

An apple a day keeps the doctor away

Raziel E. Martínez Cisneros and María de los A. Reyes Figueroa develop debating skills.



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Group discussions range from casual chats among family and friends to highly structured debates, providing a variety of naturally occurring discussion types that can be recreated in the classroom. These may include making decisions, giving and/or sharing opinions, creating something, or solving a problem (Lightfoot 2007). English for general/cultural purposes (EGP) teaching in Cuban medical schools is supported by the textbook series *Vision*, written by a group of Cuban English teachers. In order to link the course to the students' medical studies, the topic for debate must be carefully selected. We describe below our experience with our 3rd year students of developing a debate at the end of a unit on the health benefits of fruit.

Lead-in

According to the task-based learning model, the pre-task is where the teacher

introduces and defines the topic, and the learners engage in activities to help them recall words and phrases that will be useful during the performance of the main task or learn new words and phrases essential to the task (Bowen 1996).

First, images of different kinds of fruit were shown—this can be done with pictures or a slideshow—and the students were asked to identify them. In our case, the selection included several tropical fruits, such as mangos, guavas and papayas, as well as oranges and apples. The pronunciation and spelling of the words were emphasised, taking into account their frequency of usage in everyday language. A student was chosen to write the words on the board.

The language input also included useful task-related vocabulary such as a list of relevant minerals and vitamins, phrases such as 'fruits in season', 'ripe fruit', 'harvest time' and a review of functional language for giving reasons and opinions, agreeing and disagreeing and the like.

Preparation

The class was split into four teams of four or five students. Two of the teams had to provide arguments in favour of the statement: 'The consumption of fruit is essential to staying healthy'. The remaining two teams had to argue against it. As it is harder to find opposing arguments, a greater number of stronger learners were placed in these teams.

The teams were given 30 minutes to reflect on the topic and look for reasons to support their position while we acted as facilitators and progress and time monitors. They were encouraged to write down all the ideas that came to their minds as they discussed their presentation. Finally, they were

required to outline their report and agree upon the order of each member's presentation.

Debate

All the students were given the opportunity to share their opinions and, in return, they were required to listen to their peers respectfully. We acted as moderators. In a comfortable atmosphere the students came up with very interesting ideas and were even able to provide reasonable arguments against—from the risks of catching a disease by consuming unwashed fruit or the threat posed by substances used to accelerate the ripening process to the difficulties in buying fruits in the market due to soaring prices or scarce supply. Of course, the benefits of eating fruit surpass any possible harm, although in Cuba it is not usually apples but a balance of different fruits that will keep the doctor away.

Post-task

Feedback focused on the more important mistakes, not only in terms of accuracy but also discourse and communicative strategies. Self-assessment and peer-assessment were elicited and we also gave our opinions on the students' performance and on the lesson as a whole. Importantly, the assessment of each team depended on the performance of each member. As a follow-up, students were asked to research the specific minerals and vitamins found in each fruit mentioned and to write a report summarising their findings for the following week.

Advantages

Preparing, debating and reflecting on the topic, as well as on their performance, made the lesson more student-centred and more aligned with modern EFL methodologies. The task proved useful for everyone, with the more advanced students developing a sense of responsibility by helping their teammates and shy students showing more confidence as they all actively participated and cooperated with each other. Students were able to practise the new lexis and previously studied grammatical structures in a natural, meaningful way.

These group discussions have proved effective in helping our students to develop their English language skills while producing their own language on topics that appeal to them. The extended practice increases the students' communicative competence and the feedback helps them to identify areas for improvement. Subject-focused activities like the one described here build a bridge to further studies and similar debates can be adapted for other students who need to improve their language skills for future social and professional communication.

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References are available from the authors on request