

Oral debates in Spanish as an additional language classroom: assessment criteria to improve student performance

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ABSTRACT: The oral debate is a classroom discourse genre commonly used to assess the interactional competence of language learners. Nevertheless, its multidimensional features are often not explicitly spelled out to students, and empirical data related to student performance of this genre has thus far received little attention in the literature. With these two issues in mind, a group of Australian students of Spanish as an Additional Language were audio-recorded as they performed during two oral debates, one a practice session, the other a final debate intended to showcase their oral interaction skills for assessment purposes. Between the two debates, the students received feedback from classmates and their instructor on their preliminary debate performance, and the criteria and indicators of achievement by which their final debate performance would be judged were discussed with them. Transcripts of the two debates were subjected to thematic analysis and the results compared. This comparison revealed improvements in student debate performance, especially in terms of effective turn-requesting and turn-alternation. A second outcome was the elaboration of a revised, more detailed set of criteria for assessing the performance in oral debates of upper intermediate-level students, an instrument which will be useful in any Additional Language context.

Keywords: discourse competence; language assessment; discourse genre; oral debate; group discussion; Spanish as a foreign or additional language

Debates en el aula de español como lengua adicional: criterios para evaluar la producción oral

RESUMEN: El debate oral es un género discursivo que se utiliza habitualmente en el aula para evaluar la competencia interaccional. Sin embargo, con frecuencia sus características multidimensionales no se explicitan a los estudiantes ni se utilizan instrumentos de evaluación; faltan, además, datos empíricos sobre cómo debaten en el aula quienes están aprendiendo español. Por estas razones, en este artículo se analiza un corpus de datos de un grupo de aprendices australianos de español como lengua adicional durante dos debates orales, uno de práctica y otro final evaluable. Entre los dos debates, los estudiantes recibieron comentarios de sus compañeros de clase y de su docente, y se discutió con ellos los criterios e indicadores de logro con los que se evaluaría su actuación en el debate final. El análisis temático realizado permite comparar y revelar las mejoras en la actuación de los estudiantes. Los resultados

destacan, por un lado, la mayor eficacia en la petición y en la alternancia de turnos de habla, así como una mayor variedad de recursos léxico gramaticales empleados. Por último, el estudio aporta una herramienta de evaluación detallada para evaluar en un nivel avanzado de aprendizaje del español el género debate oral formal, que puede aplicarse en cualquier contexto de lenguas adicionales.

Palabras clave: competencia discursiva; evaluación de lenguas; género discursivo; debate oral; discusión en grupo; español como lengua extranjera o adicional.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to determine the kinds of parameters that must be considered to assess a group debate carried out in the language learning classroom. The importance of group discussions or classroom debates about a topic in the classroom has been detailed in various documents of reference in Europe. For example, in general terms, the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR, 2001, 2020) includes debates and discussion as “spoken text-types” to be learned to achieve competence in a language. In the field of Spanish as an Additional Language (AL¹), the specific context for this study, the *Plan Curricular del Instituto Cervantes* (PCIC; Instituto Cervantes, 2006) includes the discourse genre *debates and public discussions* in its criteria for an upper intermediate (CEFR B2) level of linguistic competence.

However, assessing student performance in this sort of oral interaction task by means of a set of specific descriptors or indicators is not a simple task, and explaining such assessment parameters students is even less so. Nonetheless, it is this task that we will attempt to explore here. Thus, two main research questions underlie this study:

RQ1. What are the assessment criteria and indicators of achievement that can measure the competence of AL learners, specifically AL Spanish students, as they perform in oral debates?

RQ2. If students of AL Spanish become aware of the assessment criteria against which their performance will be judged, will their subsequent performance become more effective?

To answer these questions, first we characterise the genre of discourse which is the object of our study, the *oral debate* in academic contexts, a teaching-learning-assessing text to be mastered at an upper intermediate level of communicative language competence. We then define a set of parameters for measuring communicative competence in the performance of this genre. Finally, we apply those criteria to obtain empirical data about this discourse genre competence in a group of Australian university students learning AL Spanish, in first

¹ We prefer the term *additional language* rather than *foreign language* because it allows for the possibility that the language being added to the linguistic repertoire of students is not necessarily “foreign”. That said, with regard to Spanish as an AL, the most widely used acronym in Spanish is ELE (*español como lengua extranjera* ‘Spanish as a foreign language’).

preparatory ‘mock’ debates and then in final debates in which they are formally assessed. Between the two debates, the students will receive teacher and peer feedback regarding the skills and behaviours on which they will be assessed. Our aim is to analyse the aspects that most differentiate the students’ performance in the final debates compared to the mock ones, and thus determine the impact of the intervening feedback.

2. ORAL DEBATES IN THE CLASSROOM

2.1. Assessing oral performance in classroom debates

There is still a gap in the characterisation of the different oral interactional discourse genres that a language learner must practice in the classroom to ultimately demonstrate his/her communicative competence. The specific features of interaction to be assessed are considered in the CEFR, which distinguishes between dialogic and monologic discourses.

The CEFR goes on to offer specific descriptors for *spoken*, *written* and *online interaction*. We are interested here in the spoken interaction discourse genres which the CEFR calls *formal discussion* or *debates*, defined as a type of interaction proper to academic and professional settings in which language is used to evaluate and solve problems (CEFR, 2020, p. 33), which contrasts with *conversation*, for example, whose macro-function is creative, interpersonal language use. With the purpose of evaluating or solving problems in *formal discussion* (differentiated from *informal discussion with friends*), the parameters considered in the CEFR are:

- *type of meeting and topics*: from exchanges on practical problems to discussions of abstract, complex, unfamiliar issues;
- *ability to follow the discussion*: from needing repetition and clarification to understanding points given prominence and keeping up with animated debate;
- *ability to contribute*: from needing to rehearse and get help with formulation to probing, evaluating and challenging the contributions of others and arguing one’s own position convincingly.

CEFR (2020, p. 75)

Moreover, the CEFR (2020) highlights three type of interaction strategies that are necessary to demonstrate competence in this communicative activity: *taking the floor (turn-taking)*, *cooperating* and *asking for clarification*. These critical skills of discourse competence can be identified in the discourse produced by B2-level students while debating if they hold an “animated discussion”, can present an “argument convincingly”, “participate actively” or interact “with effective turn-taking” (CEFR 2020, pp. 88-89). As for argumentation, the CEFR (2020, Appendix 8) adds specific supplementary descriptors about discussions or nowadays genres such as online conversation. However, for assessment purposes, it is important to stipulate more specific descriptors related to linguistic features and to consider whether these parameters are understood in the same way in the languages that students speak and the cultures they belong to.

2.2. Research on oral debates in the classroom

Considerable research has been done with regard to interactive spoken discourse genres in Spanish, especially informal conversation in everyday settings (Gallardo Paúls, 1998; Briz & Grupo Val.Es.Co. 2000; Cestero, 2005; Loureda & Schrott 2021) or more formal interactions in public settings such as TV or radio debates, interviews and talk shows (e.g., Calsamiglia et al., 1994; Cortés Rodríguez & Sánchez Villanueva 2021). Regarding the academic context, oral interaction has been analysed as a form of language mediation for learning within the social interactionism paradigm (Van Lier 1989; Nussbaum 1995) or within a didactic purpose (Moreno Fernández 2002; Pérez Ruíz 2016; Bustos Gisbert & Sánchez Iglesias; Merzlikina 2021). However, more specifically in language teaching, learning and assessment contexts, as highlighted by May et al. (2020, p. 165), interactional competence is an area that is relatively under-explored.

Regarding the study of oral debate in the classroom, the research shows several lines. The first line focuses on the development of skills in first languages (L1) as an important part of cross-curricular university competences, which are relevant to a wide variety of disciplines. In this approach, the debate is conceived from a rhetorical perspective with, for example, a focus on persuasion (Cortés & Muño, 2012). By contrast, a second line of research focusing on the AL learning context has tended to adopt a discursive perspective (as will we), with several studies looking at the patterns of argumentation employed in debates (Duarte et al., 2020; Galaczi & Taylor, 2018). Findings in this area show that the argumentative strategies most frequently used by students are giving examples based on personal experiences and rebutting or supporting the opinions of classmates. Authors in this line point to the need for classroom approaches that will enhance students' understanding of argumentation, and their awareness of genre (Galaczi & Taylor, 2018, p. 288). In fact, as various other scholars have emphasised, genre awareness is crucial to achieve successful interactional competence (Paltridge, 2001; Stobart & Hopfenbeck, 2014; Martín Peris et al., 2021).

As first noted by Swales (1996), this lack of genre awareness in students is a consequence of the often 'occluded' nature of spoken academic discourse genres, especially face-to-face oral exams (Cañada y López Ferrero, 2019; May et al., 2020). Although such exam dialogues have important consequences, because they have a direct impact on whether the student will pass or fail the course leading to the passing or failing of a student according to the way he or she interacts, their linguistic-discursive features have traditionally not been made explicit to students—or teachers, often. Research in this area has identified the twin needs for clear assessment criteria on the one hand and discussion of these criteria with students on the other. For example, May et al. (2020) and Nakatsuhara et al. (2018) report on a broad project which aims to develop a practical checklist with accompanying descriptors descriptions that teachers can complete to assess a student's competence and then use to give the learner feedback on his/her interactional skills.

In the field of teaching Spanish as an AL, several studies have explored the use of debates in the classroom for specific didactic purposes. For example, Acosta (2020) looks at classroom debate as a tool for developing critical thinking (Acosta, 2020) and Martín Soria (2013) uses practical cases to help students learn techniques of political debate. However, the empirical data is scanty and we still lack specific descriptions of assessment tools. To our knowledge, Acosta-Ortega (2019) has developed the most complete empirical study

regarding interactional competence in AL Spanish in three different classroom activities: stories, open-ended discussions, and goal-oriented cooperation. Turn-taking, pragmatic-discursive resources in turn-taking and in backchannels, and collaboration sequences are analysed in the study. The results provide evidence for specific learning needs such as variation in pragmatic-discursive markers and silence management, for example. However, aside from these studies, as we have noted, empirical studies on the performance of AL learners in oral debates are scarce.

Therefore, the goal of this paper is to help fill two important gaps in the research. First, we will develop and fine-tune a set of criteria by which to assess intermediate-level student performance in the oral debate classroom discourse genre. On the grounds that enhanced learner awareness of the genre will improve their performance of it, we will discuss these assessment criteria with the students. Finally, by thematically analysing student verbal output during debates before and after exposure to the assessment criteria, we will seek empirical evidence of the impact of this greater genre awareness on their performance in oral debates.

3. THE STUDY

3.1. Participants

Participants were 24 undergraduates enrolled in an upper-intermediate level (B2.1 according to CEFR) AL Spanish course at an Australian university during the spring semester of 2019. Participants are matriculated in different degrees in Humanities and Social Sciences.

3.2. Mock debates, student feedback and final debates

The data was collected by the first author, who was also the course instructor. The course consisted of two hour-long face-to-face class sessions per week over a 12-week term. The oral skills component of each student's final grade was based on the instructor's assessment of their performance in a group debate centred around a text, which took place in the last week (week 12). These oral activities were carried out in six separate groups consisting of four students each, without intervention on the part of the instructor.

As a training activity for the final debates, the students did mock debates in class at week 9. However, total durations for the mock and final debates were different: the mock could not exceed 8 minutes while the final debate was limited to 12 minutes. As each group of students was performing their mock debate, they were observed by their classmates, who then wrote down feedback consisting of at least one positive comment and any suggestions for improvement, which was collected by the instructor.

López Ferrero et al. (2019) have proposed that discourse genres can be analysed across three dimensions, textual, pragmatic and sociocultural. After the feedback was analysed, a tentative set of criteria for assessing debate performance was prepared for further discussion with the students at week 10. These criteria (see Table 3) emerged from the teacher's own notes on the debates, the students' feedback, and the dimensional framework presented in López Ferrero et al. (2019). The criteria consisted of five basic components, namely, coherent argumentation, active participation, verbal and non-verbal strategies, formal debate structure and the use of visual aids.

Table 3. *Preliminary set of criteria for assessing student performance in an oral debate*

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA	DESCRIPTION
1. Solid argumentation	Argues own position, related to the learner's sociocultural context, questions views or content set out in article around which debate centres, lays out advantages and disadvantages
2. Active participation	Participates actively in group, contributes to discussion, uses time judiciously in turn-taking, keeps interaction fluid, remains polite
3. Verbal and non-verbal strategies	Uses verbal and non-verbal strategies to catch audience's attention, asks fellow-debaters questions, uses appropriate intonation and emphasis, articulates clearly, maintains eye-contact, etc.
4. Formal debate structure	Follows agreed structure of debate, moderated by a member of the group
5. Visual aids	Appropriately uses visuals such as tables, figures, images or graphs (graphics, etc.)

Criterion 1 is related to the sociocultural dimension of the *oral debate* discourse genre and is linked to students' agency and their critical attitude. Criteria 2 and 3 are part of the pragmatic dimension, determined by the situational parameters of time and space, and the relationship between the participants in the discussion. Finally, criteria 4 and 5 have to do with the linguistic and textual dimension, since they involve adhering to the formal structure of the discussion and choosing appropriate linguistic resources.

One class session in week 10 was devoted to reflecting on student performance in the mock debates with a view to being ready for the final debate in week 12.

3.3. Data corpus

All six groups were audio-recorded as they performed both the mock debates at week 9 and the final debates at week 12, yielding a total of 163 minutes of recorded material (mock debates 70 min, final debates 93 min). These recordings were manually transcribed and compiled into a single corpus for analysis. Student errors in Spanish (whether morphological, syntactic or lexical) were transliterated verbatim, as were the occasional uses of English. Since the recordings did not include video, we restricted our analysis to verbal aspects, and excluded non-verbal cues such as gestures, gaze, posture, etc.

3.4. Qualitative methods: categories of analysis

A qualitative research approach (Flick, 2009) was adopted for this study to identify improvements in performance between the mock and oral debates. We used a thematic analysis

based on an iterative process of coding using concept-driven codes as described by Gibbs (2012, p. 44). Analysis proceeded in the following three steps.

Five macro-levels of categories of analysis were established. These corresponded to the tentative set of criteria for assessing the oral debate genre (see Table 3). Each macro-level category was broken into micro-levels based on the achievement indicators agreed between the researchers for each criterion. This was done taking into account the research reviewed and the CEFR indicators of discourse competence, which are detailed as part of pragmatic competence in the following 6 categories: Flexibility, Turn-taking, Thematic development, Coherence and cohesion, Propositional precision, and spoken fluency (Council of Europe, 2020, p.138-142). This model has been adapted for our research purposes. Using these tentative micro-levels, the mock debate and final debate corpora were coded by two researchers working independently. When this first coding pass was completed, the two researchers met to discuss any discrepancies in their results. On the basis of this preliminary work, the sub-categories were further refined and consensus was reached on eleven sub-categories, resulting in the final categories for analysis shown in Table 4.

Table 4. *Macro- and micro-level categories for thematic analysis of corpus*

MACRO-LEVEL CATEGORIES	MICRO-LEVEL CATEGORIES (INDICATORS OF ACHIEVEMENT)
1. Solid argumentation	Justifying different opinions Using reliable information sources to support argumentation Giving examples and relating the topic discussed with learner's sociocultural context
2. Active participation	Managing speaking turns Requesting turn-taking appropriately Negotiating different positions
3. Verbal and non-verbal strategies	Drawing attention to an original or curious event
4. Formal debate structure	Introducing opening sequences formally Announcing closing sequences and highlighting main ideas Negotiating different positions
5. Visual aids	Appropriately uses visuals such as tables, figures, images or graphs graphics, etc.)

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Criteria and indicators of achievement for assessing performance in oral debates in the classroom

A comprehensive set of criteria and indicators of achievement for assessing student performance in oral classroom debates was devised based on the thematic analysis of the two debate subcorpora (Table 5). It will immediately be noted that it closely follows the structure of the preliminary version shown in Table 3 and reflects the categories of analysis presented in Table 4. It is intended to be universally applicable to any intermediate-level academic context where performance in oral debates is to be assessed. In line with the idea that learners should be fully aware of the features and indicators of achievement of any genre on which they will be tested, it is assumed that this information will be explained to and discussed with students before it is used to assess their performance.

Table 5. *Criteria and indicators of achievement for assessing student performance in oral debates in academic contexts*

CRITERIA	INDICATORS OF ACHIEVEMENT
<i>The participant in the debate....</i>	
SOCIOCULTURAL DIMENSION 1. The content is presented critically and with solid argumentation	1. Justifies his/her point of view, i.e. what he/she intends to argue for or against: the reason for his/her position is made clear. 2. Can express a variety of opinions and ideas, articulate the advantages and disadvantages of various views, and can provide arguments that expand on the point of view that is being defended. 3. Can elaborate on the topic being debated, providing new information by explaining concepts and terms that may be unfamiliar to the other participants in the debate. 4. Challenges the point of view of the author of or the information in the article being used to stimulate the debate (if such a stimulus is being used), calling attention to the fact when relevant information is omitted, or the language used in the article favours a certain ideological stance on the issue, etc. 5. Uses reliable and up-to-date sources. 6. Relates the topic to the learner’s socio-cultural context (common or divergent points are established); gives examples of analogous cases in their context.

CRITERIA	INDICATORS OF ACHIEVEMENT
<i>The participant in the debate....</i>	
PRAGMATIC DIMENSION	<p>1. Uses his/her turn for an appropriate length of time.</p> <p>2. Allows speaking turns to alternate fluently; uses time to present an idea, argue it and conclude.</p> <p>3. Duly allows the moderator to designate turn-taking.</p> <p>4. Requests turn-taking appropriately; uses explicit resources for the change of speaker, e.g., to support or refute the previously presented point of view.</p> <p>5. Makes reference to what has been mentioned by other participants previously or to facts already known.</p> <p>6. Negotiates different positions with conditions for their fulfilment.</p> <hr/> <p>Verbal</p> <p>1. Captures attention in his/her opening sequence by</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) proffering a question or sentence that identifies the topic being presented. b) explaining the relevance of the topic to the present day c) arousing interest through an original or curious event, etc. <p>Non-verbal</p> <p>1. Addresses his/her fellow participants in the debate, not the teacher; uses eye contact to include the whole audience.</p> <p>2. Does not read or does so while maintaining eye contact with the audience.</p> <p>3. Accompanies speech with appropriate and dynamic facial expressions, gestures and body posture.</p> <hr/> <p>4. The structure of the debate is followed, moderated by a member of the group</p> <p>In the opening sequence, the debate is formally introduced by a brief summary of the topic, the participants are introduced by name and institution with which they are associated or position and the roles they play, including the role of moderator, etc.</p> <p>During the debate, there is alternation of turns, to express agreement and disagreement with the views of the other participants.</p> <p>In the closing sequence,</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. the end of the discussion is announced (by means of discourse markers, pauses, etc.), to highlight the main message, and 2. the moderator links the closing of the debate with a conclusion that holistically summarises the participants' previously stated perspectives. <p>Tables, figures, images, graphs, or publications such as press articles or tweets, etc. are used to support argumentation, with sources duly acknowledged</p> <hr/> <p>5. Visual aids strengthen and clarify the discussion</p>
LINGUISTIC-TEXTUAL DIMENSION	

These indicators make it possible to characterise the use of spoken language in an oral debate and facilitate its assessment.

By way of comparison, recent research by May et al. (2020) provides assessment criteria for the B2 Cambridge First Certificate paired interaction task. These authors draw on five macro themes already established for the rating scale in *Cambridge English*: the student 1) initiates discussions and introduces new ideas; 2) responds to partner; 3) maintains and develops the interaction; 4) negotiates towards an outcome; and 5) the extent to which support is needed. In their study they add three more criteria: “6) interactive listening; 7) body language; and 8) rater reflections which focused on the manner or perceived authenticity of the interaction” (p. 14). The criteria they state focus on the pragmatic dimension and are not contradictory but rather complementary to those we have proposed in Table 5. Nevertheless, the proposal we offer here is restricted to the specific guidelines of the task and the framework of the group oral debate discourse genre in academic contexts.

4.2. Improvements in student performance

With regard to differences in student performance from mock to final debate, our analysis yielded significant results. In the following section, our results and discussion will be guided by the three dimensions established to study interactional competence in oral debates. Attending to the most salient findings, the pragmatic dimension will be discussed first, followed by the sociocultural and linguistic textual dimensions.

4.2.1. Pragmatic dimension: animated discussion

The pragmatic dimension, as clarified in the assessment criteria (see Table 5), focuses on fluid, spontaneous and balanced participation among the participants. Our thematic comparison of the mock and final debate subcorpora showed that improvement occurred chiefly in two aspects: turn duration, and requests for turn-taking accomplished through structures for adding information.

Descriptive statistics for duration and turn-taking in the mock and final debates are shown in Table 6. It will be seen that while the average number of turns per debate increased from 7.5 in the mock debates to 22.8 in the final debates, the average number of turns per participant increased from 1.8 to 5.6 but the average duration of each turn fell from 58 seconds to 34. In other words, students took shorter turns in the final debate but spoke more often. This reflects a shift from the monologue-like oral discourse that characterizes the first oral debates to the much more dialogical interaction observed in the final debates.

Table 6. *Descriptive statistics for mock and final debates*

	MOCK ORAL DEBATES	FINAL ORAL DEBATES
Average number of turns per debate=	7.5	22.8
Average number of turns per participant	1.8	5.6
Average duration of one turn, in seconds	58	34
Average duration per debate, in seconds	395.5	725.3

As Acosta-Ortega (2019) points out, some interactions are more mono-managed, like in *storytelling* interactions, while others, such as *open discussions* and *agreement discussions*, tend to be pluri-managed. Our analysis reveals that the final debates are more pluri-managed than the mock debates. This is a feature that we consider positively significant because the debate genre requires alternation among participants.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that current L1 and LA teaching practices tend to offer students more classroom opportunities to produce expository oral texts such as presentations rather than interactive debating. If students are more familiar with expository oral delivery, this is likely to be the model or schema they reproduce in any oral performance context, even if it this behaviour is inappropriate to the target discourse genre.

These results corroborate what Cañada y López Ferrero (2019) state, namely that only if learners understand clearly the parameters for how to communicate appropriately in a given context will they be able to act as authentic ‘interlocutors’. Becoming aware of what it means to interact orally (e.g., contributing to advancing the topic of discourse, using relevant backchannels, initiating and reacting, etc.) and the linguistic resources needed to do this—in other words, making visible what has traditionally been ‘occluded’—is the real way to develop discourse competence.

The second most significant area of improvement in student performance between mock and final debates concerned the appropriateness of turn-taking requests. An explicit linguistic resource often employed by the learners in both mock and final debates to request a turn involved adding information to the topic being discussed. However, in the final debates, students used a greater variety of strategies, as illustrated by the corpus excerpts in (1).

(1) • *Me gustaría añadir que no creo que sea justo que nos hayan avisado de esta situación tan tarde.* ‘I would like to add that I don’t believe it is fair that they have informed us of this situation so late.

- *Tiene razón. Yo tengo que algo que añadir.* ‘You’re right. I have something to add.’
- *Me gustaría a mí decir algo, aquí.* ‘I would like to say something here’

Moreover, less genuine Spanish expressions frequently based on syntactic translation from English, such as *para añadir otro punto* ‘to add another point’ seen in (2), were found more often during the mock oral debate.

(2) *Para añadir otro punto, quería mencionar como la compañía Nike ha traído mucha atención, [...]* ‘To add another point, I wanted to mention how the Nike company has attracted a lot of attention...’

4.2.2. Sociocultural dimension: contextualised and solid argumentation

The results of the analysis showed that in both mock and final debates participants effectively deployed argument strategies based on linking the topic with their interpretation of the facts and their socio-cultural context to achieve a meaningful discourse, as can be seen in excerpts (3) to (5).

- (3) [...] *por ejemplo, en Australia el gobierno en poder ha dado muchas soluciones para proteger la cultura indígenas* [...] ‘... for example, in Australia the government in power has provided many solutions to protect the indigenous culture...’
- (4) Sí, pues el Gobierno australiano tiene una situación similar con su crisis de refugiados. ‘Yeah, so the Australian government has a similar situation with it refugee crisis.’
- (5) *Sí, a mí me gusta cómo está Australia en este momento* [...] *¿has visto la campaña de “Your right to know”?* ‘Yeah, I like the way Australia is right now... Have you seen the “Your right to know” campaign?’

These results are similar to those reported in Fonseca Velandia et al. (2020), where students used their own experiences and prior knowledge to support their argumentation.

To prepare students for the mock debates, the instructor stressed the importance of backing up argumentation with reliable and up-to-date sources, and reiterated this point in the week 10 feedback session. While only two examples of this practice were found in the mock oral debates, it became much more common in the final debates, as exemplified by the excerpts in (6).

- (6) • *Estas publicaciones colaboraron con 17 expertos en varias disciplinas, como biología, química y matemáticas, para recolectar información entre Latinoamérica* ‘These publications collaborated with 17 experts in various disciplines such as biology, chemistry and mathematics to gather information in Latin America’
- *... según el Ministerio de la Economía* ‘... according to the Ministry of the Economy’
- *... según Trump, el presidente de los Estados Unidos* ‘... according to Trump, the President of the United States’

With respect to sequencing strategies, in the final debate it was observed that the learners modulated their discourse more to determine the importance of the arguments put forward. The hierarchisation of discourse is a symbol of discourse competence. In our data, hierarchisation was realised by means of discourse markers, comparative structures, adverbs and focalisers. Some examples from the final debates can be seen in (7).

- (7) • *en primer lugar* ‘in the first place’
- *lo primero* ‘the first thing’
- *Pero, por el otro lado* ‘But, on the other hand’
- *por una parte* ‘on the one hand’
- *A fin de cuentas* ‘at the end of the day’
- *por ultimo* ‘finally’

Being able to use these markers to modulate discourse is also part of the linguistic-textual dimension of discourse competence.

4.2.3. Linguistic-textual dimension: formal debate structure and visual support

Our discussion of the linguistic-textual dimension will focus on three features: opening and closing sequences and visual support. An example of an opening sequence can be seen in (8). This sequence was produced during a final debate and contains two important features: first the debate is formally introduced by a summary of the topic and then the participants are introduced by their names and the institution with which they are affiliated, their position and/or the roles they will play in the debate.

- (8) *Bienvenidos a este episodio del Debate Argentino. Hoy vamos a descubrir el poder de las multinacionales, especialmente, Monsanto, el proveedor más grande de semillas y químicos para los productos transgénicos. [...] Aquí tenemos Miguel Valverde, un campesino indígena que está preocupado por el poder de Monsanto [...].* ‘Welcome to this episode of the Argentinian Debate. Today we are going to discover the power of multinationals, especially Monsanto, the most important supplier of seeds and chemicals for transgenic products. [...] This is Miguel Valverde, an indigenous farmer who is concerned by Monsanto’s power in Latin America...’

As explained in the criteria, the pragmatic dimension is also involved in the opening sequence because it is here that audience attention should be captured through a question that identifies the topic being presented. We found examples such as (9), taken from a final debate, where participants are prompted with a question to initiate the opening sequence, but as often occurred during the mock debate, the participants are not introduced.

- (9) *¿Alguno de ustedes ha visto este artículo sobre la ley contra la mentira en Bolivia?* ‘Have any of you seen this article about the law against lying from Bolivia?’

Another interesting case illustrated a negotiation between conflicting parties, though this did not strictly speaking match the target oral genre. The opening sequence of this final debate, reproduced in (10), is appropriately formal in tone. Although the topic is not summarised, the turn is handed over to the other participants, who then introduce themselves and proceeded to present their respective positions on the issue.

- (10) *Buenos días, bienvenidos a todos a nuestra reunión. Como todos saben, soy la gerente de las relaciones humanas y hoy me acompaña la directora de relaciones. Entonces, con la directora aquí, es claro que durante este tiempo tenemos alguna información muy importante para el futuro de esta empresa y ustedes por igual. Y con eso, dejaré que la directora se presente.* ‘Good morning. Welcome, everyone, to our meeting. As you all know, I am the director of human relations and today I am accompanied by the director of relations. So, with the director here, it is clear that during this time we [will] have some very important information for the future of this company and also you. And with these words, I will let the director introduce herself.’

With regard to closing sequences, our analysis showed that in the mock debates they were frequently left incomplete or even at times omitted altogether.

This can be clearly seen in (11), where the closing sequence deviates from the established criteria. During the last speaking turn, the participant shares a point of view and proposes a solution, but there is no conclusion or indication of the completion of the task, which must be intuited from the abrupt silence of the participants.

- (11) *De cara a dicho panorama, tengo una respuesta. A ver qué os parece [...]. Propongo que la empresa ETM tenga que ayudar a los afectados por la reubicación y el desarrollo de nuevas comunidades, siempre y cuando no hubiera más inundaciones.* ‘With regards to this situation, I have an answer. Let’s see what you think. I propose that the ETM company should be obliged to help those affected by the resettlement and development of new communities, provided that there are no more floods.’

Other examples of abrupt closing were found throughout the mock debates. For instance, participants often ended the discussion with the words *de acuerdo* ‘OK’, then turned to address the teacher directly and said *ya está* ‘that’s it’.

In comparing the closing sequences of the mock and final oral debates, we found notable differences. In final debates, the observed closing sequences tended to approximate the desired target more closely. This can be seen in (12), where the end of the debate is announced, and participants are thanked. Moreover, the moderator closes the discussion with concluding remarks tied to the topic.

- (12) *Gracias, Angela, y a todos por sus contri... contribuciones a la discusión. A fin de cuentas, está claro que es una tema muy controversial que no tiene ninguna respuesta fácil. Quizás en el futuro podamos unirnos para solucionar estas problemas que se presentaron en el debate con el propósito para mejorar el sector agrario, pero con esto acabamos el debate.* ‘Thank you, Angela, and all of you for your contri... contributions to the discussion. In the end, it is clear that it is a very controversial topic that has no easy answer. Maybe in future we can meet to solve these problems that were presented in the debate for the purpose of improving the agricultural sector, but with this we conclude the debate.’

With the final utterance *pero con esto acabamos el debate* ‘but with this we conclude the debate’, the student explicitly closes the debate. Similar closing moves have also been highlighted in previous studies (Nguyen, 2017).

Finally, as stated in the assessment criteria, visual aids can strengthen and clarify the discussion. In the final debates, students occasionally made use of visuals, as can be seen in (13).

- (13) *Hay muchísimos casos de niños nacidos con deformidades: mira esta foto, triste muy triste.* ‘There are many, many cases of children born with deformities: look at this photo—sad, very sad.’

4. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE LINES OF RESEARCH

The results of our comparative thematic analysis of transcripts revealed clear changes in learners' performances from the mock to final oral debates. This suggests that discussion of this oral genre had a positive impact on the students' execution of the learning activity. In other words, making the criteria and indicators of achievement explicit led to greater mastery of the genre. The class activities carried out following the mock oral debate, namely peer feedback and the creation of a renewed checklist by which to assess the final debates, also contributed the preparation of the final detailed set of criteria and indicators of achievement, which, we believe, accurately reflect the competence of AL learners at the level of competence studied (level B2). This constitutes an answer to our first research question. Importantly, though these criteria were developed in the context of an AL Spanish learning context, it should be noted that this instrument is fully applicable to any B2-level language-learning context.

As for the second research question, greater student awareness of assessment criteria led to several improvements in students' performance. They seemed to have gained a clearer understanding of what constitutes an *animated discussion*, how to participate in *effective turn-taking* and how to provide *solid argumentation*. By sorting these improvements in performance according to the three dimensions of discourse genres, we have seen that, first, in the sociocultural dimension students learned to share their point of view while relating the topic with their sociocultural background. Second, with regard to the pragmatic dimension, by the time of the final debate students' performance had become more dynamic and they were more balanced in their use of time, taking shorter but more frequent turns. Finally, related to the linguistic-textual dimension, students had improved their management of opening and closing sequences and recourse to visual aids, as required by formal debate structure.

Related to the implications of our study for foreign or additional languages teaching and learning, feedback student literacy is needed. We have proved in our results the positive impact that the discussion about teacher and classmates' feedback from the mock debates has had in the final formal debates. This is due to the process shared with learners to "make sense of information about their performance" and to the exercitation to "use it to enhance the quality of their work": this is the way *feedback for learning* has been defined (Carless & Boud, 2018; Han & Xu, 2020). We have offered a key tool to develop the student literacy in feedback: the criteria and indicators of achievement for assessing their oral debates in Spanish as an additional language classroom.

Two issues raised in this study require further exploration. First, as noted in the results, a variety of lexical and grammatical resources can be used to verbalise the indicators of achievement of the different dimensions of the oral debate as a genre depending on the language level. Second, from a psycholinguistic perspective, the degree to which students actually internalise the descriptors defining oral competence in academic debates remains to be examined.

The study shows that results should be interpreted in the context under investigation because, due to the nature of the qualitative design and the sample of participants, the results may not be generalisable to other educational settings. We would like to stress also that the international context of teaching and learning Spanish requires raising awareness of the variation of this language. For this reason, the focus should be not only on the production

model of the debates but also on helping to interpret other debates in different socio-cultural contexts (i.e. the role expected of the participants).

Finally, it is essential for the teachers involved to agree on evaluation criteria. It may be true that these criteria can be ephemeral because they emerge in the specific classroom, depending on the context and the class group. Nevertheless, sharing referential assessment criteria among language instructors remains practical and efficient as a starting point for teachers to develop them according to students' needs.

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