Debate in the EFL Classroom

> Language is not only a cognitive phenomenon, the product of the individual brain; it is also fundamentally a social phenomenon, acquired and used interactively, in a variety of contexts for myriad practical purposes. The time has come for SLA [second language acquisition] to recognize fully the theoretical and methodological implications of these facts, a crucial implication being a need to redress the imbalance of perspectives and approaches within the field, and the need to work towards the evolution of a holistic, bio-social SLA. (Firth and Wagner 2007, 768)

1 Introduction

The above quote is taken from the article Firth and Wagner first published in 1997 (*The Modern Language Journal*), and was based on the paper they presented at the International Association of Applied Linguistics conference in Finland in 1996. Their paper caused the kind of reactions that are more common in the world of rock&roll than in the circles of applied linguistics. Diane Larsen-Freeman reports of "palpable excitement" among the audience, describing their conference session in terms of a paradigm shift:

> The perceived dominance of a cognitive, mentalistic orientation to second language acquisition (SLA) had been challenged. Scholars who had previously felt excluded found a rallying point in the Firth and Wagner paper; those who believed that their positions had been ignored felt empowered in a way that they had not before. (2007, 773)

Their presentation (and the related article) addressed the growing discontent owing to the persistent imbalance in the ontological and epistemological basis of foreign/second language (L2) research: language is a social phenomenon, yet studies of language acquisition, discourse use and communicative competence are limited to the individual, and as such, bound to cognitive theories (cf. Firth and Wagner 2007; Larsen-Freeman 2007; Vygotsky 1978; Cook 2011; Tollefson 2011). Their contention was/is that such a restriction within the research field impedes further development of theories of second/foreign language acquisition. Of course, in their praiseworthy attempt to reset the course of studies in applied linguistics, they did not operate in a void; their performance was indebted to the work of a number of predecessors, perhaps most obviously to that of Lev Vygotsky, the founder of sociocultural theory (SCT).

The stir they created was (and continues to be) indicative of the shortcomings of the so-called communicative approach in L2 language teaching, which is supposed to be informed by the very same underlying theories and holistic stance suggested by the above quote. This paper focuses on oral communicative competence at higher levels of language proficiency according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR; Council of Europe 2001), which, inevitably, goes hand in hand with another educational goal: the systematic development of critical thinking (CT).

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe 2001), first published after the first and before the second publication of Firth and Wagner's contentious paper, continues the tradition of the "communicative approach" (cf. ESOL Examinations 2011, 8,16), providing descriptors for language users in a variety of social contexts – and betraying its flaws in the process. As the definitive document in the area of L2 policy and implementation, it shapes all national L2 documents within the EU. Teachers across the EU find a bold promise (in

the "Notes for the user section") that they will find in it "all [they] need to describe their objectives, methods and products." Unsurprisingly, it is a promise that the document cannot always fulfil.

In harmony with the supreme goal of the communicative paradigm, the CEFR's descriptions of the B2 speaker depict a remarkably proficient person capable of either articulating a standpoint on a complex subject or discussing it argumentatively (i.e., debating). They are deemed able to "give clear, systematically developed descriptions and presentations, with appropriate highlighting of significant points, and relevant supporting detail" and "keep up with an animated discussion, identifying accurately arguments supporting and opposing points of view. Can express his/her ideas and opinions with precision, present and respond to complex lines of argument convincingly." (Council of Europe 2001, 58, 78), which leads us to conclude that the CEFR expects B2 speakers to be linguistically and interactionally competent people capable of critical thinking (CT).[1]

The obvious question is: Do we really teach all that? My PhD research (Želježič 2016) has shown that teachers themselves receive no or negligible training in interactional competence and CT. The "matura" (i.e., the school-leaving exam) catalogue provides no instructions on how to test and assess these competencies, but focuses primarily on *oral production skills*, reducing interactional elements to the vaguely phrased "participation in conversation" (Ilc et al. 2012, 18). As a result, our students are much less experienced in oral interaction than CEFR suggests. Whilst recent generations of secondary school students in Slovenia seem to have reached the highest average speaking proficiency level ever,[2] it is impossible to claim that they are equally competent in "presenting and responding to complex lines of argument [in an animated discussion] convincingly" (Council of Europe 2001, 78). Results of the empirical part of the above mentioned PhD research (Želježič 2016) demonstrate that while, in theory, oral *production* competence may receive as much attention as oral *interaction* competence, it does not do so in practice. They also reveal the inadequate and unsystematic development of critical thinking (both among teachers and students) as well as of interactional competence in argumentative discursive practices – suggesting that educational provision falls short of meeting the official educational goals in this respect.

Two decades after the milestone contribution of Firth and Wagner we cannot but agree with Skela, who notes (in his introduction to the Slovene edition of the Common European Framework of Reference) that a closer look into EFL syllabi and coursebooks reveals "the fact that the prevalent organising principle of contemporary coursebooks – and with it probably also teaching practices – remains to be a grammar-based syllabus", and that in L2 teaching "four decades of communicative approach have in many cases added but a superficial layer of communicative components" (Skela 2011, 130; own translation). Consequently, it should come as no surprise that although it is exactly development of communicative competence that is stated as "the primary aim of contemporary L2 teaching" , there are "no systematically developed ways of teaching it" (Skela 2011, 126).

As far as developing CT faculties is concerned, relevant research suggests any significant improvement relies on a systematic approach over an extended period of time (cf. Bennet

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[1] The descriptions are echoed in The National EFL Syllabus in Slovene academic secondary schools, the so-called *gimnazije* (e.g., Učni načrt 2008, 26).

[2] The claim is based on more than 25 years of my own teaching experience and a number of discussions with EFL teachers.

2004, Abrami et al. 2008, Hatcher 2006, Van Gelder 2005, Lakoff 2006). All definitions of CT presuppose, whether implicitly or explicitly, proficiency in (and further development of) competencies and mental activities such as inferring, analysing, synthesising, understanding of one's own thought processes, interpreting and arguing – all of which the above (CEFR-defined) speaker necessarily possesses – as neither presenting nor responding to *complex lines of argument* can be *convincing* unless it is structured systematically and verbalized in a language that conveys points of view of some *complexity*. CT does not exist outside language; the richer one's vocabulary the better equipped they are to think; the more motivated they are to think, the richer the vocabulary they need to articulate their thoughts; the more complex the topic, the more nuanced and critical the required thinking – and the deeper the vocabulary pool one needs to rely upon (cf. Vygotsky 1978; Dennett 2013).

In the light of the situation outlined above, it is the aim of this article to recommend debate as a genre/didactic method that addresses the part of communicative competence conspicuously sidelined in our educational provision – *interactional* competence at the B2 (and above) level. It attempts to argue in favour of a systemic approach, one that would actually introduce and cultivate the missing elements of argumentative interaction in our EFL educational provision, thus providing guidance and instruction in the areas of communicative approaches that are considered sufficiently covered, but are, in effect, neglected.

All of the above serves as an explanation of a combination of factors that sparked my interest in debate in the EFL classroom. It was in April 2009, when I first heard Slovene university students (none of whom was a student of English) debate in English, that I was confronted with a rather disconcerting realization: their CT skills, articulacy and interaction skills were in stark contrast with those of our students of English; at the same time they were perfectly in tune with the CEFR descriptions of B2+ level learners' interaction competence. The event decided my PhD orientation and basic research questions, which required an in-depth analysis of a number of educational documents (including CEFR and The National EFL Syllabus) on the one hand and the practical application of the goals and standards stipulated in them on the other. All research questions revolved around debate as an (in)appropriate and (in)effective pedagogical method for developing oral communication skills and CT, and resulted in a case study conducted in three classes of students at a Slovene academic secondary school (in each case including a full cohort of students).

2 Rationale behind Debate in Education

By using the term *debate* we refer to a *structured and regulated communicative event* on a debate motion that enables a confrontation of two opposing views.[3] Through a debate two sets of perspectives/values/policies are established, one arguing in support of the motion and the other opposing it. A generic definition of debate that is quite compatible with this description is the one proposed by Akerman and Neale (2011) in their research report on the effects of debate on primary school, secondary school and university students:

> Broadly speaking, debate can be described as a formal discussion where two opposing sides follow a set of pre-agreed rules to engage in an oral exchange of different points of view on an issue. Formal debates are commonly seen in public meetings or legislative assemblies,

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[3]   To this end a number of debate formats are available, one of the more common ones being, for instance, the British Parliamentary Debate Format. For basic information on debate formats cf. http://ww.idebate.org/about/debate/formats;

where individuals freely choose which side of an issue to support, and also in schools or university competitions, where the participants are often assigned a particular side for which to advocate. (2011, 9)

In Slovenia debate as a competitive discipline was introduced by Zavod za odprto družbo (The Open Society Institute) in 1996, and has since 1999 continued to be promoted by its successor Za in proti, Zavod za kulturo dialoga (Pro et Contra, Institute for Culture in Dialogue). Slovene secondary school and university debaters have managed to gain considerable international recognition, putting Slovenia on the world debate map as a force to be reckoned with. Yet, what is perhaps more noteworthy is that since 1997 the institute has been organising educational seminars not only for debaters and debate mentors, but also for teachers who wish to use debate as a teaching method in class rather than – or at least not only – in debate clubs. While it signals a degree of awareness of the gaps in our educational practices among teachers, it by no means signifies that these gaps are being suitably and systematically addressed.

On the practical level, the need for debate in the pedagogical context is simple enough to explain: it is not only a dialogic genre that presupposes an intense form of interaction, but is also often addressed in connection to the development of CT (see Branham 1991; Snider and Schnurrer 2006; Zompetti 2011). It cultivates controversy and sophisticated language use. In other words, it is a form of speech that is – in the context of the so-called Western democratic culture – considered to be privileged.

Speculatively, debate is justified through the theories that informed Firth and Wagner's (2007) concerns, most notably Vygotsky's discovery of the social origin of higher mental functions: social interaction is a basic prerequisite for linguistic, mental and character development. The learning of a language is (as any other learning) a dialogic process. As claimed by John-Steiner and Mahn in the article "Sociocultural Approaches to Learning and Development: A Vygotskian Framework" (1996), the relationship between individuals forms a basis for cognitive and linguistic mastery. Luoma, too, reminds us of Vygotsky's proposal "… that social interaction plays such a fundamental role in the development of human cognition that cognition should be studied as a social rather than an individual concept." (2004, 102)[4]

The two most often quoted and argued contributions of Vygotsky' sociocultural theory (SCT) are his explanations of the relationship between the inter- and intra-personal level and the so-called zone of proximal development (ZPD). He advanced them in the framework of child (developmental) psychology, but, as stated above, they have proved their significance within L2 theories as well.[5]

Vygotsky shows that human consciousness is intricately (and necessarily) connected with culture and society, and that language is both the source of social behaviour and consciousness, and the most perfect tool of human consciousness (language as a tool of mediation). His most accessible explanation of the relationship between the interpersonal and intrapersonal in a development of higher mental processes is to be found in his article "The Genesis of Higher Mental Functions" (1981):

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[4]   See also Aljaafreh and Lantolf 1994; Lantolf 2006.

[5]   Among the most prominent applied linguists that base their work on sociocultural theory are, for instance Lantolf, Johnson, Kasper, van Lier, Kozulin and John-Steiner.

> Any function in the child's cultural development appears twice or on two planes. First it appears on the social plane, and then on the psychological plane. First it appears between people as an interpsychological category, and then within the child as an intrapsychological category. This is equally true with regard to voluntary attention, logical memory, the formation of concepts, and the development of volition. We may consider this position as a law in the full sense of the word, but *it goes without saying that internalization transforms the process itself and changes its structure and functions*. Social relations or relations among people genetically underlie all higher functions and their relationships. (as cited in Johnson 2001, 185; my emphasis)[6]

Vygotsky surmounted the Cartesian limitations between the external and internal, proving that the processes of internalisation take place in co-dependence between individuals and external factors. Rather than a simple imitation of patterns (meanings, ways, etc.) these processes entail idiosyncratic interpretations and/or adaptations, which, in turn, transform these external factors. In other words, this is a dynamic (and also a two-way) process, which causes the existent level of cognitive development to expand in the direction of the potential level of cognitive development. But for this expansion to be fostered, learning has to take place in the zone of proximal development (ZPD) – defined by Vygotsky as the difference between a quantified ("measured", tests-assessed) level of development and a level of (potential) development that individuals would exhibit if guided by a more experienced person or more advanced peers (Vygotsky 1978, 86).

To put it differently, SCT views learning as linked to "collaboration" rather than "acquisition"; as mediated through social interaction rather than through students' thought processes. SCT does not link learning to acquiring information, but – more holistically – to the development of a personality with the competencies that empower an individual to enter and take part in social interactions. The question is, however, how participation in interactive activities creates the conditions that are conducive to learning and development – the so-called "affordances". Especially intrigued by this question are theoreticians of the so-called ecological approach in L2 acquisition, such as, for instance, van Lier and Chun. Chun (2011, 675) says:

> According to SCT, there is no single set of characteristics of social interaction that constitute affordances for all learners. Rather, affordances arise out of the successful tailoring of the interaction to the developmental level of individual learners. They occur when the interaction enables the participants to construct a "zone of proximal development" for the learner — that is, the learners come to be able to perform a language feature through the scaffolding provided by an interlocutor when they are not able to do so independently. The aim of interaction (including corrective feedback) is to assist the learner to move from other-regulation in the zone of proximal development to self-regulation where the learner is finally able to use a linguistic feature correctly without assistance.

The above quote may perhaps more readily refer to earlier phases of language acquisition, but the same principles apply also in the later phases of the development of an individual's language (or any other intellectual) competence.

It seems that the avant-garde lucidity of Vygotsky's SCT can only be understood from a contemporary perspective: rather than the actual level of development he was interested in

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6   We take this quote from Johnson because it is more expressive than that in *Mind in Society*, where Vygotsky gave a more modest explanation of this part of the internalisation of higher psychological functions (1978, 57).

the potential level of development. Focused on development rather than on performance, his theory stands in explicit opposition to the standard practices in language teaching and testing that continue to be marked by the belief that language interaction is but a cognitive and psycholinguistic activity.

Interestingly enough, contemporary cognitive theory seems to be finding some common ground with SCT in this respect. This was most befittingly captured in a public lecture that Daniel Dennett gave to the Royal Geographic Society in London on 22/5, 2013: the most serious thinking and problem-solving is interactive. It is only in collaboration and confrontation with other thinking individuals that we can overcome limitations and prejudices that are part of our instinctive legacy, meaning that interaction is not only a prerequisite for that development of oral communicative competence but is also crucial in terms of the development of CT faculties.

This brings us to the issue of the practical implications of SCT for L2/EFL pedagogy, and the issue of debate in EFL teaching respectively. In *The Art of Non-conversation* Johnson (2001) states that Vygotsky developed the notion of ZPD in order to "address (…) the problem of teaching practices" (2001, 186). Compatible with the statement is Lantolf's observation: "One of the most intriguing topics for future research is whether the appropriate pedagogical interventions can be designed to promote the development of conceptual and associated linguistic knowledge to enable learners to use the L2 as a mediational artefact" (2006, 103). In response, this article aims to offer debate as one of the appropriate pedagogical methods.

However, it must first be established that there is no dialogic teaching method currently cultivated in the context of EFL classroom with the express purpose of developing oral interaction skills and CT. The obvious "candidate" is dialogue/interview with the teacher, the only existing dialogic form of *testing* students' oral *interactional* competence in EFL in our school system.

In Marycia Johnson's book *The Art of Non-conversation* (2001) she proves the differences between assessment interviews and authentic interviews to be so big that the results of such testing are considered to be non-valid, and calls oral testing "conversations" simply – non-conversations. To put it differently, the so-called dialogues/interviews with the teacher have so little to do with teaching and practising interactional competence in argumentative discursive events that they cannot be credited with validity. They do not aim to foster interactional skills such as negotiating, holding one's ground in a debate on a complex topic and building and responding to arguments (while at the same time considering the sociocultural conventions and questioning one's presuppositions, for instance).

This paradoxical situation could be described as follows: although it has been established that interaction is a prerequisite for the development of both oral communicative competence and CT faculties, the only form of testing it – dialogues/interviews between teachers and students – do not, in fact, build interactional competence in students.

In order to propose debate as an answer to this situation, some rigorous scientific evidence proving the correlation between debates on the one hand and CT and argumentative interaction on the other should be presented. Admittedly, despite the lively theoretical debate outlined above, such evidence has begun to accumulate only recently. The good news is that the volume of this evidence is substantial.

3 PRO Debate: Evidence and Recommendations

In 2007 the 1–2 issue of Šolsko polje (*School Field Journal*) published "the best contributions addressing the use of rhetoric, critical thinking and pedagogy" (2007, 5; own translation) from the first international conference on argumentation, rhetoric, debate and the pedagogy of empowerment *Thinking and Speaking a Better World*. One of them is the article by Mateja Glušič Lenarčič from Gimnazija Celje-Center (an academic secondary school) titled "Revising Vocabulary and Teaching Essay Writing Through Debate: Why Use Debate Techniques for Teaching a Foreign Language?". In it she states: "Debate is a very efficient and challenging method of teaching a foreign language. It enables you to revise new vocabulary and teach students how to organise their thoughts and ideas sensibly. (…) They become genuinely interested in different topics and also learn to think logically and critically" (2007, 157).[7]

While this is a tentative attempt to link debate to communicative and CT competence with a degree of scientific merit, Sam Greenland, an Australian teacher of EFL in Hong Kong, was among the first to do so in compliance with established research standards. He measured these competencies in his doctoral thesis titled *Assessing student performance in classroom debates: a valid and unbiased measurement* (2009). Based on a case study involving secondary school students, his research showed that debate is an effective didactic activity in the context of EFL classroom, enabling teachers to develop and assess both oral interactional competence and CT.[8] It also confirmed debate to be a genre that develops these competencies irrespective of whether students are more or less linguistically and/or academically successful. Still, his sample (the total number of participants was 453 – cf. Greenland 2009, 41) was not extensive enough to provide irrefutable evidence of the links between the observed competencies and debating activities.

The first text to seriously address this deficiency is the report *Debating the evidence: an international review of current situation and perceptions*, written by Rodie Akerman and Ian Neale, published by The English-Speaking Union in 2011. The authors presented a detailed review of existing research from around the world, looking for scientific data linking debate to the development of CT and communicative competence.[9] Approximately 50% of the studies that this report takes into account are based on debate as classroom activity; the other half is focused on debate tournaments. From the perspective of EFL teaching, the former are of greater importance than the latter, as they are concerned with *the whole classroom /all students* rather than the more select group of competitive debaters.

The report (Akerman and Neale 2011) presents four key positive effects related to active participation in debate (and other Forensics) activities:

1. considerable improvements in academic attainment (in a group of American 'high schoolers' from the most marginalized districts, "African American males who took part in debate were 70% more likely to complete school than their peers." (2011, 5);

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[7] At the second International Conference on Argumentation, Rhetoric, Debate and the Pedagogy of Empowerment in Ljubljana in 2008, Kate Shuster spoke extensively about the correlation between debate and CT. Herself a debater and debate coach, she argued that there was a generally acknowledged but (until then) not also scientifically confirmed link between debate and development of CT.

[8] The case study was based on twelve classes of students from each of the two state schools involved – in his own words "… a full cohort of students (every student in a single year group in a single school)." (Greenland 2009, 38).

[9] Searching through academic databases, they identified over 800 references, which they eventually narrowed down to 51 studies, all of them published no earlier than 1990.

2. developing critical thinking: both qualitative and quantitative research prove participation in debate develops one's ability to think critically;

3. debate improves communication skills;

4. participating in debates boosts debaters' aspirations, confidence and cultural awareness.

Increases in critical thinking ability (up to 44%) were found regardless of the measurement used, although most of the studies used the Watson-Glaser test, which measures five abilities:

*   defining a problem;
*   selecting relevant information for its solution;
*   recognising assumptions;
*   formulating and selecting relevant hypotheses;
*   drawing valid conclusions and judging the validity of inferences. (Akerman and Neale 2011, 19, 21)

The Watson-Glaser definition of CT is, of course, by no means the only one; some are more and some are less elaborate, some based on consensus among a large group of specialists,[10] some are authored by one person.[11] However, all definitions contain elements pertaining to any debate; they all presuppose and build upon the ability to do research, to infer, analyse, build and refute arguments. In other words, all definitions describe mental and verbal activities that are based on credible and relevant information.

In this respect the report findings agree with contemporary research in teaching/enhancing CT (Van Gelder 2005; Hatcher 2006; Abrami et al. 2008; Zompetti 2011): systematic development of CT with emphasis on regular practice results in a marked improvement in CT ability.

It is also noteworthy that students who took part in debate and other competitive speech activities "were found to gain statistically significantly higher scores in a state writing test and a national (ACT) reading test" (Akerman and Neale 2011, 14).

Credibility of the findings is further corroborated by students' views on the effects of debate in class: "Student perception data indicates that engaging in debate activities increases engagement and motivation in a subject, improves subject knowledge and helps students apply their learning to real-world situations." (Akerman and Neale 2011, 16). Students themselves believe that active participation in debates "… leads to improvements in their communication and argumentation skills, including improved English when it is not their first language" (Akerman and Neale 2011, 22).

Other effects of debate as a teaching method that Akerman and Neale (2011, 17–18) report on are an improved ability to work in a team, development of interactional competence, considerable gains in research skills and improved writing competence.

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[10] The lengthy definition used in the study by Abrami and colleagues (2008), for instance, was agreed by 46 eminent researchers in the field of CT.

[11] Hatcher, a professor of philosophy (and CT teacher), proposes a definition that attempts to distance CT from logical reasoning and creative thinking: "CT is thinking that tries to arrive at a judgement only after honestly evaluating alternatives with respect to available evidence and arguments." (2006, 251).

All the results they included in their report are based on longitudinal studies involving hundreds of participants, yet the authors are prudent enough to call our attention to the fact that measuring these achievements is a complex task, and that final results may be tampered by "unobserved factors" such as, for instance, social status and parental education.

Included in the Akerman and Neale report is a contribution by Anitha and Anitha (undated), who, as secondary and tertiary level teachers of EFL in Singapore, articulate an interesting observation: they relate the noticeable progress in communicative competence of students to the fact that they experience debate as a *meaningful* communicative task (2011, 16). They also note that the formal rules of a particular debate format promote rather than inhibit accurate expression. As students are expected to present clear arguments, they do their best to comply with the expectations, thus improving their own performance as well as inspiring and helping less advanced peers.

This observation of Anitha and Anitha is compatible with the views of those who, alongside Vygotsky, regard interaction as a tool for (foreign) language learning and as a competence in its own right. As stated by Kasper and Rose (2002, 34), interaction is neither a context of learning nor a mechanism of language production; instead, it is learning itself. In other words, language/ communication is both a cognitive and social phenomenon – as Vygotsky's quote on the two levels of cultural development (social and intrapsychological) makes clear (see above). Personal development is not possible without intervention of better qualified, more skilled or experienced individuals; it is only in interaction with others (in ZPD) that individuals can reach for a goal, solve a problem, gain understanding of a concept, develop an argument, etc.

It is wholly unsurprising – from the point of view of SCT (and the double function of language: language as the tool of both communication and learning) – that the Akerman and Neale report (2011) is not limited exclusively to the effects of debate in English classes (regardless of whether English is the native or a foreign language), but also takes into account studies of debate as a teaching method in *any* subject and in *any* language. One of them is a case study from an Israeli secondary school, published in the article "Fostering Students' Knowledge and Argumentation Skills Through Dilemmas in Human Genetics" in 2001 by Zohar and Nemet. Akerman and Neale state they report "dramatic gains in argumentation ability", but warn against attributing them prematurely to debate practice alone, for students might have "been encouraged to use patterns of thinking that they possessed all along but did not normally utilise in the classroom, or had reinforced skills that were already present but not usually valued in class" (2011, 23). Despite their caution, they suggest that the practical value of debate lies in the *opportunity* it creates for students to develop argumentative thinking and speaking. What counts is what happens in a specific situation in class, where teachers and students have an opportunity to adapt a particular debate format to their own needs and preferences, and to do so in a creative, critical or playful manner. In other words, respecting rules in dialogic events is essential, yet debate formats are inherently flexible: in the classroom context it is possible to negotiate and transform them, depending on abilities, wishes, educational goals, etc. An example of such an adaptation stated in the report is a transformation of a debate format into *constructive controversy*, described as "similar to debate but distinguished from it by the fact that after debating both sides of a position, the group of students work together to find and write about a solution that is acceptable to all the participants" (2011, 16). If students can re-fashion discursive events according to their own preferences, they also tend to find them more meaningful and be more motivated to engage in them.

Akerman and Neale conclude that regular debate and debate-related activities will improve students' argumentative discourse – an important part of CT and higher levels of communicative competence – at the same time recommending further investigation, "particularly around the experience of students for whom English is a second language" (2011, 25).

Two years after their report, The English-Speaking Union published the article "Research shows that persuasive speech aids pupils' development" (2013), in which they presented new evidence about the relationship between dialogic/debate formats and CT, i.e., between the development of argumentative discursive practices and public speaking on the one hand and general cognitive development and improved academic results on the other. Subjects in the three-year scientific study comprised over a thousand students and their teachers, and conclusions based upon this research provide further proof that oral interactional competence is crucial in achieving educational goals at all levels.

In standardised tests children who were part of the programme (mostly eleven-year-olds) achieved results that exceeded those of other children by 6% to 19%. Children whose native language was not English were among those who benefited most: "Whilst the improvements were widely spread, they were particularly high for children of lesser ability, pupils for whom English is a second or additional language, and boys." Implicitly, the study confirmed that – just like the development of CT – interactional competence cannot be attained without appropriate instruction, systematic practice and feedback. In other words, the study suggests that the success of a communicative event seems to depend upon the volume of communicative experience; *drill* seems to be crucial; *uses promptos facit.*

Another piece of evidence comes from Slovenia: in autumn 2013 the Slovenian debate organization *Za in proti, Zavod za kulturo dialoga* (Pro et Contra, Institute for Culture in Dialogue), published the results of an international research project called *Untangling Debate,* with Anja Šerc as project coordinator and editor. The four countries involved in the research were Slovenia, Croatia, Macedonia and Romania. Their aim was to either prove or disprove the positive impact of debate methodology on CT skills, on the processes of socialisation in active citizenship, and on empathy and understanding the other (Šerc 2013, 5–6). The students involved in the research were between 14 and 18 years of age; 50% of the participants had been involved in debate for more than a year (debaters) and the other 50% not involved in debate at all (non-debaters).[12] (The total number of respondents from Slovenia, Croatia and Macedonia was 805.) The impact of debate on their CT skills was measured by the Watson-Glaser test, the conclusion of which was that "debate has a significant contribution on the development of critical thinking skills, but not all of them can be directly related to the definition of critical thinking as measured by the Watson-Glaser test" (2013, 21). So apart from the measured CT skills, active participation in debate also develops CT skills such as, for instance, "ability to recognize and name argumentation tricks" (2013, 21) and "analytical skills, synthesis, broader perspective about a problem" (2013, 22).[13]

Yet another contribution comes from the University of La Verne in California: in his doctoral thesis "Research practices of successful world universities debate championship debaters"

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[12] The two groups were formed as it was established that statistically significant differences between them occurred only after at least one year of systematic practice.

[13] Equally important, the results also prompted a discussion on, and an understanding of, the aspects of CT that debate does *not* teach – and on how this could be improved.

(2013), John F. Patrick contends that even the best debaters – world championship tournament winners (that he puts in the category of the so-called "independent self-directed learners") – only make progress if they talk to and debate with others. Analysis of the collected evidence led Patrick to conclude that independent study of the relevant sources, with no exchange of opinions and critical reflection in interaction with others, yields neither in-depth understanding nor appropriate verbalisation of the study material. In other words, if there is no or too little interaction, an individual's CT and communicative potential simply do not develop.

Evidence on the correlation between debate on the one hand and CT and argumentative interaction on the other provides the necessary rationale to legitimately propose debate as an effective methodology for developing CT skills and communicative competence in oral interactions, especially on B2+ levels. Nevertheless, debate as a teaching method has its critics too.

4 CONTRA Debate: Scruples and Reservations

The following are two of the most common objections to debate found in relevant literature:

- debate is potentially dangerous because it offers a training ground for manipulators and demagogues (e.g., Šerc 2013);
- by requiring student-debaters to defend one and reject the other side of a debate motion, debate format strengthens a dichotomous, oppositional logic, which is, in and of itself, reductionist, simplifying complex problems and balanced dilemmas (e.g., Kennedy 2007).

Both of these are, of course, genuine concerns that one needs to examine.

A legitimate response to the above criticism relies exactly on this implicit extremism. In fact, the unreal (even irrational) nature of the oppositional frame forces debaters to find some common centre of gravity, a common denominator – or else risk speaking incoherently, or even at crossed purposes. In other words, the format itself requires defining "the grey area" allowing for the kind of confrontation that enables a coherent dialogue to take place at all. Unless debaters can adapt to the logic of the arguments of their opponents, they reduce credibility of their own. To put it differently, the *pro and contra* format does not necessarily degrade into a black-and-white presentation of controversial issues. Instead, it can serve as an effective tool in explaining multifaceted social problems. In fact, one could argue that it is impossible to *go beyond* dualism without first going *through* dualism. Or, as we are reminded by Young, "… since Hegel, dichotomies have been accepted ways of broaching complex topics" (Young 2009, 10).

The confrontational frame within which debate takes place has yet another distinctly positive effect: it equips debate participants with the skills and knowledge that enable them to cope with conflicts that take place outside the classroom. Kennedy quotes a part of the article "The Art of Debating" (1998) in which "the authors assert that 'most people do not know how to argue logically while staying calm' and that in-class debates can enable students to learn to argue constructively" (Kennedy 2007, 186).

A most sensible critique of debate comes from the ranks of those who – while warning against the pitfalls of debate – use the language of debate itself. They speak of self-compliance, of dangerous enthusiasm about *debating skills* themselves, about the rhetoric that makes it unclear what the speaker actually proposes, or makes the brilliant yet superficial discourse compensate

for a lack of understanding and critical analysis. What happens in such a case has little to do with empowerment and a lot to do with a specific adjustment to the *status quo*. In the editorial to an issue of the journal *Vzgoja in izobraževanje,* Zora Rutar Ilc alerts against such an absence of systemic criticism in debate, which goes hand in hand with creating an elite among the well-adjusted. Her warning addresses both the question of defining CT (are we talking about skills or a notional apparatus capable of systemic criticism?) and the question of developing a culture of negotiating, objecting, defending, etc. These are, indeed, the questions we need to repeatedly confront ourselves with, and debate(-related) formats can be appropriate genres in which to address them.

Apart from the above-mentioned oppositional frame, there are other "safety fuses" deterring debaters from sliding into superficiality and/or demagoguery inherent in debate. One such element is the ability of critical listening not only in debaters but also in the audience/listeners (Snider and Schnurer 2006, 9; Kennedy 2007, 184). Critical reflection of a discursive event is, as stated by Hall (1999), an integral part of the development of interactional competence. A number of authors contend that critical reflection is to be followed by a phase of active participation in a discursive practice if it is to develop *a habit* of CT, attentive listening and argumentative speaking; it is only after the new habit overcomes our instinctive tendency to emotionally charged thinking and acting that we are protected against our own nature (e.g., Lakoff 2006; Van Gelder 2005; Kennedy 2007). In other words, the best remedy against the potential demagoguery of debaters is – more debate. Or in the words of Fishbone (2008, 261): "Once this culture permeates society, it will be the strongest bulwark against demagoguery because people talking among themselves will erode the simplicity of the demagogue's solution." Similarly, the deeper our understanding of different topics, the better we are equipped to recognise weak arguments, logical fallacies and/ or demagoguery. *Debating* a particular topic requires a more in-depth understanding of that topic than *presenting* or *lecturing* (Kennedy 2007, 184). Nevertheless, the potential positive sides of debate are bigger than its possible negative effects only if and inasmuch as we are aware of them and capable of bringing them to the attention (and understanding) of students.

5 Conclusion

In *The Skills of Argument* (1991), Deannae Kuhn, a professor of psychology and pedagogy at Columbia University, argued that people are generally bad at critical thinking and argumentative speech – a conclusion that is compatible with what cognitive science has to say on the subject (e.g., Van Gelder 2005; Lakoff 2006; Dennett 2013) as well as with the findings of researchers of CT (e.g., Hassan and Madhum 2006; Hatcher 2006; Abrami et al. 2008). They all contend that for measurable gains in CT and interactional competence to take place students need to *regularly participate* in relevant discourse activities while being given *systematic guidance and feedback*.

Although debate as a competitive genre has been present in Slovenia for over two decades, and although the need for it has been acknowledged by many teachers, it has not, in effect, made its way into our EFL classrooms. As demonstrated in the empirical section of my PhD research (Želježič 2016), the most common reasons teachers state for not introducing it in their EFL classes are: they feel inadequately trained to teach debate (lack of knowledge), they don't know how to test the skills developed in debate (lack of assessment criteria), and they feel the syllabus and matura exam guidelines do not really require them to do so.[14] Given that in our EFL

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[14]   These reasons are more fully explained in the empirical part of my PhD research (2016).

classrooms there are no regular didactic practices aimed at the development of interactional and CT competence, the third of the above reasons is indicative of a significant mis-match between the B2-and-above descriptors of L2 speakers in CEFR and The National EFL Syllabus on the one hand, and the deeply entrenched educational practices on the other.

If we are serious about developing communicative competence in dialogic discourse on controversial topics in the context of the EFL classroom, then it is necessary to cultivate some form of argumentative interaction, and to do so repeatedly and systematically. While it is a fact that students have never been better at oral production in EFL, it is also true that within our educational system their oral *production* abilities will typically be taken for oral *interaction* abilities – which betrays a common misconception in both understanding and implementing the so-called *communicative approach* in our educational practices. In the current situation, a few recommendations to FL teachers as to how to overcome this issue cannot even begin to address it appropriately. On the contrary, a superficial approach promoting debate in the classroom can, in effect, do more harm than good (cf. Šerc 2013, 31). This is why this article resists such a temptation. Instead, it sheds light on the need for a slight but distinctive shift in awareness about teaching and learning oral communication skills, paving the way for a more thorough treatment of the subject in the, hopefully, near future.

In this spirit, let us attempt to articulate perhaps the main reason why this paper privileges debate over other forms of interactive discourse. Debate is contained within the rules that are more apparent than those governing interaction in the workplace, at school, on the street or within a family. In certain respects, these rules are also more demanding. Interaction in the workplace, at school etc. is, like debate, part of the process of learning and adapting to institutional norms and their respective ideological frameworks. Yet, unlike these forms of interaction, debate provides a context for questioning these adaptations and ideological frameworks, and negotiating their alternatives. As a matter of fact, not only does debate make such a questioning possible, it actually demands it, shedding light on complex issues requiring preliminary research and critical thinking skills. This is why different formats of debate are the type of communicative events that can be truly emancipatory (see Llano 2010; Shuster 2005; Snider and Schnurrer 2006; Snider 2007; Zompetti 2011). And in the hands of trained and confident teachers debate formats can provide a meaningful challenge to students, prompting them to develop the very understanding, knowledge and skills the CEFR and The National EFL Syllabus value and "prescribe" as their principal educational goals.

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