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AN ARGUMENT FOR ARGUING: DEBATES AS A TEACHING AND LEARNING RESOURCE IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

UN ARGUMENTO A FAVOR DE LA ARGUMENTACIÓN: LOS DEBATES COMO RECURSO DIDÁCTICO EN EL AULA DE INGLÉS

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Abstract
The aim of the present study is to explore the use of debates as teaching and learning resources in the English classroom, particularly in the Official Language Schools (EOIs). The analysis of the didactic potential of debates is accompanied by a teaching and learning proposal to implement this resource in an English C1 classroom.

Key Words: Debates; TEFL; EOIs; EFL assessment

Resumen
El objetivo de este trabajo es estudiar la utilización de los debates como recursos didácticos en el aula de inglés, en concreto en las Escuelas Oficiales de Idiomas (EOIs). El análisis del potencial didáctico de los debates se complementa con una propuesta de enseñanza-aprendizaje para implementar este recurso en un aula de inglés de nivel C1.

Palabras clave: Debates; DEL; EOIs; evaluación en DLE

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1. INTRODUCTION

The global economy of the 21st century has brought about significant changes in modern Spanish society. In this brave new world—where soft skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, or teamwork are some of the qualities most sought-after by employers—the ability to communicate in English fluently has become one of the main concerns to progress in academia and the workplace. Unsurprisingly, an ever-growing number of students enrol each year in Spain's Official Language School network (hereinafter referred to by its Spanish acronym, EOIs) to improve their English proficiency. However, despite the paradigm shift towards a communicative approach to language teaching (CLT), opportunities to practice and develop communication skills in English remain scarce. As a result, fluency amongst Spanish EFL learners is often uneven and lags behind that of students in neighbouring countries (Education First, 2019). Thus, it is urgent to look for teaching strategies that promote a well-rounded language education where all productive and receptive language skills are equally developed. This paper aims to analyse the use of debate activities in the EFL classroom to actively engage and motivate English learners in the context of public language instruction in Spain.

2. WHY DEBATES?

Before delving deeper into the idea of using debates in the EFL classroom, it is worth noting that this ancient educational practice has long been embedded in Western culture, even if—at times—it has been the target of mockery and contempt (Farrow, 2006). Indeed, from the cradle of civilisation, debating has been significantly connected to education, philosophy, and politics. The sophists were some of the first to consider rhetorical exchange a meaningful teaching technique; an idea that was later greatly expanded on by Socrates, Plato, and other great philosophers and thinkers of that era (Beuchot, 1998; Pujante, 2003).

But the Ancient Greeks were not the only ones to use the art of rhetoric as a way of shaping the minds of the young. Throughout the ages, many scholars and educators—such as Quintilian, Boethius, Kilwardby, Louis of Granada, Pascal, Perelman, Gadamer, or Ricœur—have postulated their ideas on the matter (Beuchot, 1998). The roots of modern academic debating can be traced back to 19th century Britain. Farrow (2006) hints that the reason why debating did not really catch on in contemporary curricula is best illustrated by the confrontation between two Victorian giants, John Stuart Mill and Matthew Arnold. In 1859, Mill's *On Liberty* defended an education system based on debating. A decade later, Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* rejected the idea of an instructional model where confronting clashing points of view played a significant role. Their thoughts were instrumental in shaping the dawning of a state-controlled education system in the 1870s and while Mill's vision was largely ignored, Arnold's triumphed thanks to the support of contemporary writers and philosophers. However, the times are changing yet again and many now extol the wonders of class debates.

Any discussion on the merits of debates as a teaching and learning strategy should first provide a comprehensive definition of rhetorical discourse, as it is intimately related to the techniques and practices needed to successfully support or rebut an argument. While rhetoric has been traditionally understood as the study of persuasion, some scholars have recently equated it to all manner of communication skills. However, rhetorical discourse has a number of defining qualities that set it apart from other forms of communication. For one, rhetoric is a planned activity that involves a great deal of preparation and forethought (Pujante, 2003; Herrick, 2005). Special care must be devoted to finding compelling arguments (*inventio*), structuring and arranging them in a logical sequence (*dispositio*), and setting the correct tone to convey the message (*elocutio*). Naturally, this also implies that rhetoricians must take their audience into account when crafting a speech or piece of writing. This imaginary target may or may not ultimately reflect the sentiments, experiences, or beliefs of the real audience, but it should provide a guideline to seek areas of common ground between them. The eternal quest for audience approval has often led to negative views towards this discipline but, be that as it may, it remains a cornerstone of rhetorical discourse.

In a similar vein, Herrick (2005) suggests that rhetoric reveals human motives, as one always approaches an audience with an intended goal in mind. Rhetoricians might seek approval from their peers, aim to reach a compromise, gather support towards a common cause, or simply have their opinion heard. It is for this very reason that studying and practising rhetorical techniques may help EFL learners develop not only basic language skills, but also—and perhaps more importantly—become acquainted with the underlying mechanisms that drive all forms of human communication.

Furthermore, rhetorical discourse is responsive in nature (Beuchot, 1998; Vilà, 2014). That is to say, it responds to a particular situation or a previous statement. Such rhetorical situations usually comprise three deeply-interconnected elements—a problem that needs to be addressed, an audience that aims to tackle it, and a range of constraints that merit a discussion. At the same time, it also invites interaction or further response, by compelling others to exchange their ideas and points of view. The dialogic character of all meaningful rhetorical discourse promotes the development of the pragmatic competences described by the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001: 123).

Yet another important quality of rhetoric is that it deals primarily with practical questions for which there is no clear or conclusive answer (Herrick, 2005). Scholars have defined such dilemmas as contingent issues. Accordingly, rhetorical discourse does not pay much heed to what cannot be (the impossible) or what must be (the inevitable), but to the vast array of probable matters that may elicit conflicting or opposing views. Therefore, it plays an essential role in making reasoned decisions that require broad consensus.

Finally, persuasion is a central tenet of this discipline. While rhetoric often strives to achieve other goals such as clarity of expression or creative delivery of the message, its main purpose is to sway the opinion of an audience in the speaker's favour. To do so, it employs four resources: arguments, appeal, arrangement, and aesthetics (Pujante, 2003; Herrick, 2005). Broadly speaking, an argument is a logically sound reasoned statement one makes to reach a conclusion. Appeals, on the other hand, are not aimed at the

audience's rational mind; they seek to stir their emotions. At times, it can be difficult to draw the line that separates arguments from appeals, but if there is one key difference, it is that the latter often elicit a more visceral reaction. Careful consideration is given to the arrangement of the arguments, and seasoned rhetoricians often attempt to gauge the audience's reaction and adapt their message accordingly. Likewise, rhetorical discourse is concerned with form and beauty. Figures of speech provide a vast array of possibilities to enhance the effect if what is said. Sometimes, speakers or writers may choose to subvert expectations and intentionally break traditional rules to shock the audience to achieve the same end.

The art of rhetoric is also an inextricable part of contemporary society. Herrick (2005) identifies several key social roles fulfilled by this discipline. First, it allows people to test their ideas, by confronting opposing views and seeking the approval of others. As ideas are held up to public scrutiny, attention is drawn to them (Pujante, 2003). The importance of this aspect cannot be overstated, as public advocacy gives voice to and empowers those whose opinion goes unheard otherwise. As such, it is an invaluable resource to shift public opinion and achieve meaningful societal changes. Moreover, the analysis of rhetorical discourse provides an insight into how power is distributed in our societies, by revealing who is allowed to speak, what topics are safe to discuss and what language is considered permissible (Pujante, 2003). Thus, it reflects the underlying mechanisms that govern public policy and acts as a warning sign when power is concentrated in the hands of a few select groups of people.

Another important purpose of rhetoric is that it helps society explore, discover, and build knowledge. Although it might seem counter-intuitive at first—as we tend to see knowledge as something that can only be experienced through direct observation or rigorous study—it is largely a function of what a community or society collectively decides is correct. And more often than not, that decision is made after thorough rhetorical exchange. The bonds forged through this interaction lie at the very core of those communities, as the one thing that links their members together is the set of ideas they have decided to embrace or reject as a group of people.

3. DEBATING AND EDUCATION

Having briefly explored the history of debating in education as well as the characteristics and social functions of rhetoric as a field of study, the discussion can move on to how this knowledge can be applied to teaching foreign languages. Alén, Domínguez & de Carlos (2015) suggest that, while there is not a universally applicable model that will fit the needs of every language instructor, there are certain elements shared by most formats that should be carefully considered to conduct a debate. It goes without saying that some aspects need to be stipulated: the duration of the activity, the role of the participants (moderator, debaters, and jury), and the time allotted to each part of the exercise. Indications on how to proceed need to be negotiated with the students and adequately explained beforehand. Furthermore, an equal amount of time should be allowed for each side of the argument, and that the speaker or team that supports the in-

favour position should go first as they bear the burden of proof. As far as the structure of the debate is concerned, three important steps should be followed. First, speakers should state their initial position for or against the issue that is being addressed (thesis). Next, they are supposed to counter the opposing speaker or team's arguments by pointing to any logical flaws, inaccuracies or weaknesses in their reasoning (antithesis). Lastly, they should draw meaningful conclusions and persuade the jury to support their side of the argument. As a general rule of thumb, the case should be sufficiently compelling to convince someone who was previously uninformed about the issue at hand.

All debate topics should be inspired by course content and objectives, but it is advisable to consult with students first, as it can shed some light on their interests and concerns (Alén et al., 2015). Debate proposals (also known as resolutions) must present the topic in a succinct appealing manner. They should meet certain requirements, such as being relatable to the class, up to date, and appropriate for oral presentation. It should be possible to tackle them in the time available. They also need to allow for contrasting opinions and be confined to a single issue to keep the debate focused on a clear target. Under ideal circumstances, students should be sufficiently acquainted with the topic to defend any side of the argument. In fact, debating positions should only be revealed right before the debate takes place, so as to ensure participants thoroughly research every possible angle instead of simply memorising a list of bullet points.

A panel of judges can be composed by the instructor and the students not actively involved in the debate (Alén et al., 2015). Assessment criteria can be condensed in a rubric to choose the winner of the debate. It should take into account aspects such as the quality of the arguments put forward, the attitude of the debaters, or formal elements like language correction and compliance with the rules. At the end of the exercise, all participants should receive constructive feedback to improve their understanding of course contents and enhance their communication skills. By sharing this part of the assessment with students, instructors will help enrich the overall learning experience. The topic of assessment will be discussed at greater length later on.

3.1. Traditional Debate Formats

Out of all traditional debate formats, Parliamentary Debate is particularly well suited to the EFL classroom, as it has a strong focus on communication (Aclan & Aziz, 2015). It is also one of the most popular varieties in academic and contest settings and is often praised for its ability to teach "sophisticated skills in extemporaneous speaking, critical listening, critical thinking, research, and presentation" (Meany & Shuster, 2002: 6). There are many different styles with various rules and standards that define speaking times, number of participants and team composition, order of intervention, or even topic selection. Notable among them are the American and the British formats.

Standard American Parliamentary Debate pits a couple of two-member teams against one another. One team supports the resolution, which is why it is referred to as the proposition team or the government, while the other argues against the proposal, and is commonly known as the opposition or the anti-government (Meany & Shuster, 2002). The proposition team bears the burden of proof. Accordingly, it opens and closes the

debate. Throughout the debate, there are six speeches in total. The first four are constructive in nature and are meant to present the core ideas behind each team's position. The remaining two speeches are devoted to rebuttals that address the opposing team's arguments and attempt to convince the judges to agree with the team's position. The similar Lincoln-Douglas format mirrors the rhetorical confrontation between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas in the electoral race to the United States Senate of 1858 and is widely popular in the United States (Kennedy, 2007).

British Parliamentary Debate deviates a little from its American counterpart, as there are four different teams comprising two members each (Meany & Shuster, 2002). Two are designated first and second proposition, while the remaining teams become first and second opposition. Both first proposition and first opposition have largely the same functions as they do in the American Parliamentary format. The second proposition team is supposed to elaborate on the case developed by the first proposition and put forth new areas of interest. For their part, the second opposition aims to disarm this new line of reasoning. Closing arguments from either side are meant to summarise the debate and highlight key ideas. Each speaker can only deliver a single speech, so points of information—brief interruptions by any member of the opposing team to ask a question, or to correct the speaker—are instrumental to win the debate. As each team member has a limited amount of time on the stand, managing interruptions from debaters on the other side makes British Parliamentary Debate a more challenging format.

The French Debating Association (FDA) style, alternatively known as Paris Fives or Paris Style, was conceived by French instructors to be used in the EFL classroom over two decades ago. It draws heavily from the British Parliamentary format and it is designed to "challenge students in critical thinking, communication skills, confidence and cultural awareness but also, in grammar, vocabulary and fluency" (O'Mahoney, 2015: 144). Even though it is primarily intended to be used in higher education institutions, its appeal to foreign language instructors is undeniable, as it is one of the few traditional debating formats that has taken the needs of EFL speakers into account.

Morse (2011) suggests the Karl Popper Debate format is highly compatible with EFL instruction, and points to its ability to promote teamwork as its main advantage. One of the differentiating features of this style is that it often deals with contentious issues that elicit tremendous interest but also heated debates. Thus it facilitates the development of critical and analytical thinking skills, and promotes tolerance for different viewpoints (International Debate Education Association, 2006). Debaters are split in two teams of three members and are supposed to be capable of taking either side of the resolution, so they must conduct thorough research before the debate takes place. Interestingly, this format further supports rhetorical exchange by allowing speakers to cross-examine their opponents. Only six out of ten turns consist of speeches. In the remaining four cross-examination turns, debaters are expected to reply to the opposing team's questions, but cannot give a speech or ask questions in return. This dialectical interaction seems especially appealing in the context of an EOI.

3.2. Contemporary Debate Formats

Some scholars have expressed certain reservations about class debates, as the dualistic nature of traditional debate formats may prove somewhat controversial. A number of strategies have been proposed to mitigate potentially negative outcomes and create a more inclusive learning environment. In a Four Corner Debate, students group up according to their level of agreement with an initial statement on a gradient that goes from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. Afterwards, they elaborate on the issue and outline the best arguments to defend their point of view. They are free to swap teams at any moment, should they change their opinion based on the ideas put forth. At the end, they have to summarise in writing the most solid arguments to defend their position (Kennedy, 2007).

Role-play Debates take a different approach by having students act out the part of people involved in a specific issue (Kennedy, 2007). The teacher may also alternate between various characters with differing opinions and let students ask the questions or detect any flaws in the arguments presented. These type of activities work well even when students are unfamiliar with common debating techniques. Similarly, in Problem-solving Debates, different tasks are assigned to several groups of students to create a more enjoyable and rewarding learning experience. Some are in charge of presenting the historical background of a given topic, others bring up the arguments for and against the issue at hand, a third set of students suggest a possible course of action and the last group summarise key ideas.

The other objection that is often brought up when discussing in-class debates has to do with student involvement (or lack thereof). Some educators claim that the confrontational aspect of debates may dissuade certain students from participating in the activity. Others see that as a benefit and assert it is one of the best ways to help students handle conflictive situations and argue their opinions while remaining cool-headed. Whatever the case may be, several debate formats and strategies have been proposed to address this issue (Kennedy, 2007). Some instructors require all students take part in the activity or even assign them specific roles in the discussion, while others ask them to prepare the topic beforehand and select a few of them at random.

The Fishbowl Debate format (Mott, 2015: 489) is named after the disposition of the seats in the classroom, as chairs are arranged in two concentric rings. The outer ring allows the class to observe the debaters sitting inside the 'fishbowl'. At least one seat in the inner circle is left empty to allow members of the audience to interact directly with the debaters. Before they can sit down, however, one of the original speakers must vacate their seat. As new students weave in and out of the debate, it is difficult for one debater or one position to dominate the discussion.

Think-Pair-Share Debates (Nasir, 2018) are one of the most inclusive formats as they play to the strengths of different types of students. Initially, they have to think about the topic individually and jot down their thoughts quickly. Afterwards, they pair up with another student to share their ideas, and draft a common position. Each pair will then side with another like-minded group to present their conclusions to the rest of class. This

exercise combines different language skills and balances the needs of introverted and extroverted students.

In the Three Card Strategy, each student is given three cards that grant them three turns to speak up and take part in the debate. After all their cards are spent, they cannot step in again until other students have used up theirs. These cards may be replaced by having students visually or verbally indicate how many times they have already participated whenever they wish to intervene.

Alternatively, written assignments can be given to those students in the audience who do not participate orally during the debate (Kennedy, 2007). Some instructors require them to summarise the most convincing arguments put forward and present their own viewpoints on the subject, while others prefer to have them compare antagonistic positions and identify areas of agreement and disagreement. Regardless, the idea of having to submit a paper might be unappealing enough to dissuade students from remaining silent.

Another popular strategy requires non-debating students to write multiple choice questions related to the content of the debate. These can potentially be used later on by the instructor when putting together an exam. Indeed, the final success of class debates may depend on whether or not they are relevant to the final mark. Alén et al. (2015) suggest that instructors may need to closely re-examine the curriculum to make sure that students see these activities as meaningful and attractive.

4. THE PROS AND CONS OF DEBATES IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

In the light of all this, one can easily surmise that debating must be an attractive activity within the EFL classroom. In fact, some scholars have posited the idea that it satisfies both short and long-term learning objectives and stimulates classroom participation (Kennedy, 2007; Morse, 2011; Alén et al., 2015). It is an active learning strategy that "involves complex thinking processes and improves the retention, assimilation, understanding, and appropriate application of course content" (Alén et al., 2015: 15). Since the tasks related to building a persuasive argument are not mechanical or benefit much from rote learning, they require students to think critically and analytically. Additionally, they foster creativity because both form (arrangement and aesthetics) and function (arguments and appeals) are important components of rhetorical exchange. This is very much in line with Vigotsky's defence of communication and mediation as a means of promoting the higher-order cognitive functions defined by Bloom's Taxonomy (Kennedy, 2007). The line that separates low order skills (such as comprehension and application) from high order ones (analysis, synthesis and evaluation) can be difficult to overcome using traditional instructional techniques. Given the increasingly rapid pace of scientific and technological progress, it is important for language instructors to accord a more prominent place to those learning skills that focus on how to effectively use new information.

At its heart, the process of constructing a case based on solid arguments and defending it before one's peers shares many similarities with other problem-based

learning strategies. Alén et al. (2015: 16) argue that debating should be considered a method for "consensual problem solving", as it revolves primarily around communicating ideas. Thus, even though it has been traditionally restricted to competitive team environments, it stands to reason that it holds many advantages for language learners. Indeed, all evidence points to the fact that class debates are an outstanding way of improving oral expression, while also helping students master course content and develop research skills. Yet, even though oral fluency is a key competence, it is one of the most prominent skill gaps across all levels of education (Kennedy, 2007; O'Mahoney, 2015). There are many underlying reasons for poor student performance in oral expression, chief amongst which is speech anxiety. This is compounded by the fact that EFL learners are seldom in contact with the language and do not have the chance to practice. Interestingly, some scholars point to the benefits of using exposure therapy in reducing anxiety when speaking in public (Mun Yee & Abidin, 2014).

Morse (2011: 114) notes that "debate fosters the development of a variety of language-related skills, such as speaking, listening, reading, and writing, as well as interpreting and translating skills". The advantages of class debates as a tool for improving oral expression are self-evident, but this may not be the case with other language skills. He claims that listening is intimately linked to becoming a good public speaker, as one needs to identify opposing ideas and counterarguments to refute them. Similarly, reading is also part of debate instruction, since the preparatory stages of any debate usually involve some level of research. Students thus need to "practice skimming and scanning techniques, as well as reading aloud for their team" (Morse, 2011: 113). He also states that the abilities required to compose a good speech—learning how to structure and support the ideas clearly, whilst gaining and holding the attention of an audience—are largely applicable to writing. Additionally, he suggests that class debates help EFL learners improve their translation and interpretation skills because, as they research a topic and refine their arguments, they will find themselves using both English and their native language. This may prove useful given the recent changes to the structure of public language certification tests in Spain, which now include translation tasks as part of the examination process.

When debating, learners are encouraged to overcome their own prejudices and judge a position on its own merits, as they might find themselves supporting an opinion they do not personally agree with, or opposing one they actually favour. Moreover, they need the clarity of mind to identify and expose any logical fallacies, as well as justify their own position in a reasoned manner. Kennedy (2007) considers this one of the main advantages to this approach since, unlike simple class discussions, debates necessarily involve different viewpoints. In a way, this minimises the effects of instructor bias and prevents turning the classroom into an echo chamber. Furthermore, by being actively involved in their own learning process, students can better manage their own expectations and become more self-aware of their own strengths and weaknesses, thus also improving their ability to progress on their own outside the classroom. Compared to most teacher-centred methods, which generally see students as empty vessels that passively absorb information, this approach makes them accountable for their own learning. Interestingly, Kennedy (2007) notes that debate places much more responsibility on educators as well,

as they need to prepare more intensely for a rhetorical exchange than they do for a simple lecture.

Debates integrate different learning preferences and styles. Students who happen to be more naturally inclined to a hands-on learning approach will enjoy the practical nature of this activity. However, the audience can also learn from observation and potentially feel encouraged to interact with debaters as well as with the rest of the group. This points to another educational advantage. Stimulating student intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is seen as one of the greatest challenges in education, and in-class debates may be an effective way to reach that goal (Morse, 2011). Becoming a proficient debater can give students a confidence boost, and increase their motivation and self-esteem. Likewise, awards and prizes—whether tangible or symbolic—often play an instrumental role in class debates, since they reinforce positive learning attitudes.

As mentioned earlier, not all experts in the field of education consider debates a suitable learning approach, and a few have raised concerns as to their possible side effects (Kennedy, 2007). For instance, some scholars have pointed out that class debates can occasionally devolve into a clash between two disparate viewpoints. When positions become entrenched or polarised, they can reinforce already existing beliefs and prejudices, and compromise, as a result, the entire purpose of the activity. Another common objection is that some students may have trouble adjusting to this strategy, especially if they have never been exposed to similar learning environments. Open disagreement may elicit negative thoughts and, in some cases, even lead to frustration and hostility. Others might hesitate to get involved so as not to hurt their classmates' feelings and avoid confrontation.

5. TEACHING AND LEARNING PROPOSAL: "LIGHTS, CAMERA… EQUAL PAY!"

5.1. Legal Framework

Publicly funded foreign language learning institutions such as the EOIs in Spain are undergoing drastic changes following the enactment of the Organic Law 8/2013 (9 December 2013), on the improvement of educational quality, more commonly known by its Spanish acronym, LOMCE. Even though it has taken years for it to be adopted countrywide, its effects are quite substantial, as it redefines the curriculum, adds a new language skill, and improves upon existing language certification tests. This law is complemented by other national and regional pieces of legislation. The Royal Decree 1041/2017 (22 December 2017) provides an in-depth description of the objectives, competences, contents and assessment criteria which together make up the new curriculum. Most notably, it restructures course levels, and renders the Royal Decree 1629/2006 obsolete. Although—much like its predecessor—it is based on the guidelines drawn up by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), there are substantial differences between them. As a result, all EOIs have been immersed in a process that will ultimately overhaul language programmes and test models alike.

Since this Royal Decree was enacted once the new school term had already begun, there was no time for it to be transposed into regional law. As a result, most EOIs could not amend their programmes or place students in the appropriate course levels in time, so it was first implemented in the following academic year. The uncertainty surrounding the new curriculum—which came into force one and a half months after the start of the classes—caused enrolment delays and complicated the administration of certification tests. The most significant development stems from Article 7.3 of the Royal Decree 1041/2017, which establishes that certification tests must observe some common basic principles that ensure their objectivity, reliability and transparency. In addition to the traditional productive and receptive language skills, this regulation describes a new skill called mediation. Broadly speaking, mediation involves reformulating and relaying a message to a third party using various strategies such as paraphrasing, note taking, or translation. Although this article elicited different interpretations, most EOIs expected this new skill would be added to the existing written and oral expression exams. However, the Royal Decree 1/2019 (11 January 2019) threw a wrench into these plans a mere few weeks before the mid-year exams in February.

Under the new rules, a separate mediation test is to be added to an already intense exam schedule. These changes initially caused great concern amongst teachers and students alike, as it was virtually impossible for them to prepare in time. They increase the workload for an overburdened teaching staff. More importantly, the new standards are far stricter because, in order to pass, students need to achieve a minimum score of 50% in each of the five tests and, at least, 65% overall. To address these issues, a committee meeting between the state and regional education authorities was held in January. They decided to give an extension to those autonomous communities that needed some additional time to implement these reforms. Some chose to exercise this prerogative. In Galicia, for instance, all EOIs operate under the rules laid out by the Notice 8/2019. For the time being, pending further legislation, all mediation exercises in this region are administered along with the written and oral expression exams, yet scored separately.

5.2. Context

All academic centres in the EOI network are located in major urban areas and have several branches that serve neighbouring towns. English is by far the most popular choice, so English language departments have the largest amount of instructors and are often divided into smaller sub-sections. The demographics are very diverse but, generally speaking, most students are adults who want to improve their language skills to enhance their career prospects and, therefore, are particularly interested in passing the certification exams. Nevertheless, there is a significant number who see language learning as merely a hobby. These widely different interests and disparities in extrinsic and intrinsic motivation can impinge on class attendance, student retention and general learning outcomes. Furthermore, several other factors, such as disparate levels of education, ITC literacy, age, socio-economic status or previous contact with the language, may come into play when designing specific teaching and learning strategies.

The following proposal has been designed to suit the needs of Spanish EOIs and corresponds to a C1.2 English syllabus. Throughout the course, different debate activities of increasing difficulty would be conducted in the classroom. The teaching unit presented below would take place sometime in the first semester, as part of an introductory stage to train students in various techniques needed in a formal rhetorical exchange. At the end of this stage, they should be sufficiently acquainted with the basics to move on to more traditional formats. The debate propositions—i.e. topics—would draw inspiration from current issues in the Anglosphere, as in the table below.

Table 1

Teaching and Learning Proposal

Description
When Patricia Arquette won an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress in 2015, she devoted her acceptance speech to an issue that had been flying under the radar: the massive pay gap between men and women in the filming industry. Her words were echoed by many of her colleagues. Soon, women from all walks of life came together to denounce what many had experienced in their professional careers. This lesson takes a look at the film industry from many different angles to discuss various topics ranging from its cultural impact to working conditions for women in the entertainment business. It gives pointers and recommendations on how to write a review, provide constructive criticism, or simply disagree with someone in a civil manner. To that end, students must learn several techniques and resources commonly used by professional critics and journalists through text analysis and focused grammar practice. To assess this lesson, the class will put themselves in the shoes of modern-day actresses in a Role play debate and present a compelling argument in favour of equal pay.
Specific Objectives
Listening 1. Understand with relative ease presentations and interviews about cinema and television, and working conditions—including the finer details—even when the information is not clearly structured. 2. Understand conversations and discussions of certain length, on abstract, complex or unfamiliar topics related to cinema and television, and working conditions and grasp the intention of what is said. 3. Understand, without too much effort, a wide range of radio and TV programmes, plays or shows and films even when colloquial expressions or idiomatic phrases are used. Identify details and implicit information.

Speaking

1. Participate in an interview, or in formal or informal discussions, with one or several speakers, on complex or specific topics related to cinema and television, and working conditions, adopting adequate strategies to maintain the flow of the conversation.

2. Debate, with one or several speakers, about complex or specific topics related to cinema and television, and working conditions, presenting convincing arguments and rebuttals.

Reading

1. Understand articles, notes and messages dealing with complex issues related to cinema and television, and working conditions, and identify implied information.

2. Understand the ideas and positions expressed in editorials, reviews and critiques, of certain length, regardless of the format.

Writing

1. Write reviews, reports or complex articles that present an argument or a critical assessment on literary, cinematographic, or artistic works.

2. Write clear and well-structured reports, memos, articles and essays on complex topics related to cinema and television, and working conditions, highlighting the main ideas, providing new sub-topics, and an appropriate conclusion.

Mediation

1. Identify the meaning of complex oral or written texts, change without much difficulty the format, the content and/or the register according to the needs or interests of the recipient, and clarify any confusion or misunderstanding.

2. Mediate between speakers of the target language or different languages, by translating or interpreting a wide range of texts on subjects related to cinema and television, and working conditions.

Unit Contents and Competences	**Activities**
Cultural and Sociolinguistic Aspects	
1. Culture, art, and entertainment in English-speaking countries. 2. Appropriate rules of politeness to express disagreement or make a criticism.	1. Reflect on the cultural and artistic values of English-speaking countries, and their influence on the English language. 2. Express disagreement or make a criticism in a tactful manner according to the rules of politeness

	commonly observed in English-speaking countries.
Language Strategies	
1. Previous knowledge. 2. Self-assessment.	1. Use previous knowledge to assimilate new information. 2. Self-assess own progress through reviews and guided practice.
Communication Functions	
1. Assertive functions: expressing facts, opinions, beliefs and formulating hypotheses; expressing agreement and disagreement; expressing doubt and scepticism. 2. Phatic functions: establishing or discontinuing communication; accepting or declining an invitation; expressing sorrow or regret; paying compliments; asking for forgiveness. 3. Emotive functions: expressing feelings, such as admiration, happiness, appreciation, sympathy, (dis)trust, (dis)approval, disappointment, (dis)interest, resignation, fear, etc.	1. Make criticisms and offer constructive feedback to another person. 2. Express opinions about films or TV programmes. 3. Understand and extract information from critiques and reviews.
Types of texts	
1. Formal debates and discussions on complex or specific topics. 2. Opinion pieces or essays on issues or topics of general interest. 3. Interviews.	1. Discuss and debate about the film industry, wage gap between actors and actresses, and general working conditions for women. 2. Write reviews, critiques and opinion pieces about a film, a TV programme or another work of art. 3. Ask and answer questions in the context of an interview.
Syntax	
1. Grammar resources to make criticisms or suggestions.	1. Use conditional forms to soften criticisms and suggestions. 2. Use the passive voice to increase the perception of objectivity and to

	distance oneself from the topic of conversation. 3. Use modal verbs to express criticisms.
Vocabulary	
1. Culture and art: music and dance, architecture, painting and sculpture, art styles and trends, literature, photography, cinema and theatre, crafts. 2. Work and professional activities: types of work and tasks, new forms of employment, conditions and employment contracts, trade union associations, occupational safety and risks.	1. Learn and use vocabulary related to cinema and television. 2. Learn and use vocabulary related to wages and working conditions.
Phonetics and Orthography	
1. Pronunciation of diphthongs /aɪ/, /eɪ/, /əʊ/, /aʊ/, /eə/ y /ɪə/.	1. Identify, compare and reproduce pronunciation of /aɪ/, /eɪ/, /əʊ/, /aʊ/, /eə/ y /ɪə/.
Assessment Criteria	**Minimum Requirements**
Listening	
1. **Understand** what is said to draw appropriate conclusions. 2. **Identify**, based on the context and the register (informal, formal or neutral), the intention and meaning of a wide range of oral texts dealing with cinema, television, and working conditions.	1. He/she is able to understand what is said to draw fairly appropriate conclusions. 2. He/she is able to identify, based on the context and the register, the intention and meaning of a good number of oral texts dealing with cinema, television, and working conditions.
Speaking	
1. **Express** what they want to say, overcoming any difficulties they may have, in a coherent and cohesive manner. 2. **Develop** well-thought arguments in a systematic structured manner, presenting them logically, highlighting key ideas, detailing specific aspects and providing an adequate conclusion.	1. He/she is able to express himself/herself, without much difficulty, in a coherent and cohesive manner. 2. He/she is able to develop detailed arguments in a fairly systematic well-structured manner. 3. He/she is able to hold a conversation on topics related to

3. **Initiate, hold** and **finish** a conversation related to cinema, television, and working conditions with ease, allowing others to speak and participate. 4. **Master** a wide lexical repertoire related to cinema, television, and working conditions. 5. **Rebut** the arguments of others in a convincing and appropriate manner, stepping in a discussion fluently and spontaneously.	cinema, television, and working conditions and allows others to participate. 4. He/she is able to show a good command of the language as far as vocabulary is concerned, on topics related to cinema, television, and working conditions. 5. He/she is able to offer appropriate rebuttals and step in a discussion quite naturally.
Reading	
1. **Identify** the intention and meaning of the text, according to the context, or genre. 2. **Find** important details in long and complex critiques and reviews, even when information is not properly structured or explicitly stated. 3. **Identify** idioms and terms, and understand all their meanings, occasionally looking up certain words in a dictionary. 4. **Understand**, according to the context and genre of a text, the meaning of a wide range of syntactic structures, especially those pertaining to conditional forms, the passive voice and modal verbs.	1. He/she is able to identify, for the most part, the intention and meaning of the text, according to the context, or genre. 2. He/she is able to find most important details in critiques and reviews, even when information is not properly structured or explicitly stated. 3. He/she is able to identify most idioms and terms related to cinema, television, and working conditions, and understand their general meaning, occasionally looking up certain words in a dictionary. 4. He she is able to understand, for the most part, the meaning of a fairly large range of syntactic structures, especially those pertaining to conditional forms, the passive voice and modal verbs.
Writing	
1. **Write** a coherent and cohesive critique or review based on various sources. 2. **Present** ideas and points of view, highlighting key elements and	1. He/she is able to write a fairly coherent and cohesive critique or review based on various sources. 2. He/she is able to present ideas and points of view, highlighting several elements and drawing fairly

drawing meaningful comparisons in a clear well-structured manner. 3. **Use** a wide range of syntactic structures to express themselves with precision and propriety, especially those pertaining to conditional forms, the passive voice and modal verbs. 4. **Have a good command** of the rules and orthography of the language, to produce written texts that are well-structured, and punctuated, with few or no typos.	relevant comparisons in a clear structured manner. 3. He/she is able to use a fairly wide range of syntactic structures to express himself/herself with precision and propriety, especially those pertaining to conditional forms, the passive voice and modal verbs. 4. He/she has a good command of the rules and orthography of the language, and makes few typos.
Mediation	
1. **Adapt** texts according to the situation, recipient and communication channel, without altering the information or the original meaning. 2. **Convey** orally or in writing the most relevant points of the source texts provided to them, as well as all relevant details, based on the interests and needs of the recipient. 3. **Demonstrate** knowledge of English-speaking cultures.	1. He/she is able to adapt texts according to the situation, recipient and communication channel, with few or no significant alterations. 2. He/she is able to convey orally or in writing the most relevant points of the source texts provided to them, as well as most relevant details, based on the interests and needs of the recipient. 3. He /she is able to demonstrate a fair amount of knowledge of the cultures in which English is spoken.

DEBATE ASSESSMENT

Assessment can be said to be one of the most contentious topics within the field of education, as it is largely responsible for the quality of learning outcomes. For this reason, it is imperative to reconcile the need to establish objective and comprehensive assessment criteria with teaching methods that promote meaningful learning and spark interest in course content. In this regard, interactive activities that reflect real life situations may be helpful in stimulating student involvement and participation in the classroom, as well as achieving a deeper level of understanding. Debates have garnered widespread support as an instructional strategy to actively engage students and help them develop strong communication and critical thinking skills (Doody & Condon, 2012).

Various strategies have been proposed for assessing debates (Kennedy, 2007). Sometimes participation alone is considered enough to get full credit, while some instructors do away with grades altogether. However, rubrics are by far the most

commonly used assessment tool to gauge student performance. Generally speaking, they tend to contemplate such categories as the quality of the research, the coherence and cohesiveness of the presentation, speech delivery and body language, or the presence of insightful arguments and rebuttals. Written notes or brief summaries may account for part of the final mark to help those students who are unaccustomed to oral presentations or experience stage fright when performing in front of an audience.

Table 2

Debate assessment rubric (Doody & Condon, 2012)

	Excellent	Proficient	Average	Poor
Preparation	Broad scope of information. Deep critical analysis of the topic. Wide range of sources. Effective development of arguments.	Satisfactory preparation of information and analysis of the topic. Issues relating to topic are well covered.	Preparation for basic information but little evidence of analysis.	Failed to prepare only basic and essential information.
Organisation and Presentation	Logical flow in presentation. Organised in coherent manner. Powerful and persuasive presentation.	Generally clear flow of arguments. Presentation is persuasive but minor problem.	Able to give the basic framework of the presented ideas. Lacked persuasive power.	Lack of logical flow. Lack of focus. Information not appropriately digested.
Use of Arguments	Plenty of very strong and persuasive arguments.	Many fairly strong arguments, but some not persuasive.	Arguments are generally on the right track but not convincing enough.	Arguments are not significant or persuasive to the topic.
Rebuttal	Excellent defence and attack against opposite side. Able to identify weaknesses.	Satisfactory defence and attack. Attempted to find out weaknesses.	Failure to defend some issues. Some successful attacks against opposite side.	Failure to defend issues. Unable to attack opposite side in most issues.

As most debates involve a fair amount of teamwork, careful consideration must be given to decide which percentage of the final mark corresponds to each team member and which to the group as a whole. Some instructors try to strike a fair balance by designing two separate rubrics. Individual marks usually depend on effective delivery and stage presence, whilst the team's overall score has more to do with organisation and argumentation. Similarly, one needs to decide whether the assessment will be carried out solely by the instructor or by the students as well. Research indicates that the scores given by students to their peers closely mirror the teacher's evaluation and that having learners play a role in their own assessment fosters active involvement in the classroom (Kennedy, 2007). Whatever the case may be, once a decision has been made, it is important for students to know how they will be assessed.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Despite recent efforts towards the standardisation of course content, learning strategies and assessment criteria, the issue most commonly found across all levels in Spanish EOIs is that students have widely disparate language competences. Instructors need to integrate into the same class learners with unevenly developed productive and receptive language skills and highly advanced learners. These two distinct groups of students are diametrically opposed to each other and require different yet complimentary approaches. Striking the right balance can prove difficult at times. Debates—which in many ways mimic the structure of the oral expression and mediation certification tests administered by EOIs in Spain—provide infinite possibilities to explore different communicative situations that involve the whole classroom. Similarly, they can be scaled up or down depending on the class size and the number of students, and do not require any special resources. Flipping through the pages of most English textbooks, it becomes clear that most learning materials are designed with Millenials and Gen Z-ers in mind, which makes it hard to keep senior students engaged and motivated. However, using debates, lessons can easily be adapted to the students' interests and general language competence. Lastly, debates can also address a glaring yet often overlooked aspect in most language syllabi: marrying language instruction with cultural awareness of foreign societies.

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