

## THE FOCUS OF SIGNIFICANT LEARNING: THE PEDAGOGICAL POTENTIAL OF DEBATING

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***Abstract.** Nowadays, in the process of the implementation of student-centered learning paradigm, not only the knowledge, skills and attitude formation has been updated, but a new quality of teaching and learning as well. Thus significant learning approach has been promoted, leading to the each student's personal development and providing new resources and opportunities. The publication describes the productive dimension of significant learning in the English language learning process revealing the educational opportunities and a potential of the innovative learning method – debating. The prerequisites of significant learning for students have been analyzed as well as the possibilities to develop learning skills through students engaging in the process of debating. Empirical research data confirms the value of the learning method – debating: it promotes self-discipline, the increase of interest in learning, student responsibility as well as raising students' motivation.*

***Keywords:** debating, motivation, teaching potential, self-discipline, significant learning, students.*

### **Significant learning dimension in the English language learning process**

**The goal of the publication is:** basing on the theoretical analysis of the aspects of significant learning, to reveal and characterize the pedagogical potential and importance of debating in the learning transformation process, thus updating the resources and opportunities of self-disciplined learning.

The searches of interrelationships in the learning content as well as strengthening the interdisciplinary links are highly valued to support the innovative pedagogical approaches and accentuation of methodological didactic diversity in all subjects, including the English language learning in the comprehensive school. The implementation of the education reform in schools of Latvia has highlighted the subject of the learning process – a student; his/her cognitive powers and the high-quality competence formation management. This is a process when the teacher becomes an adviser and a support provider. The most important emphasis in the process of education is put on the personal development and self-realization opportunities. Thus education becomes a new technology generating an active personality, which automatically selects and sets its own direction of the development (Čehlova, 2002). The goal of the English language is to promote student's as a creative personality's development,

promoting the competent use of foreign languages in communication, lifelong learning and intercultural dialogue in today's society (*Kursīte, 2008*). Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment states: "The use of language and its acquisition includes activities, of which the persons as individual and social beings develop various competencies - in general and in particular communicative language competences. Using these competencies in different contexts and circumstances, and taking into account a variety of hassles, people engage in language activities and processes to generate and / or receive text on specific topics and areas. People apply the strategies that they consider the most appropriate in the fulfillment of the specific tasks through these activities and processes. Consolidation or modification of these competencies occurs for people managing these activities" (*Council of Europe. Languages Policy Division, 2006*). A teacher of the English language L. Sardiko (*Sardiko, 2007*) considers that one of the most important contemporary problems of students is a lack of motivation. This fact has been confirmed by L. Sardiko with the help of the survey data gathered in the case study interviewing 88 teachers of the English language from Latvia. 70% of respondents recognized that this problem - a lack of motivation is the most typical for teenagers, 66% of respondents noted the lack of motivation as a current problem, 66% of respondents highlighted the lack of students' management skills of their own learning process, while 57% indicated that the students do not see the connection between learning process at school and a real life. Students' learning motivation is one of the most important aspects for foreign language learning to become an opportunity for personal development. Motivation is the first important structural element of learning activities (*Maļicka, 2004*). The promotion of the motivation can take different forms. One of the objectives of foreign language teaching is to improve communication in the processes of learning and teaching and implementation of student-centered learning, which is characterized by learning efficiency.

The efficiency of learning is one of the most important indicators of students' readiness to learn within the formal or non-formal education system, in order to acquire new knowledge spontaneously or purposefully, as well as attitudes, skills and competencies. Learning efficiency is an indicator of the ability to learn. It depends on the organization of the educational process and methods. The learning method in the pedagogical process is determined by the goal. In order to achieve the goal, the targets of the learning process ought to be set, to promote gaining the knowledge of creative learning, creative application of knowledge in practice and leading to the independent student learning activities. The youth of today is characterized by the media, adventures, variable values, cooperation and communication, multi perspective learning, as well as a multilingual generation (*Tilla, 2005*). The official language of the country and a foreign language serve as a communication tool, means of thinking and expression of experience. Foreign language serves as an important tool in the

forming of a multi-cultural society and promotes the using of information technology.

One of the most important requirements for foreign language teaching methodology is to integrate the development of language skills, on the basis of existing knowledge of the mother tongue and other foreign languages, as well as attracting and using the knowledge obtained in other subjects. Class culture and its psychological atmosphere derive particular topicality to promote the language learning process. The class requires atmosphere in which students feel safe and are able to learn the English language efficiently. In this environment significant learning can be encouraged and students become active creators of their own knowledge. Thus security, self-discipline, sense of belonging, positive communication, collaboration, students' learning achievements and success, the desire to participate and to achieve goals are required.

Each student's uniqueness: the knowledge, skills, existential competence and ability to learn, must be taken into account in the processes of creating lesson plans and selecting learning methods:

- *knowledge*: learning the language requires knowledge not only about the language and culture, but the academic knowledge as well;
- *skills and abilities*: all depend on the ability to sequence and act practically;
- *existential competence* - an individual's personal qualities, character traits and attitudes associated with the idea both for themselves and for others, self-esteem, willingness to cooperate with other individuals. Each person's own attitudes, character traits and temperament are guidelines that should be taken into account in the process of learning and teaching of languages;
- *ability to learn* - promotes existential competence, the development of knowledge and skills, and includes a variety of competencies. The ability to learn is a concept particularly important in the language learning process (*Council of Europe. Languages Policy Division, 2006:19*).

The concept of "student-centered learning" has been established by the psychologist Carl Rogers. Student-centered learning highlights the efficiency of the learning process, the teacher's work focused on students' acquisition of knowledge and respecting the uniqueness of each student (*Rogers, 1961*). To implement the educational process of the significant learning, teachers' motivation and systematic action serve as very important factors. Innovative changes of the lesson will occur successfully if the organization of the learning process is carefully planned and prepared. This process is very important for the teacher as organizer of learning activities (*Weimer, 2002*). Thus, due to the teacher targeted and competent work in the significant learning dimension, the learner's autonomy has been encouraged:

- ensuring the development of the learner's individuality;
- actively involving students in the learning process from the decision-making to the achievement of the results- external discipline has been replaced by self-discipline;

- learning from the teacher and a course book as the main source of information has been changed into the learning from experience- through individual and team work searching and researching processes and with a help of a teacher to draw relevant conclusions;
- from practicing and training particular skills to the development of the competences generally;
- using the knowledge, the development of critical and creative thinking in addressing the real-life problems.

### **Debating in student-centered learning paradigm**

The teaching experience of the authors allows to confirm that the teaching potential of debating as a teaching method and form complies with the criteria of student-centered learning process and can be successfully used not only in the lessons of the English language but in other subjects as well. In order to efficiently implement the curriculum, the content of debating (arguments and facts for supporting the resolution) is researched in the collaboration process of students and teachers. The learning content becomes a tool to promote acquiring new knowledge independently and purposefully. As a result, motivation, students' presentation and research skills and their readiness to work independently have been promoted. Thus, debating develops new ways of thinking and raises students' self-confidence. Students are explorers: they are able to acquire knowledge independently. One of the teaching values of debating is the preparation process. This method can be implemented not only within the lessons, but goes beyond the borders of the learning process through using of different electronic means of communication. Students' behavior and learning habits are determined by successfully designed curriculum in both, the process of debating and the preparation process for debating. The performance (debate tournament) is the most important function of learners' individual growth.

Learning method – debating – is a way how to encourage students to participate in their own learning process. It includes preparation process, presentation, team work, prompt decision making, argumentation skills, etc. (*Stephen & Brookfield 2005:308*). Table 1 describes the pedagogical potential through six criteria developed by the researchers Robert B. Barr and John Tagg: mission and goals, resources, structure, theory, productivity, diversity of characters (*Barr & Tagg, 1995*).

**The pedagogical potential of debating**

<i>Criterion</i>	<i>Activities to implement debating as a learning method</i>
Mission and goals	The learning is being activated through debating.
Resources	Using debating inside and outside the classroom, the use of technology has been updated in the education process (search for the information, communication between the students and with the teacher, etc.), the quality and quantity of the results has been promoted as well as a growth of students' success and efficiency of learning.
Structure	Holistic approach to the learning process has been dominating - students approach the resolution as a whole – statement that needs to be researched. Learning process has no boundaries in time-it goes beyond the lesson, teachers and students work together in a team and interdisciplinary link has been ensured.
Theory	When debate is put into practice inside and outside the classroom, the knowledge is gained by enabling the understanding about different processes through interdisciplinary link. Learning process is based on cooperation and support, student-centered learning dominates. Skills of every student are being developed.
Productivity	Knowledge is gained both: individually, and in a team with team mates and also with a help of a teacher/teachers.
Diversity of characters	Teacher and students work together, involving the teachers or experts of other subjects as well. All the involved experience the process of learning.

**The pedagogical preconditions of significant learning**

Significant learning is the highest quality of the learning, which allows student not only to learn the content, but also to reveal new patterns, formulate general conclusions, to apply skills and knowledge in a new, unfamiliar situation and creatively search for the solution. The possibility of a creative action is ensured by students' basic knowledge, skills to analyze and synthesize, and experience to assimilate new knowledge and change the opinion by influence of new information (*Jonāne, 2011*). The leading researcher of the University of Oklahoma, USA, L. Dee Fink (2013) has carried out a research and analyzed the factors affecting the learning process adversely by gathering the views of both teachers and students (USA). The research showed that teachers believe there are various troublesome factors:

- disinterest of the students;
- students' disengagement in the activities, e.g. discussions;
- students' unwillingness to get acquainted with the information sources;
- the emphasis on textbooks;
- students are more interested in obtaining a good assessment rather than knowledge;

- lack of support from colleagues or administration when introducing and applying new methods in the learning process.

Students, however, considered that troublesome factors for successful learning are:

- in their opinion, uninteresting lessons;
- monotonous learning methods used in lessons – working with the notes – teacher dictates, students write;
- learning is particularly based on the preparation from one test to another;
- learning content is not linked with the real life;
- excessive emphasis on the use of textbooks in the learning process (*Fink, 2013*).

Fink's study highlights a number of challenges in today's educational system:

1. Students' unwillingness to participate in the development of the learning process.
2. Monotonous learning methods.

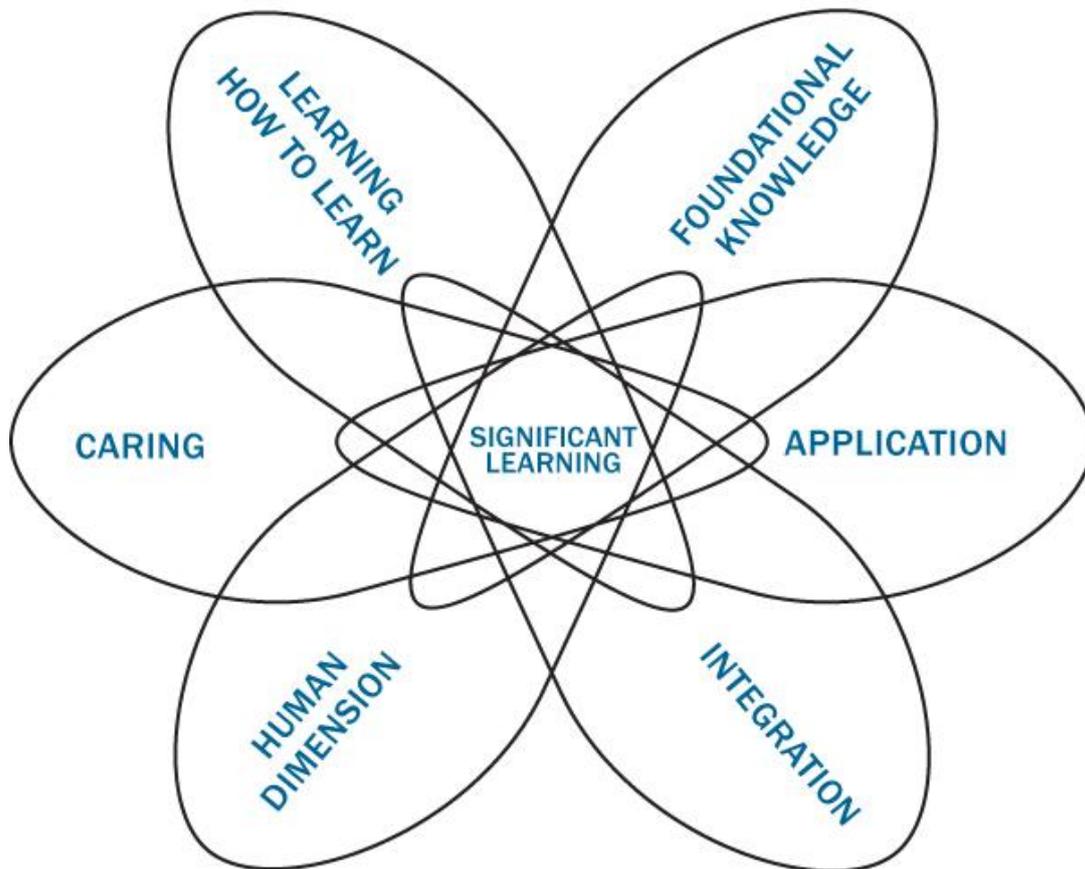
The teacher often has to show the initiative in order to make changes, without any support from colleagues or administration. The lack of communication with the teacher can be recognized as one of the modern school problems. Another problem is the fact that instead of focusing on the education process, teacher focuses on maintaining the discipline in the classroom. Thus, students are not fully involved in the educational process, and as a result a lack of motivation to learn appears. Students communicate with each other, but, unfortunately, the topic is not the current teaching material. There is an opinion dominating in schools and also in the society that learning process ought to be transformed. However, the question is what exactly and how to change it. L. Dee Fink (2013) believes that teacher has to learn how to teach better.

Evaluating the necessity to emphasize the significant learning approach, the interdisciplinary link and a team work is being updated. Unfortunately, these two components are not sufficiently widely used inside or outside the lesson. It has to be admitted that the learning environment cannot be created as a place where students do everything that teacher says. They write everything down, and read everything. In such situation, regardless of the method, results would be achieved. One precondition for the significant learning to be accomplished is the ability to change oneself individually and the society in general. During the lesson planning process, it is essential to evaluate what exactly students will gain from the learning process. Surely, the students learn something from every lesson, but it is important that students learn significantly.

**What action models provide significant learning?** Successful educational process is updated by three correlated questions: What should be taught? How will I organize the scholastic work? Why do students need the particular material (knowledge, skills)? Why should students be taught this particular learning content (knowledge, skills)? Thus both the content (What...?) and methods (How...?) as well as the learning context, meaning and personal

importance of the learning process (Jonāne, 2011). Taxonomy created by L. Dee Fink includes components such as *Foundational knowledge* which covers the content (What...?); *Learning how to learn*, *Application*, *Integration* which covers methods (How...?); *Caring* and *Human dimension* which cover also learning context, meaning and personal significance of the learning process.

L. Dee Fink's taxonomy was created on the basis of required skills in 21<sup>st</sup> century: the ability to learn, communication skills, cooperation skills, ability to be tolerant, flexibility, etc. L. Dee Fink created his taxonomy in order to define how exactly the approach to educational process should change. In order the learning process to be successful, the change has to take place in the student. If the change does not happen, the learning process will be incomplete. L. Dee Fink believes that the change has to take place not only in student's attitude towards learning, but also in the student's personal life. Thus six components have been included in L. Dee Fink's taxonomy.



**Figure 1. L. Dee Fink's taxonomy of significant learning (Fink, 2013, 29)**

Each category of significant learning taxonomy resonates not only with the learning process, but also with extracurricular work and values. The main components:

1. *learning how to learn* includes the desire to become a successful student – learner with independent learning skills and interest about the subject;
2. *foundational knowledge* contains not only knowledge, but also memory, skill to memorize new information, and ability to generate new ideas and to promote understanding;
3. *caring* means the development of new sense, interest, and value. Thus promoting a new attitude towards educational process, which results in new motivation and desire to learn;
4. *application* materializes in a situation when students are learning how to join new intellectual, physical, social and other activities. This component includes the using of existing knowledge to gain new knowledge and skills.
5. *human aspect* combines the ability to understand oneself and the surrounding with the finding of personal correlation within the processes in society;
6. *integration* includes the understanding of the study material integration, e.g. in daily life, as well as implementation of the interdisciplinary approach (Fink, 2013, 26-30).

### **The pedagogical potential of significant learning**

Significant learning can be characterized by its synergistic nature, which is based on students' and teachers' mutual understanding, trust, shared responsibility and cooperation. Productive potential of significant learning is multi-functional, as upbringing and education, teaching and development are organically combined together. Thus every person involved in the process of education is led to purposeful self-evolving and self-empowerment. Due to the implementation of cross-curricular links, significant learning promotes creating of the associations and linking the subject matter with other subjects or practical life (integration). It reveals the importance of the study material for each student individually and the entire class, etc. Thus the human aspect is implemented in the learning process.

The key contributor to the implementation of productive learning is a teacher who determines students' participation in learning, as well as applies a form and methods of implementation of the learning content. The more the taxonomy of these components will be included in the lesson, the more productive teaching will be (Fink, 2013). Significant learning is the result of the using of Fink's taxonomy contained six components in the learning process, which could also be defined as deep learning. The basic idea of the taxonomy is a personal interest in the learning process. A student-centered learning can be considered as a significant learning. Student-centered learning updates the knowledge and skills that students have gained through the processes of discovering and researching. It is *learning how to learn*. Through the implementation of student-centered learning in the classroom, providing information sources, books, internet

resources, etc. students can be given a task which requires undiscovered knowledge (*Brackenbury, 2012*).

Student-centered learning has been successfully applied in the implementation process of the learning method- debating. Students acquire unknown topics during the preparation process for debating tournaments: working individually and in groups. This provides confidence about the opportunities of applying this method not only in the lessons of the English language, but in the other subjects as well. Thus the objectives of significant learning have been achieved.

To get an understanding of the contemporary students' learning habits and find out the conditions of significant teaching and learning, the research had been carried out. Respondents were random 29 students (13 girls and 16 boys), who are active and productive participants of the school debate club (students from form10-12). They were asked to finish two incomplete sentences and answer one control question:

1. *I learn the best when ...*
2. *The best lesson at school is ...*
3. *What should be done for you to learn more successfully?*

The summary of the research shows the different nuances of girls' and boys' answers in the field of significant learning prerequisites. After the analysis of the research data, the categories of groups characterizing the process of learning, were formed: learning environment and resources, learning, collaboration, learning content, teaching and teacher's competence.

Table 2

**Students' responses characterizing aspects of significant learning**

Students	Environment and resources	Learning	Collaboration	Learning content	Teaching	Teacher's competence
Girls	15	11	4	2	3	4
Boys	5	22	8	3	-	9

The gathered data shown in the table 2 reveals the fact that girls' have highlighted the importance of the learning environment: *silence, peaceful atmosphere, background music, physical facilities of the environment: lots of space, the classroom is warm, comfortable chairs, teaching resources*. Boys have emphasized the significance of the aspects of learning highlighting *personal interest, understanding, inspiration, ability to answer and ask questions, the will and responsibility*. Common prerequisites for girls and boys were *good mood, ability to concentrate, motivating reasons, being active, opportunity for creative action*. Significant learning was generally characterized by these dominating statements: *the student's responsibility, emphasis on learning motivation and self-discipline, emphasis on teacher professionalism, enthusiasm and the importance of the learning content*.

Describing the best lesson at school, the following aspects were highlighted:

- active learning and development (9 responses) ;
- importance of teacher's preparation, teaching (5 responses) ;
- expression of students' creativity in the learning process(5 responses);
- exciting learning content (4 responses) and other important factors.

Overall, in 18 of the 29 cases, the learning activities have been highlighted in order to implement successful lessons at school. This fact confirms the potential of significant learning in the process of the implementation of the curriculum in comprehensive school.

Summarizing the responses of the control question: "What should be done for you to learn more successful?", it can be concluded that the dominant understanding of students (12 statements) highlights learning as a student's self-expression and responsibility for his/her own learning process. This fact can be emphasized by the following students' responses: *learning must be faced more seriously; I must have the motivation and sense of security in the process of learning; students' diligence should be highly valued; students' preparation is very important; home work ought to be always done; things should be applied in practice; we need to focus on the learning process*, etc. A number of student responses (6 statements) express confidence in the professionalism of the teacher, thus emphasizing *the teacher's personal interest in the teaching issue* as well as *the understanding of students' needs and interests*. Only one student insists: "It is necessary to find good teachers". This response focuses more on the teacher's responsibility for the learning process rather than personal.

After evaluating the gathered data, the following conclusion can be drawn: the process of significant learning gives an opportunity to experience the gratifying of the results, thus creating a positive attitude towards the learning subject and the debating as a learning method; expanding the personal activity and responsibility for the learning process.

## **Conclusions**

1. In order to implement a significant learning successfully, students' own contribution in the learning process is essential as well as teachers' professionalism while implementing the student-centered learning. Student engagement in the learning process promotes the efficiency of obtaining knowledge and skills, particularly presentation skills, both individually and in group. Therefore new forms of work for the implementation of the learning process are required. The factors influencing the learning process must be assessed in order to diversify and improve the quality of learning in the lessons of the English language and extracurricular educational activities.
2. Students who have gained experience in debating consider that the use of the learning method - debating in the lesson and beyond it helps to

implement student-centered learning. Successfully created learning content determines students' behavior, self-discipline and learning habits in the processes of debating and preparation for debating. Thus the using of technologies in the learning process, as well as the quality and quantity of the results and students' growth has been promoted. This results in the effectiveness of learning and a holistic approach to learning.

3. In the process of significant learning, students use their full potential, discover interdisciplinary link, actualize cooperative learning style, practice communication and gain pedagogical support, develop their individual skills and develop their value system. Thus purposefully the development of students' individuality has been promoted; independent learning skills and decision making have been improved and achievement of the results has been contributed.

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