HOW TO PREPARE FOR A UNIVERSITY DEBATE?

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For the time being, the debating technology is widely used in schools and universities of many countries of the world as a form of organizing educational process and extracurricular activities alike. It is especially popular in Western Europe, the United States of America, Southeast Asia and Japan [5, p. 4]. It is an acknowledged fact that debating clubs and societies operate in Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Yale, Sorbonne and other world famous universities [1, p. 9—10]. Since the 1990s, debates as a technology of instruction and educational movement started to gather momentum in the Russian Federation, Eastern and Central Europe as well as in a host of countries in Central Asia. This may be largely attributed to their proven efficiency.

Using the term debates, it should be noted that in accordance with the theory of argumentation it is not identical to the concept of discussion. The debate is a formal exchange of views on a contentious issue with the involvement of two teams as a rule which hold opposing views in respect of a given problem. By contrast, taking part in a discussion does not imply the necessity to adhere to strict limitations (time frames, order of speaking performances, etc.). While the main goal of the discussion is to reach a consensus on a controversial issue by means of a peaceful exchange of views, classical debates possess an adversarial nature since the main goal of their participants is to convince a third party (an audience, a panel of judges, etc.) in the superiority of their position [4, p. 133—134].

Provided that debates are properly organized, they have a great potential in facilitating the formation of a number of important academic, social, personal and professional competencies. These include, first and foremost, the abilities to conduct an independent and unbiased research of problem related literature, make a critical analysis of issues under discussion, effectively construct argumentation and refutation and the ability to work in a team. In respect of teaching a foreign language it should be said that the implementation of the debating technology is designed to contribute to the development of the students’ speaking skills and the expansion of their linguistic and cultural outlook. A number of experts in this field (P. Zhdanov, E. Kalinkina, S. Naumov, T. Svetenko, L. Turik, etc.) advocate for a wider integration of debates into the process of formal education in classical and modified formats alike [see 1—3; 5].

However, it should be mentioned that preparation for this intellectual game is a painstaking process both for a teacher and a student. Unlike in professional debates, the motion for educational debates is announced to the participants beforehand for them to be able to carry out the necessary research. The players’ position (pro or contra) may be distributed in advance as well. The teacher is expected to act as an expert in the theme under discussion and to advise the participants on recommended resources for a particular topic. Procedural matters (such as time, venue, format and the length of performances) should also be clarified. Not infrequently the teacher has to work as an arbiter: on the one hand, to prevent incorrect polemic methods, on the other hand, to provide a competent opinion on the game results.

The students are expected to draft their speeches in accordance with the position they have received and to make sure they have a proper introduction, main part and conclusion. It is important to pay attention to three aspects: content, structure and manner of presentation. It is obvious that the content needs to be relevant to the motion, the structure of an argument (assertion, reasoning, evidence and impact) has to be observed and the speech should sound coherent, persuasive and linguistically correct. For this purpose the students are recommended to create individual glossaries with due regard being paid to pronunciation and word use. The application of rhetorical devices is very much appreciated as well as most of effective speakers masterfully employ them. Moreover, it is reasonable to think of possible arguments of the opposing side and to create a list of questions which could challenge their case.

Within the framework of the Students’ Week of Science in February of 2017, the debating club Debate on FIRe of the Chair of English for the Humanities held a debate devoted to the discussion of the role of tertiary education in the life of modern society. The motion was formulated as follows: «Higher education: privilege or necessity?» The format of the event was approximated to the model of the British parliamentary debate.

At the preliminary stage, the students of the Faculty of International Relations studied global trends in the development of higher education both on the basis of recommended resources and on the basis of independent research. Later, a social portrait of potential supporters and opponents of
universal higher education was drawn up in the process of brainstorming. The roles of an educational innovator, a government official, a concerned parent, an athlete, a director of a recruitment agency, an economist, a university professor and that of a cleaning manager of the most famous Russian PSJC Gazprom were proposed.

After the roles had been distributed, the participants of the debate got a written instruction with tips of how to structure a persuasive speech, create valid arguments, expose objections and answer the questions of opponents.

In view of the fact that the event was held in English, a basic version of the glossary on the topic «University Education» was prepared for the participants. It was recommended to complete it on an individual basis. In the course of the debate the students demonstrated not only a decent command of English, but also showed good artistic skills. Of special interest were the question rounds in which the invited audience actively took part. At the end of the game, a spectator vote was conducted so as to identify the most convincing speaker. It was followed by the analysis in which special attention was given to the use of the «yes, but» speech tactic within the framework of the cooperative strategy of communication. Undoubtedly, events like these contribute to the development of the culture of polemic speech, which is of great importance to the would-be specialists in international law and international relations.

References