

Qualitative Insights into Speaking Skill Development Through Debating

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ABSTRACT

Speaking skill is one of the most challenging aspects of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. This qualitative study investigates how debating activities have an effect on undergraduate students' speaking skill development. Seven undergraduate students majoring in English Literature in Sekolah Tinggi Bahasa Asing Persahabatan Internasional Asia (STBA-PIA) participated in semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis revealed four major themes: (1) difficulties in speaking English, including vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and anxiety; (2) improvement in speaking skills through debating, particularly fluency, vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar; (3) enhancement of confidence, motivation, and anxiety management; and (4) development of argumentation and critical thinking skills. The findings imply that debates are an effective pedagogical strategy fostering language skills, cognitive, and socio-emotional development. Implications for teaching include integrating structured debates in EFL classrooms to improve speaking skills and promote learner autonomy. The study also shows the importance of qualitative methods to better understand learners' perceptions and experiences in language learning.

Keywords: EFL speaking, debate, qualitative study, argumentation, critical thinking, speaking anxiety

ABSTRAK

Kemampuan berbicara merupakan salah satu aspek paling sulit dalam pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing (EFL). Studi kualitatif ini meneliti bagaimana aktivitas debat berpengaruh terhadap perkembangan kemampuan berbicara mahasiswa S1. Tujuh mahasiswa S1 jurusan Sastra Inggris di Sekolah Tinggi Bahasa Asing Persahabatan Internasional Asia (STBA-PIA) berpartisipasi dalam wawancara semi-terstruktur. Analisis tematik mengungkapkan empat tema utama: (1) kesulitan dalam berbicara bahasa Inggris, termasuk kosakata, tata bahasa, pengucapan, dan kecemasan; (2) peningkatan kemampuan berbicara melalui debat, khususnya kelancaran, kosakata, pengucapan, dan tata bahasa; (3) peningkatan kepercayaan diri, motivasi, dan manajemen kecemasan; dan (4) pengembangan kemampuan argumentasi dan berpikir kritis. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa debat merupakan strategi pedagogis yang efektif untuk meningkatkan kemampuan berbahasa, perkembangan kognitif, dan sosio-emosional. Implikasi untuk pengajaran meliputi pengintegrasian debat terstruktur di kelas EFL untuk meningkatkan kemampuan berbicara dan mendorong otonomi pembelajaran. Studi ini juga menunjukkan pentingnya penggunaan metode kualitatif untuk lebih memahami persepsi dan pengalaman pembelajaran dalam pembelajaran bahasa.

Kata kunci: Berbicara EFL, debat, studi kualitatif, argumentasi, berpikir kritis, kecemasan berbicara

A. Introduction

Speaking skill plays a vital role in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, as it enables learners to express ideas, negotiate meaning, and participate effectively in academic and social communication. In many EFL contexts, particularly in higher education, students are expected to demonstrate oral proficiency through presentations, discussions, and collaborative tasks. However, speaking remains one of the most challenging language skills for EFL learners to master. Learners often face difficulties related to limited vocabulary, grammatical inaccuracy, pronunciation problems, and lack of fluency, which in turn negatively affect their confidence and willingness to speak (Harmer, 2015; Karmida et al., 2024).

A major issue associated with speaking skill development is learners' speaking anxiety and passive participation in classroom activities. Research indicates that fear of making mistakes, negative peer evaluation, and low self-confidence are the barriers to English oral proficiency and significantly reduce learners' willingness to communicate orally in EFL classrooms (Liu & Jackson, 2018; Hijra et al., 2024). In numerous instructional settings, speaking activities are frequently restricted to structured tasks such as short question-answer sessions or rehearsed conversations. While such activities may support accuracy, they do not adequately encourage the use of spontaneous language or prolonged verbal expression. As a result, students might experience several years of English training without developing sufficient speaking fluency or confidence in communication.

In order to resolve the challenges, instructional strategies that are learner-centered and interactive are essential for encouraging meaningful oral communication. A pedagogical method that has attracted growing interest in EFL contexts is classroom debating. Debate activities require learners to develop

arguments, defend viewpoints, respond to counterarguments, and participate in dynamic interaction with peers. Through these methods, learners are motivated to utilize language intentionally and spontaneously. Some studies have demonstrated that debate-based instruction enhances learners' speaking skills by improving fluency, vocabulary usage, and confidence (Alasmari, 2019; Fauzan, 2016; Sahril et al., 2020).

Previous studies have also recorded learners' positive perceptions of debate as a speaking activity. Zare and Othman (2015) found that classroom debates enhanced students' speaking abilities while also fostering critical thinking and self-confidence. These findings indicate that debating holds a significant role as a teaching method for tackling common speaking issues in EFL classrooms. Similarly, Soomro and Farooq (2018) discovered that EFL students viewed debate as an engaging and motivating strategy that improved their oral communication abilities.

Although a substantial number of studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of debate in EFL speaking instruction, existing research mainly employed quantitative research designs, including experimental designs and questionnaire-based investigations. Despite the valuable evidence of improvement in speaking presented, the studies do not fully capture learners' personal experiences and views on their speaking development through debate.

Therefore, there is a need to conduct qualitative research exploring how EFL learners perceive and experience the improvement of their speaking skills in debate activities. Addressing this gap, the present study seeks to provide qualitative insights into speaking skill development through debating by focusing on learners' perceptions and experiences to deepen understanding of debate-based speaking instruction in EFL contexts.

B. Research Method

This study aims to explore undergraduate EFL students' perceptions of speaking skill development through debating. The research questions are as follows: What challenges do undergraduate EFL students encounter when speaking English in class? In what ways do debating activities affect students' speaking skills, including fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar? How do debates influence students' confidence, motivation, anxiety, and critical thinking when participating in oral activities? How do students view the effect of debates on their ability to present arguments and communicate their ideas clearly?

A qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach is employed to explore EFL students' lived experiences with speaking skill development through debating. A qualitative approach is appropriate because it allows for in-depth exploration of learners' perceptions, reflections, and personal experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study involved seventeen undergraduate EFL students studying English as a foreign language. Participants were chosen using purposive sampling. Each student had completed at least one semester of debate-based speaking instruction. The selection aimed to include individuals with diverse levels of English proficiency and varying levels of participation in debate activities.

Data were collected primarily through semi-structured interviews, supported by classroom observations.

1. Semi-structured interviews

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews consisting of 16 open-ended questions exploring students' speaking challenges, including pronunciation, grammar, fluency, confidence, motivation, anxiety, argumentation skills, and critical thinking development during debates. Each interview lasted 20 – 35 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent.

2. Classroom observations

Observations during debate sessions were conducted to document students' verbal participation, interaction patterns, and ability to articulate arguments and rebuttals. Field notes focused on fluency, vocabulary use, pronunciation, grammar accuracy, and confidence.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), following six steps:

1. Familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts, journals, and observation notes.
2. Generating initial codes related to speaking challenges, fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, confidence, motivation, anxiety, argumentation, and critical thinking.
3. Searching for patterns to develop broader themes across participants' experiences.
4. Reviewing and refining themes to ensure they accurately reflect the data.
5. Defining and naming themes for clarity and coherence.
6. Producing a comprehensive report linking themes to the research questions and existing literature.

The open-ended written interview questions consisting of sixteen items were developed with reference to previous studies on debate-based speaking instruction, particularly those conducted by Syamdianita & Maharia (2019) and Putri (2023). The questions were adapted and modified to suit the context and objectives of the present study.

Table 1. Open-ended Questions

1	Do you have problems speaking English?
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2	What are the problems that you face when speaking English? Why do you think you have these problems?
3	How do you describe your pronunciation skills?
4	How do you describe your English grammar skills?
5	Can you describe how debating influences your confidence in speaking and answering questions in front of a group?
6	How does participating in debates influence your motivation to learn English?
7	How has participating in debates affected your English speaking fluency?
8	How has participating in debates affected your English pronunciation?
9	How has participating in debates helped you improve your English vocabulary?
10	How has participating in debates helped you improve your English grammar?
11	How do you feel when you are required to speak during class debates, and why do you feel that way?
12	How does participating in debates help you manage or reduce your anxiety when speaking in front of a crowd?
13	Do you find it difficult in making the structured argument. How does participating in debates improve your argumentation skills?
14	After participating in debates in your speaking class, how has your ability to deliver your ideas clearly changed?
15	Do you find it difficult in giving some rebuttals? Why?
16	Does debate help to enhance your critical thinking.

C. Result and Discussion

The qualitative analysis of interviews and classroom observations revealed several key themes related to speaking skill development through debating. The themes are organized according to the research questions.

Theme 1 - Challenges in Speaking English
 Participants experienced many challenges when speaking English, such as having a limited range of vocabulary, making grammar mistakes, finding it hard to pronounce words correctly, and feeling nervous when talking in front of their classmates.

1.1 Vocabulary and Grammar Limitations

Many students highlighted that lack of vocabulary and difficulty applying grammar rules hindered their ability to communicate effectively.

Responses:

"I often have difficulty expressing my ideas fluently and choosing the right words when speaking English."

"I found it very difficult to understand the words."

"I understand basic grammar rules, but I still make mistakes when using tenses, articles, and sentence structure, especially when speaking spontaneously."

"Sometimes I get confused when I want to explain something."

1.2 Pronunciation Difficulties

Pronunciation difficulties were a common concern, causing hesitation and likely reduced participation. Responses:

"The problems that I face when speaking English is either my confidence or my pronunciation. I think I have these problems because of my Chinese accent and rarely talk to others in English (on daily lives)."

"I would describe my pronunciation skills as average. I can pronounce common words clearly, but I still have difficulty with unfamiliar words, and intonation."

"I think my pronunciation is pretty good, probably around 4 out of 5. And, of course, when there're words I rarely speak out loud, I struggle to think the correct pronunciation. For example, the word nicotine, there're 2 options in my brain; is it /nɪkəti:n/ or /nɪkətæɪn/. Sometimes when in deliberation, I opted for the pronunciation that is closer to Bahasa Indonesia, since I knew there are many vocabulary in Bahasa Indonesia that were derived from English, so the pronunciation might be not that different."

1.3 Speaking Anxiety

Anxiety was reported as a significant barrier, particularly when required to speak in front of the class. Responses:

“Sometimes I feel nervous and afraid of making mistakes”

“I am afraid to be judged”

“One of the main problems I face when speaking English is a lack of confidence, especially when speaking spontaneously. I sometimes hesitate because I am afraid of making grammatical or pronunciation mistakes. I think this happens because I do not use English frequently in daily conversations, so I need more practice to speak fluently and naturally.”

Theme 2 - Influence of Debating on Speaking Skills

Debates provided opportunities for learners to improve fluency, vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar.

2.1 Fluency Improvement

Students noted that regular debate practice encouraged them to speak more fluently.

Responses:

Responses:

“My speaking fluency has improved compared to before. I can speak more smoothly, although I still pause to think sometimes.”

“It's push our limits to speak and reconstruct our knowledge focusing grammar, vocabulary and prior knowledge experiences”

“It helps me to construct what I want to say, so when it's my turn to speak, I can speak .

2.2: Vocabulary Expansion

Exposure to different debate topics encouraged learners to learn and use new words.

“Debates introduce me to new vocabulary, especially from different topics. I also learn new words by listening to other speakers.”

“It helped by making me looked up some unfamiliar words”

“I learned many new words”

“It improves my English vocabulary because I'm exposed to many kind of topics! It introduces many new words, phrases, etc. that are rarely used in daily lives (more into a scientific or specific field of something).”

2.3: Grammar and Pronunciation Enhancement

Students reported gradual improvement in grammar and pronunciation through practice. Responses:

“Debates help me practice using grammar in real situations. I try to form better sentences when sharing my opinions.”

“I learned how to pronounce difficult words”

“I think my pronunciation is getting better after debating class, as I had time to prepare what I'm going to say and I can take a look at the dictionary for unfamiliar words' pronunciation.”

“as I practice speaking english, my tongue got used to pronounce things better than before””

Theme 3 - Impact on Confidence, Motivation, and Anxiety

Debates had a positive influence on students' confidence, motivation to learn, and anxiety management.

3.1 Increased Confidence

Engaging in debates helped students feel more self-assured in expressing their opinions.

“Debating can increase our confidence if you're willing to fight for your comfort zone

and willingness to learn the topic you've prepared of."

"Before speaking or answering questions in a debate, one must comprehend the meaning of the argument from one side to another. Participants of the debate have to analyze the perspective of their opponents in order to create adequate responses. This may improve the debater's confidence to respond the question, even when an unexpected question is made."

"Debating knowledge helps me to prepare more (think more) before speaking, especially in front of teammates. So, whenever I need to argue, I already have a reason to convince my point needs to be considered as well."

3.2 Enhanced Motivation

Preparing for debates motivated students to study English outside of class. Responses:

"Because debating can enhance our point of view and perspectives to other by sharing both parties to solve the same problem with different approach."

"because I highly want the interlocutor/ opponent get the point, so I must study more."

"I've seen a debate which the participant speaks so fast. It motivated me to sharpen my listening skill and vocabulary knowledge, since we also need to know what others said in order to support or refute them"

3.3 Anxiety Reduction

Repeated practice in debates gradually reduced fear of speaking publicly.

"it helps me to be okay to speak in front of a crowd and train my public speaking skills"

"It's like we already know speaking in front of a crowd is not as bad as we thought, so the next times we have to speak in front of a crowd, we don't feel as nervous as the first time. So, yes, debating helps in overcome

speaking anxiety and boost confidence when speaking in front of a room full of audience."

"It teaches me to focus on my arguments instead of my fear"

Theme 4 - Development of Argumentation and Critical Thinking Skills

Debates also helped learners improve their ability to structure arguments, deliver ideas clearly, and think critically.

4.1 Argumentation Skills

Students learned to organize ideas logically and provide supporting evidence.

"Yes, it can be difficult at first. However, debates help me learn how to organize ideas logically, support opinions with reasons, and respond effectively to opposing arguments."

"I think it's kind of hard to make a structured argument if I can't find the one that's logical enough. It can improve my argumentation skills because it not only needs critical thinking but fast thinking that should result in logical argument."

"Because, you're facing in different persons with different perspectives. You need to be mastered in logical thinking and fallacy to try proposed your statements so people will agreed to you. (Just like selling things by persuading people to buy your product, even though it's just a average things)"

4.2 Critical Thinking

Engaging with opposing viewpoints fostered analytical thinking.

"Debates enhance my critical thinking because they require me to analyze issues from different perspectives, evaluate arguments, and respond logically."

"Yes, debate helps improve my critical thinking. It teaches me to analyze problems

and consider different opinions plus through debate we need to search from another sources that are accurate and correct, we need to think whether the sources are

"Yes, because you practiced and learn from other people problems and their point of view instead

4.3 Clear Communication

Students reported improvement in delivering ideas coherently.

"After participating in debates, my ability to deliver ideas has improved. I can express my thoughts more clearly, confidently, and systematically, making it easier for others to understand my points."

"I learned how to avoid confusing words"
"I think my way of delivering ideas has become more structured, not just jumping to the point as I did in the past. Now, when I was in discussion, I have to think of why and how repeatedly before presenting my ideas."

"My ability of delivering ideas clearly changed as I can widen my perspective towards some topics more. I can also become more confident while also starts to realize that I am able to structure my thoughts in coherent sentences if I try hard enough."

Debating proved to be an effective strategy for addressing the speaking challenges. Participants showed noticeable improvement in speaking fluency, supporting earlier findings that debate activities promote spontaneous and extended oral production. Moreover, improvements in vocabulary use, pronunciation, and grammatical accuracy were observed, reinforcing Alasmari's (2019) claim that debate-based instruction improves linguistic development through active engagement and authentic communication.

Besides linguistic gains, debating also positively influenced students' confidence, motivation, and anxiety management. Increased self-confidence and reduced fear of public speaking align with the findings of Soomro and Farooq (2018), who emphasized the role of debate in increasing learner participation. Furthermore, students' increased motivation to learn English highlights the potential of interactive activities to foster learner autonomy.

This study also demonstrates the contribution of debating to the development of argumentation and critical thinking skills. Participants reported improved ability to organize ideas, present structured arguments, and respond to opposing views, supporting Zare and Othman's (2015) claim that debates promote higher-order thinking alongside oral communication skills.

The findings suggest that incorporating debate in EFL undergraduate classrooms can facilitate the holistic development of speaking skills.

D. Conclusion and Suggestion

This qualitative study examined how undergraduate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students perceive the development of their speaking skills through participation in debates. The study found that students initially struggled with vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and speaking anxiety. However, engaging in structured debates had a positive impact on their linguistic abilities, including fluency, vocabulary use, pronunciation, and grammatical accuracy. Additionally, debating helped students build confidence, increase motivation, and develop critical thinking skills. It also supported them in managing anxiety and improving their ability

to construct and present arguments, directly answering the study's questions about challenges, skill development, emotional factors, and argumentation. These results suggest that EFL teachers should include debating activities in speaking classes to offer meaningful, student-focused practice. This approach can boost students' confidence, reduce speaking anxiety, and enhance both oral language proficiency and higher-level thinking skills needed in academic and professional settings. Future research could use long-term or mixed-methods approaches to explore the lasting effects of debating on speaking skill development. Combining qualitative and quantitative methods would offer a more complete understanding of its impact.

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