


Great Debates: Language and Culture Skills for ESL Students

| | | | |
|-------------------|--|--------------|--|
| Author: | Meredith Westfall & John McCarthy (2004) | |  |
| Publisher: | Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. | | |
| Pages | ISBN | Price | |
| Pp. vi + 256 | ISBN 0-472-08955-2 (paper) | \$18.95 | |

Great Debates: Language and Culture Skills for ESL Students by Meredith Westfall and John McCarthy is a classroom text published by the University of Michigan Press which offers ESL learners the opportunity to engage in spoken English through the activity of debating. This is an interesting teaching technique, which introduces English in the ESL classroom in a way that is both challenging and interesting to the learner as well as to the teacher.

The text is divided into thirty chapters, each focusing on a carefully-selected topic that can generate debate by stimulating thought and promoting discussion. The topics cover a broad range of areas, such as animals, food, technology, health, and culture. They are of common interest, and learners will find that they can easily relate to them, since they are all concerned with the real world and involve experiences that the learners themselves may have gone through. Some of the topics included are Summer or Winter? (Chapter 5), Bagels or Doughnuts? (Chapter 11), Diet or Exercise? (Chapter 15), Cats or Dogs? (Chapter 21), Trains or Planes? (Chapter 27), and Phone or E-mail? (Chapter 30).

Conversational Tips and *Language Learning Tips* are provided throughout the text. These features present the learners with alternative phrases and expressions for such communicative functions as agreeing, disagreeing, asking for more information, giving more information, and disagreeing while adding one's own opinion. Teachers will find

these tips invaluable in getting the learners to express themselves in new ways during the debates.

Each chapter follows the same format, and is divided into the following sections: *Starting Off* prepares the learners to discuss the topic of the chapter; *Vocabulary* introduces five new vocabulary items, with part of speech, definition, and two example sentences provided for each item; *Reading* presents the two sides of the issue in a two-paragraph passage on the topic; *Comprehension Questions* checks the learner's understanding of the reading passage by means of four questions; *Discussion Activities* provides three activities through which the learners can debate the topic; *Write about It* encourages the learners to practice their writing skills by writing short answers to three questions based on the topic; *People Say* presents two idioms or expressions related to the topic; and *Vocabulary Review* tests the learners' vocabulary recall with a series of fill-in-the-blank questions. Two useful features provided in an appendix are a vocabulary list and an Answer Key.

One of the strengths of this book is that it provides practice in several of the language skills, integrating these skills in such a way that they support and enhance one another. Another excellent feature of the book is that it exposes the learner to the culture of English-speaking peoples, something that is essential in developing communicative competence in English. Finally, it brings all the various elements of language learning together into a unified whole through the medium of debate, in which the learner not only develops communicative competence in English but also acquires thinking skills that have a wide range of applications in everyday life.

One danger in writing a book that aims to "teach" culture to "outsiders" is that the material may be presented in such a way that it inadvertently offends some learners. In *Great Debates: Language and Culture Skills for ESL Students*, however, the cultural material is presented with great sensitivity so as not to offend anyone. In addition, the authors provide the sources of the information used in the reading passages so that the learners can track them down if they are interested and get further details on the topic if they wish. The authors have been careful to use only the most reliable sources, and this gives the book a high degree of credibility.

Great Debates: Language and Culture Skills for ESL Students is an excellent classroom resource for both the ESL teacher and the ESL learner. By getting the learners to engage in the valuable learning technique of debate and integrating this with other activities and skills, it develops a firm foundation both linguistically and culturally. The authors and publisher have collaborated to create an excellent text that should prove to be an unqualified success in the classroom. I strongly recommend it to any ESL teacher who is looking to enhance and enrich the learning experience of his or her learners.

Thinan Sangpanasthada
Brock University

<ts98ah@brocku.ca>

© Copyright rests with authors. Please cite TESL-EJ appropriately.

Editor's Note: The HTML version contains no page numbers. Please use the [PDF version](#) of this article for citations.