In a debate not everyone can win the top prize. Judges will explain who won and who lost and why. You may not agree with the decision, but you should listen and learn. It is a great exercise

for developing your critical thinking skills. In the classroom your teacher and fellow students will also offer comments to help you to improve. Most people are giving you these comments to help you. Listen to them, take notes, ask clarifying questions and learn.

**Give good feedback to your classmates.** Besides seeking constructive criticism from others, you also need to assess the ideas of others and give them constructive criticism. You need to be honest about your thoughts, but you also have to present your critique in a way that can be easily accepted and helps to build the relationship. You must have a high concern for the task and a high concern for the relationship.

## Conclusion

You have now become a student of debate. This means you should be committed to developing your critical thinking skills through oral communication. I sincerely believe there is nothing better than debate to help you to become a better speaker and a better thinker. It will take effort on your part, but it will be well worth it.

### Activities

1. Discuss with a partner: What do you expect to achieve through debating?
2. Start debating with easy and fun value topics. Choose one of the topics below, prepare a two-minute speech on both sides. Be sure to provide reasons to support your ideas. Form teams with classmates who choose the same topic and assign the side, with 2-4 members on each side. Give alternate speeches for and against the topic.

- A dog is a better pet than a cat.
- McDonald's is better than KFC.
- Traveling by car is better than traveling by train.
- Rice is better than noodles.
- Fall is better than spring.
- A trip to the US is better than a trip to Europe.
- A trip to the mountains is better than a trip to the beaches.
- Blue is a better color than green.