

## Bear Fights: An Ursine Introduction to Debating in the EFL Classroom

by CHARLIE TAYLOR

**LEVEL:** Low Intermediate and above

**TIME REQUIRED:** It depends on the size of the class. For a rough idea, you should figure on about 2.5 minutes per student, plus ten minutes for the introduction to the activity and ten minutes for a wrap-up session; however, the activity can easily be lengthened or shortened as required.

**GOALS:** To get students to engage one another in a playful argument; to familiarize them with debates; to equip them with the rhetorical skills and confidence they will need to participate in a more formal debate at a later time

**MATERIALS:** One small piece of scrap paper for every student; a bowl; a timing device (such as a cell phone)

**BACKGROUND:** Two students stand at the front of the class, hotly debating the question of which would win a fight: a bear that could read minds—or a bear that could teleport? The audience cheers and snaps their fingers in appreciation after each mic-dropping rebuttal. After the allotted time is up, the instructor stops the “fight,” and the audience votes on a winner. If you are wondering why students are debating bears with superpowers in an English as a foreign language (EFL) class, bear with me, and I will explain.

These Taiwanese high school students have had little or no experience with formal debating in any language, and soon they will be debating weightier topics, like capital punishment, same-sex marriage, and nuclear power. The language-acquisition benefits of formal debating have been well documented (el Majidi, de Graaff, and Janssen 2021; Lustigová 2011; O’Mahoney 2015); however, in a culture where social cohesion and not disagreeing directly with others in one’s group—especially in public—are valued traits, it can be challenging to get students accustomed to engaging each other in verbal duels, to refuting their opponent’s arguments, and to exposing someone else’s logical flaws. The intrinsic silliness of bears with superpowers allows students to become familiar with the fundamentals of debate without running the risk of anybody losing face.

### PREPARATION:

This activity requires little preparation. Assemble the above-mentioned materials: scraps of paper, a bowl, and a timing device. Draw a single-elimination bracket on the board, and randomly write all the students’ names on the first round of the bracket.

### PROCEDURE:

1. Start the class with a short discussion about superpowers. You can ask questions like

these: “Who is your favorite superhero? What superpowers do they have?” and “If you could have any superpower, what would you choose, and why?”

2. Hand out the slips of paper, one to each student, and have them write down a superpower. Encourage them to be creative: magnetic hands, rubberized legs, poison breath, hypnotic eyes, the power to animate and control garden gnomes, or the power to transform anybody into a hedgehog. The greater the variety, the better. If your students struggle with originality, you might make a list of taboo superpowers to make sure that you do not end up with a dozen bears that have the power of flight.
3. Collect the slips of paper and put them in a bowl.
4. Before getting under way, you might optionally capture the attention of the students by playing a short video clip of two actual bears fighting. There are pretty gripping clips on YouTube, and you can make them even more impressive by mentioning that each one of these bears can weigh up to 790 pounds. (That is about as heavy as five of my students put together.)
5. Explain the rules of the debate to the students. You might try saying something like this: “I will invite two of you at a time to come to the front of the class. Each of you will take a slip of paper out of the bowl, and you will imagine a bear that has that superpower. When I tell you to begin, you will each try to convince the audience that your bear would win in a fight against your opponent’s bear.”
6. Invite the first two students to come to the front of the class and have each randomly draw a superpower out of the bowl. Once you are sure both students understand what is written on their paper, you can introduce the bout: “In the right corner, we have Jason, whose bear has the



**What superpower would you give this bear?**

power to walk through walls, and in the left corner, we have Brian, whose bear can read minds! You will have 90 seconds to convince the audience that your bear will win the fight. Now, get ready to rumble!”

7. After a lively back and forth during which both sides of the argument are heard, the audience votes on a winner, who advances to the next round. Throughout the event, the instructor plays the role of moderator and referee, calling time and declaring winners. Eventually, all the bears but one are eliminated, leaving a grand champion. The victory can be attributed not only to the superior superpower of the last bear standing, but also to the debating skills of the student advocating on its behalf.
8. After the champion is crowned, you can explain to the students that what they just participated in was a debate. You can show video clips of more-formal debates and ask the students what differences and similarities they see between these debates and the bear fights. Afterwards, you can conduct a postmortem together with the students. The Bear Fights exercise will likely have exposed weaknesses that need to be addressed before formal debates take place, and you can make these clear to students by asking leading questions or by offering explicit suggestions and examples. Perhaps additional exercises are called for; students might need more practice formulating convincing arguments, identifying logical fallacies, engaging the audience, and so forth.

## VARIATIONS

1. In a larger class, the students can be divided into teams, and members can take turns representing their team in the debates. In the end, a team rather than an individual will be crowned champion.
2. If teachers are not comfortable with creating such a competitive atmosphere in their classrooms, the competition could be run without voting on individual winners or crowning a grand champion. Instead, it can be a less-structured, less-competitive format, where the audience simply provides feedback after each debate. They can identify each debater's strengths, as well as areas for improvement. In this scenario, you can moderate the discussion and ensure no critical points are left out. Of course, with no bracket on the board, teachers can use another method to choose the debaters, such as drawing a name out of a hat or simply working down the class list.
3. Every class is different, and teachers know best what will capture the attention of their particular students. Maybe bears or superpowers are not their thing, or maybe the violence inherent in fighting—regardless of how ridiculous—might be off-putting for them. In this case, the possibilities for inventing a new framework around which to structure this activity are limitless. Any hypothetical, nonsensical showdown will help create a fun, relaxed atmosphere while students get used to building a case and rebutting each other's arguments. Which of two famous historical figures would have more followers on Instagram if they were alive today? Which of two K-pop idols is more likely to win a Nobel Prize? Which of two teachers at the school is more likely to be leading a secret life as a VTuber? The sky is the limit.

## EXTENSION

Once the students have become comfortable with the concept and practice of debating,

the natural next step is to transition to more-structured debates on less frivolous issues. While the topics for this next round of debates should be weightier than bears with superpowers, it is a good idea to maintain student interest and enthusiasm by letting them propose and vote on potential propositions.

## CONCLUSION

The Bear Fights activity not only allows students to practice creating impromptu rebuttals to arguments and gain confidence in expressing their ideas in front of an audience, it also sets the tone for the debates that follow. (For more ideas on introducing students to debate, along with topic suggestions, see Benucci [2015].) After the bear fights, it should be clear that debating can be a fun activity to be engaged in with good nature. There is no animosity, and attacking somebody's arguments is not the same as attacking the person. Finally, this activity gives students a feel for the exercise before they invest the time necessary to research and prepare arguments for debates on more-serious issues—arguments that need to bear up under scrutiny.

## REFERENCES

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