

CHAPTER 5

Debate for Critical Thinking and Communication

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INTRODUCTION

“I was a very poor student and also had a discipline problem until the age of eleven. I was invited to be in a Debate. It changed my life” (Alfred C. Snider, in Cattani, 2011, p. 91).

The quotation is by Alfred Snider, considered the “father” of debate and it shows the potential of this strategy which can change one’s life. In fact, discovering the power of communication, public speaking and oracy can make the difference in daily life and can change the way one interacts and behaves in any social context.

Debating is defined as an oral exchange which usually takes place between two teams, the proposition team, and the opposition team, defending their position in favour or against a motion or claim, launched by the teacher.

Therefore, the claim or motion is a sentence that can be debated both for and against, representing the starting point of the discussion. Supporting one’s position with solid arguments referring to authoritative sources is one of the pillars of debate.

Debating leads students to reason, to develop critical thinking skills, to anchor their own considerations to data or sources that justify them, to listen to their companions in an attentive and active way, so that they can build their own arguments. In fact, active listening is crucial, as the students will build their own intervention starting from the rebuttal of the opponent’s speech. A debate can help develop active citizenship and acquire the concept of democracy; moreover, it will help students develop elasticity and mental plasticity, allowing them to identify with others’ ideas and then return to their own with greater critical awareness and with the inevitable enrichment that follows the exchange of ideas, opinions, and points of view.

Debating on political, economic, ethical issues or even on curricular disciplinary topics has a strong formative and cultural power, regardless of the specific subject matter.

Engaging in debates can help develop the students' critical skills, from the LOTS or Lower Order Thinking Skills, a less elaborate set of thinking skills, to the HOTS or Higher Order Thinking Skills, which are more complex and challenging, according to Bloom's taxonomy, facilitating both "slow" and "fast" thinking (both "system 1" and "system 2"), to quote Kahneman (2012).

THE VALUES OF DEBATING

Alfred Snider is the author of "The code of the debater", an important document, showing the pedagogical values of debating, which needs to be based on the respect of a wide range of values, highlighting the formative dimension of this strategy. In fact, persuasion and the power of argumentation using the appropriate style, register, tone of voice and non-verbal language should be chosen over coercion and verbal violence.

The code of the debater is as follows (Snider, 2008, p. 16):

I am a debater.

I attempt to be worthy of this title by striving to observe the code of the debater.

For myself

I will research my topic and know what I am talking about.

I will respect the subject matter of my debates.

I will choose persuasion over coercion and violence.

I will learn from victory and especially from defeat.

I will be a generous winner and a gracious loser.

I will remember and respect where I came from, even though I am now a citizen of the world.

I will apply my criticism of others to myself.

I will strive to see myself in others.

I will, in a debate, use the best arguments I can to support the side I am on.

I will, in life, use the best arguments I can to determine which side I am on.

For others

I will respect their rights to freedom of speech and expression, even though we may disagree.

I will respect my partners, opponents, judges, coaches, and tournament officials.

I will be honest about my arguments and evidence and those of others.

I will help those with less experience because I am both student and teacher.

I will be an advocate in life, siding with those in need and willing to speak truth to power.

According to Snider, these are the main features of debate:

- Debating is fun
- Debating is a sport
- You control debating
- Debating creates the skills you need for success wherever your life may lead you
- Debating can give you the power to change your world and yourself
- Debating is for everyone.

EXPLANATION OF THE TOOL: FORMATIVE AND COMPETITIVE DEBATE

Debates can help us rediscover the power of words and of face-to-face verbal interaction, in this society which is increasingly pervaded by the use of digital tool and social network for interaction and communication. We live in the era of Computer-Mediated Communication, in which most of our ideas, intentions, thoughts and desires are conveyed through a multimedia and digital channel. Therefore, it is crucial to rediscover “the power of talk in the digital age”, as Sherry Turkle states in her beautiful best-seller “Reclaiming Conversation”: “face-to-face conversation is the most human and humanizing thing we do” (Turkle, 2016, p. 3). Debates can be a way to enhance the power of language and dialogue.

There is a wide range of debate formats in the literature, many of which are based on the intrinsic competitive value and aim at local, regional, and national competitions.

The Competitive Debate category can have different formats and the majority of them get inspiration from the Parliamentary Debate, stemming from the Anglo-Saxon Parliamentary Debate, which imitates parliamentary debates (“This House believes that...”).

The most common competitive format is the “World Schools Debate Championship”, also adopted in the Italian Debate Olympiad, which is based on strict rules and roles. Specifically, the roles provided are as follows:

- two teams consisting of 3 debaters each (proposition team and opposition team);
- a chairman / chairwoman who gives the floor to the speakers;
- a timekeeper, who keeps the time of each round, generally 8 minutes, except for the final reply which is 4 minutes;
- the jury, whose task is to assign a score to each debater based on an evaluation rubric; the sum of the scores will decree the winning team;
- a coach for each team, who helps the debaters in the construction of the strategy and in the choice of arguments to be used for or against a particular motion;

- the audience, who generally attends the debate without taking the floor.

An important phase of the debate is the so-called “research laboratory”, which consists of finding resources, data, facts and figures to be mentioned during the speech in order to strengthen and support it with evidence. The research usually takes place from a holistic perspective, before knowing which team the debaters are in. In this way they will be ready to defend both positions and overcome possible prejudices, stereotypes, or misconceptions. The use of technologies to find resources and information is crucial: information literacy and digital literacy play an important role in order to be able to distinguish authentic and valuable resources from fake news.

In the so-called “Formative Debate”, in addition to the roles provided by the Competitive Debate (the two teams, whose number can be more than three, the timekeeper, the chairman / woman, the jury), it is usually recommended to assign other roles, in order to be as inclusive as possible. Each student can take the role he/she prefers, according to his/her own preferences and learning styles.

Riccardo Agostini (2018), coach of public speaking and debate in schools, suggests introducing some very interesting and useful roles, even in the training sessions of competitive debates:

- “the general evaluator”, who evaluates in a comprehensive way all the interactions and actions of the various actors of the debate, offering suggestions for improvement, highlighting weaknesses and criticalities;
- “the director of improvised speeches”, who supports the debaters in the organization of the impromptu or improvised speech, which is a particular type of debate also adopted in the National Debate Olympiad;
- “the person in charge of grammar”, who notes down possible critical points from a linguistic point of view (possible mistakes in the performance), in order to discuss them in a dedicated session and reflect together on possible alternatives or improvements;
- “the person in charge of fluency”, who is responsible for highlighting specific features which can impact fluency (for example, the use of “fillers”, such as “um,” “that is,” “then,” etc.), with the aim of helping improve the naturalness and fluency of the speech.

A very common role in the “Formative Debate” is the documenter: one or more students will be given the task of documenting the different steps of the debate using a wide range of media: notes, videos, audio, etc. This material will be fundamental during the final debriefing, aimed at activating students’ reflection and meta-cognition, also referring to the collected documentation. It is a guided discussion that will lead to identify strengths and weaknesses of the different debating rounds and promote continuous improvement. The choral discussion will also foster peer feedback, allowing students to learn from each other.

Formative debates are extremely flexible and can be used to revise and reinforce concepts and content or as an alternative to a test, to be graded by the teacher.

A formative debate can also lead to negotiation, discussion and to new possible solutions, compared to the two opposing positions at the start: by listening to the other's position, a debater can even change his/her original position (Cinganotto, 2021).

THE WSD FORMAT

Over the years, the World Schools Debate Championship (WSD) has grown in popularity and has become one of the most popular competitive debating formats in high schools and universities throughout the world. The vehicular language is usually the national language and/or English. Internationally, the most common is English, however, there are international tournaments organized in Spanish, Arabic, Russian.

Each debate has two teams, which compete by defending the position for or against a particular claim or motion. The first team can be defined as “Proposition”, “Affirmative”, or “Government”. The opposing team is generally referred to as the “Opposition.” Each team has three debaters, who usually have one 8-minute speaking turn and alternate starting with the first debater from the pro team. Each team's closing argument is typically half the length of that of the regular speeches. The length of the speeches can be modified according to the specific rules.

Each team must convince the jury that their argument is the strongest, so they must make solid logical points and present them in an interesting and persuasive style.

The debate opens with the first speaker from the pro team, whose arguments are entirely new. As the debate progresses, more and more time is spent refuting the positions of the previous speakers, and less and less time is spent addressing new issues: rebuttal becomes crucial. The closing argument will be a summary of the arguments made by the team throughout the debate.

The pro team is the first to speak, generally beginning with the phrase “This House believes that...” (THBT).

Then speakers from the “pro” team and the “con” team will alternate, according to the scheme and the times indicated in the diagram below. The judges (adjudicators) will score the individual debaters according to a predefined rubric and determine the winning team and the best debater.

During the main speeches, the opposing team can ask questions, which are called “Points of Information” (PoI): the speaker can accept or reject it. The PoI brings about a major change in the role of the debaters: they are required to actively participate at all times, from beginning to end, not only during their speech.

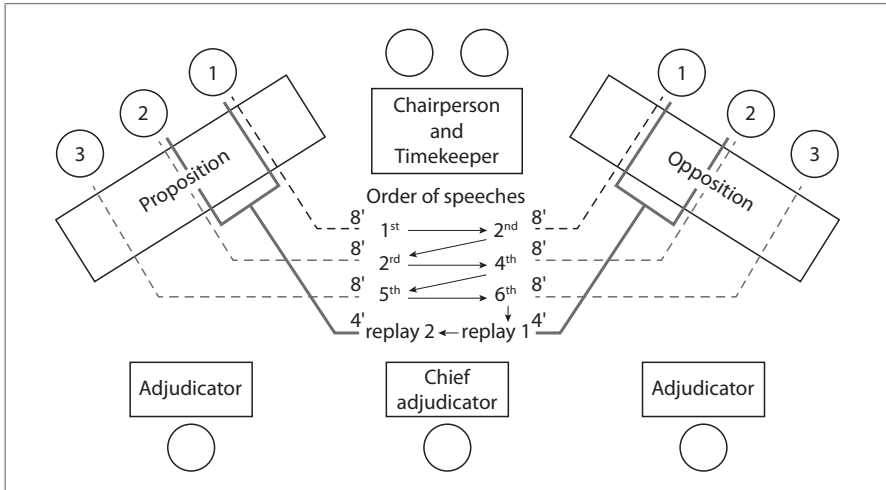


Figure 1 - The setting of the WSD

DEBATE IN ITALY

Debate¹ has been included among the Ideas of the Gallery of the “Educational Avant-Garde” movement, an Italian educational movement made up of different innovative ideas relating to methodologies, organization and learning environments. The movement was founded in 2014 by INDIRE (the Italian Institute for Documentation, Innovation, Educational Research), in collaboration with an ever-expanding network of schools, with the aim of creating a community of teachers and school leaders eager to experiment, disseminate and implement innovation from a holistic point of view: more than 1300 schools belong to the network nowadays.

Debate has the characteristic of being very flexible and dynamic, able to motivate and entertain students, from primary school to university, with the appropriate adaptations in terms of format, rules, timing, etc.

Unlike the Anglo-Saxon and American educational system, where debates are considered as a separate subject, in Italian schools debates are mainly adopted as cross-curricular methodology, which can be used across all subjects in the curriculum or in transversal projects. They can be used for revising and reinforcing content and knowledge, or as an alternative to testing, with evaluation expressed through grades or through descriptive qualitative judgments.

Debates can be adopted by a single teacher, by two or three teachers in collaboration, by a department or by the entire school.

National Debate Olympiad has been promoted in Italy by the Ministry of Education since 2017, with the first tournament in English in 2022 (Cinganotto et al. 2021).

DEBATE FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING AND CLIL

“Language specialists increasingly recognize the value of debate as a means of facilitating advanced-level foreign language uptake and overall discourse development” (Davidson, 2014, p.8).

Debate can represent a powerful tool for language learning and teaching, enhancing fluency and WTC (Willingness to communicate), as it can be considered an example of meaningful task to accomplish in order to persuade the jury or the audience.

According to the oracy framework by Voice21² in Fig. 2, debate has an impact on four dimensions:

- Physical dimension (body language and non-verbal communication)
- Linguistic dimension (vocabulary, style, register)
- Cognitive dimension (reasoning and thinking skills)
- Social and emotional dimension (cooperation, active listening, confidence).

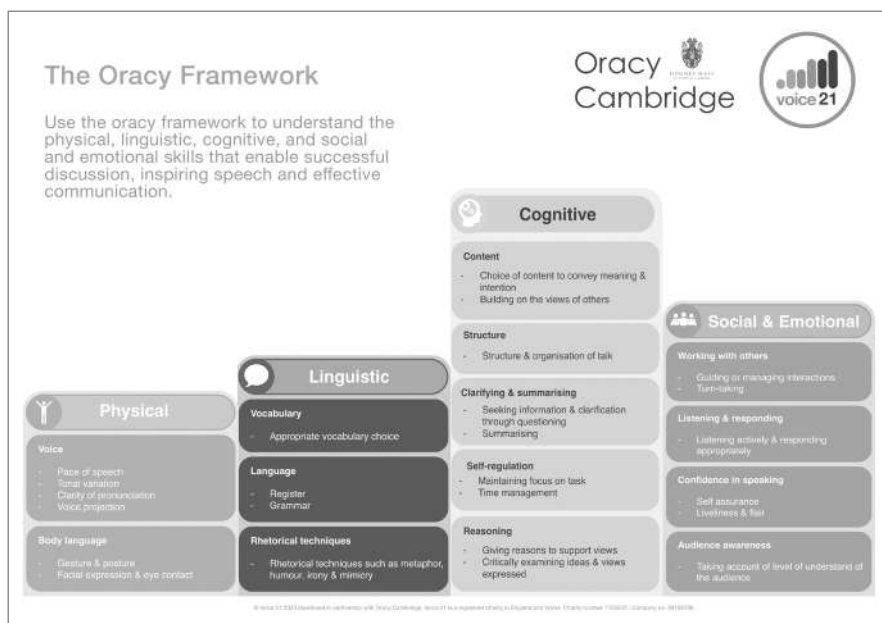


Figure 2 - Oracy framework

According to Rybold (2006), debating in a foreign language can help foster the linguistic skills in an integrated way, enhancing the four modes of communication defined by the Companion Volume of the Common European Framework for reference of languages (2020): production, reception, interaction, mediation.

In particular, Rybold suggests the impact of debate as follows:

- *Ice-breaking*: in the ice-breaking phase of the lesson, debating on controversial topics may help overcome anxiety and foster Willingness to communicate;
- *Listening*: active listening is crucial to understand the speech of the opposing team in order to plan the rebuttal or refutation;
- *Speaking*: regular practice of debate will improve fluency, pronunciation and vocabulary, enhancing the students' speaking skills;
- *Reading*: students have to prepare themselves for taking part in debates by searching for information, resources, facts and figures: reading literacy is therefore crucial to understand and apply knowledge and content to the debate strategy;
- *Writing*: debaters can develop writing skills as students will take notes, jot down a draft of their speech, use diagrams and graphs to summarize content etc. A useful exercise which is often assigned to foster writing debating skills is a position paper: like a debate, a position paper argues one side of an issue, addressing multiple aspects and presenting them in a way that is easy for the audience to understand and to perceive as valid, supported with persuasive evidence.

Written debates can also be practiced with the help of specific webtools such as *Kialo*, *Tricider* or *Parlay*, which have become popular during remote teaching and learning in Covid-19 times.

Debating will have a strong impact on literacy and on academic language (CALP, Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency), using the proper register, style, and vocabulary to express specific cognitive discourse functions (Dalton-Puffer 2013, 2016) linked to the topic of the debate. In fact, a debate can be integrated into a lesson plan aiming at developing a wide range of communicative functions such as reaching agreement in a team, supporting a point of view with evidence, expressing agreement, or disagreeing (Cinganotto, 2019).

Debates can also represent an effective way to implement CLIL methodology (Content and Language Integrated Learning) (Cinganotto, 2016; Cinganotto, 2021), as a claim about a curricular subject is explored, investigated, and discussed in a foreign language, co-constructing knowledge within the team of debaters. In fact, CLIL entails active learning of subject content in a foreign language through a wide range of student-centered teaching strategies and techniques and debate can be mentioned as an example of them. A CLIL debate is often organized by the so-called "CLIL team", made up by the sub-

ject teacher and the foreign language teacher, working together for the success of the initiative.

MUN

The “Model United Nations” (MUN³) is the international program that consists of the simulation of the UN parliamentary sessions, where the role of ambassadors is played by students. Each participant represents a different country and must faithfully respect its values and interests to be expressed in a position paper. The objective is to negotiate and obtain the approval of documents (“Resolutions”) that favor the assigned country, while also considering the interests of the community.

It is a “cooperative competition” in which participants will learn about a country and focus on the major issues of international politics.

The potential of MUN is enormous:

- it is a very innovative teaching model, allowing students to acquire knowledge on issues of global interest in a foreign language, and guiding toward an effective and meaningful use of the language;
- it helps to improve the students’ English language skills, as English is the official working language of the UN;
- it helps develop leadership and team working skills, thanks to the acquisition of negotiation techniques and strategies;
- it fosters the development of an overall vision of global phenomena that can guide future choices.

The following suggestions are usually given to delegates in training sessions:

- clearly state whether you are for or against a Resolution
- explain your reasons in one sentence or word
- select three operative clauses that support an opinion.

The simulations usually last three days, and on the last day the Resolutions adopted by the different committees will be voted on in a plenary session in the presence of all participants. During this plenary, the best delegates will be awarded with an honourable mention.

THE TED-ED FORMAT

Ted⁴ (an acronym for Technology, Entertainment, Design) is a non-profit organization whose goal is to spread ideas of value (worth spreading), different points of view that can change people's lives. The TED program was founded in 1984 in California, with the format of a four-day conference.

Over the years, the initiative has expanded globally and is now held annually in Vancouver as a multidisciplinary conference, bringing together important speakers to share innovative ideas and projects, and building a global community of innovators.

The use of Ted Talks in education has been extensively experimented in various formal and non-formal contexts, from secondary to tertiary education. In particular, some studies (Romanelli et al., 2014) have highlighted the potential of this format in the academic field, as an excellent alternative to the traditional "lecture", which often takes on the characteristics of a transmissive and dispensational lecture, without effective student participation. The Ted Talk format could be used for reflection and critical analysis of videos already available on the repository. Ted-talks can also be recorded by the students themselves and uploaded on the school You-tube channel, representing effective examples of public speaking.

Ted-Ed offers not only authentic content, drawing-on-videos tools on the platform, but it is also possible to build a training path full of ideas and insights relating to the video itself, according to the following steps:

- *Watch*: the video of the Ted Talk can be manipulated and edited, inserting a title and additional texts;
- *Think*: the student is asked, after watching the lesson, to answer multiple-choice or open-ended questions; the answers are saved and can be monitored by the teacher;
- *Dig Deeper*: additional resources that the teacher can relate to the video to further explore the specific topic;
- *Discuss*: for each video, the teacher can open several discussions, eliciting reflections, opinions, ideas from students on the topic of the lesson.

Assessment

In a formative debate, assessment can be conceived as an alternative to an oral test to be graded by one or more teacher. This is similar to the CLIL debate, where both the subject teacher and the language teacher can be involved in the assessment process, taking into account both the content and the language, based on specifically designed rubrics, generally including the following criteria:

4. <https://www.ted.com/>

- Content: the arguments and examples used;
- Style: the language, the voice, the style and the register;
- Strategy: the level of engagement, the response to other people's arguments and structure, the coherence of the team.

The following linguistic components can also be taken into account in a rubric:

- Vocabulary
- Grammar
- Prosodic aspects (pronunciation, stress, intonation)
- Coherence of the speech and references to other arguments.

Debates for foreign languages can be assessed and self-assessed as suggested by a specific scale provided in the Companion Volume of the Common European Framework, reported below:

	Sustained monologue: putting a case (e.g. in a debate)
C2	No descriptors available; see C1
C1	Can argue a case on a complex issue, formulating points precisely and employing emphasis effectively. Can develop an argument systematically in well-structured language, taking into account the interlocutor's perspective, highlighting significant points with supporting examples and concluding appropriately.
B2	Can develop an argument systematically with appropriate highlighting of significant points, and relevant supporting detail.
	Can develop a clear argument, expanding and supporting their points of view at some length with subsidiary points and relevant examples. Can construct a chain of reasoned argument.
	Can explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
B1	Can develop an argument well enough to be followed without difficulty most of the time. Can give simple reasons to justify a viewpoint on a familiar topic.
	Can express opinions on subjects relating to everyday life, using simple expressions. Can briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions, plans and actions.
	Can explain whether or not they approve of what someone has done and give reasons to justify this opinion.
A2	Can explain what they like or dislike about something, why they prefer one thing to another, making simple, direct comparisons.
	Can present their opinion in simple terms, provided interlocutors are patient.
A1	No descriptors available
Pre-A1	No descriptors available

Figure 3 - Debate in the CEFR CV

The example of rubric reported below can be used to assess classroom discussion and formative debate.

Classroom Debate Rubric						
Criteria	5 points	4 points	3 points	2 points	1 point	Total Points
Respect for Other Team	All statements, body language, and responses were respectful and were inappropriate language	Statements and responses were respectful and used appropriate language, but once or twice body language was not	Most statements and responses were respectful and in appropriate language, but there was one sarcastic remark	Statements, responses and/or body language were borderline appropriate. Some sarcastic remarks	Statements, responses and/or body language were consistently not respectful	
Information	All information presented in this debate was clear, accurate and thorough	Most information presented in this debate was clear, accurate and thorough	Most information presented in the debate was clear and accurate, but was not usually thorough	Some information was accurate, but there were some minor inaccuracies	Information had some major inaccuracies OR was usually not clear	
Rebuttal	All counter-arguments were accurate, relevant and strong	Most counter-arguments were accurate, relevant, and strong	Most counter-arguments were accurate and relevant, but several were weak	Some counter-arguments were weak and irrelevant	Counter-arguments were not accurate and/or relevant	
Use of Facts/Statistics	Every major point was well supported with several relevant facts, statistics and/or examples	Every major point was adequately supported with relevant facts, statistics and/or examples	Every major point was supported with facts, statistics and/or examples, but the relevance of some was questionable	Some points were supported well, others were not	All points were not supported	
Organization	All arguments were clearly tied to an idea (premise) and organized in a tight, logical fashion	Most arguments were clearly tied to an idea (premise) and organized in a tight, logical fashion	Most arguments were clearly tied to an idea (premise) and organized in a tight, logical fashion	Most arguments were clearly tied to an idea (premise) and organized in a tight, logical fashion	Most arguments were clearly tied to an idea (premise) and organized in a tight, logical fashion	
Understanding of Topic	The team clearly understood the topic in depth and presented their information forcefully and convincingly	The team clearly understood the topic in depth and presented their information with ease	The team seemed to understand the main points of the topic and presented those with ease	The team seemed to understand the main points of the topic, but didn't present with ease	The team did not show an adequate understanding of the topic	
Total Points:						
Comments:						

Figure 4 - Example of classroom debate rubric⁵

In a competitive debate such as the Word School Debate, each substantive speaker can generally be awarded a maximum of 100 points: 40 points for con-

5. Source: https://web.stanford.edu/class/cs326/classroom_debate_rubric.pdf

tent, 40 for style and 20 for strategy. The reply speech is worth a maximum of 50 points, 20 for content, 20 for style and 10 for strategy. However, the actual World Schools speaker scale runs from 60 – 80 as depicted in the table below.

STANDARD	OVERALL (/100)	STYLE (/40)	CONTENT (/40)	STRATEGY (/20)
Exceptional	80	32	32	16
Excellent	76-79	31	31	15-16
Extremely Good	74-75	30	30	15
Very Good	71-73	29	29	14-15
Good	70	28	28	14
Satisfactory	67-69	27	27	13-14
Competent	65-66	26	26	13
Pass	61-64	25	25	12-13
Improvement Needed	60	24	24	12

Reply Speeches (out of 50)

STANDARD	OVERALL (/50)	STYLE (/20)	CONTENT (/20)	STRATEGY (/10)
Exceptional	40	16	16	8
Very Good to Excellent	36-39	15	15	7.5
Good	35	14	14	7
Pass to Satisfactory	31-34	13	13	6.5
Improvement Needed	30	12	12	6

Fig. 5 – Rubric in the WSD⁶

CONCLUSIONS

Debates are a very useful tool that can be implemented into the Indian curricula both at secondary and tertiary level, as it can foster the students' critical thinking skills and at the same time innovate teaching methodologies. Defending one's own position can develop the students' global and intercultural competences and can be useful in any subject, both humanities and STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, Math). Another added value is represented by the discussion of global issues or topics related to Agenda 2030 SDGs as transversal and cross-curricular motions.

6. Source: <http://www.esu.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Introduction-to-World-Schools-format-guide.pdf>

Teacher training on debates can be the first step to gradually adopting it with the students, starting with easy exercises and games on public speaking, to help the students overcome anxiety and shyness when speaking in front of an audience.

Taking part in international initiatives on public speaking such as MUN or TED can offer an added value, as it develops socialization, internationalization, oracy, and transversal competences.

Apart from official competitions, debates can turn out to be a very flexible and powerful pedagogical tool to be adjusted and tailored to any educational target and context and to be easily integrated into any syllabus and teaching plan.

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