

## Introducing TechDebate: An Experimentation with DebateAI

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The integration of debate into educational settings has long been recognized as a powerful tool for fostering critical thinking, language proficiency, life and teamwork skills. Rooted in the classical tradition of oratory, the debate approach has evolved over time and has gained prominence in Italy in recent decades, thanks to twinning projects, national institutional initiatives like the National Debate Olympiad, and the 'Avanguardie educative' Movement promoted by INDIRE (National Italian Institute for Documentation, Innovation, Educational Research). At its core, debate involves structured discourse, where students engage in spirited dialogue, presenting arguments from opposing perspectives on a given claim launched by the teacher. The process encompasses various phases, from initial argument construction to rebuttals, ultimately concluding with a reaffirmation of positions, referred to as "the final arringa", all under the scrutiny of a student jury. Debate in EFL/ESL (English as a Foreign/Second Language) serves as a dynamic platform for reinforcing lexical and morphosyntactic knowledge through the practice of speaking skills. Beyond linguistic development, it provides a cultural journey, allowing discussions on a wide array of topics and facilitating language acquisition for specific purposes. Moreover, the challenge of advocating for positions contrary to personal beliefs fosters a broader perspective and a more advanced worldview. Crucially, debate helps students develop a wide range of skills and competences, both key competences and soft skills. Debating holds significant potential in the development of public speaking skills, which are indispensable in academic and professional contexts.

In our quest to enhance the traditional debate approach, we conducted an experimentation with a class of Italian students enrolled in the bachelor's degree program in "Scienze e tecniche dell'educazione e dei servizi per l'infanzia" at the University IUL. Under the scientific supervision of Professor Letizia Cinganotto, the students were introduced to a novel dimension of debate by incorporating artificial intelligence using DebateAI. This tool, designed to facilitate and elevate the debate process, serves as a supportive framework for students, assisting them in structuring compelling arguments related to the given claim. DebateAI operates by providing points both in favor and against the initial claim, thereby aiding students in developing a comprehensive and well-rounded perspective on the topic. Its functionalities extend to argument structuring, facilitating the creation of logical and coherent cases, and fostering interaction through student-generated questions related to the topic. preparation phase of arguments using DebateAI, two minutes for each group to present their arguments, two minutes to counter the opponents' arguments, and three minutes to conclude their speech and persuade the jury. A jury consisting of two individuals evaluated the debate based on predefined criteria established prior to the debate.



Evaluation criteria encompassed the debate structure, effective use of time, response to opponent arguments, persuasive and convincing language, and adherence to debate rules. The selected claim for the debate was

"The impact of artificial intelligence in education." Students were divided into two groups, one in favor of implementing artificial intelligence in education and the other against its use in the classroom. The two groups internally debated and structured their arguments, subsequently engaging in the actual debate using the DebateAI tool to organize the argumentation process.



Upon completion of the activity, a brief questionnaire was administered, revealing that most participants had not previously experienced debating activities. They expressed a sense of engagement in the debate, finding it challenging and stimulating. What enthused the students about the DebateAI tool was its creativity in suggestions, the variety of responses, and the

natural flow of conversation. Students asserted that the tool was valuable for delving into the topic and expanding their vocabulary on the subject

In conclusion, the integration of debate, augmented by innovative tools like DebateAI, could be instrumental in fostering language proficiency and critical thinking skills in the EFL/ESL classroom, equipping students with the communicative competence essential for academic and professional success.



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