

## Classroom Debate as a Systematic Teaching/Learning Approach

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**Abstract:** Research studies show that students learn through different ways and approaches. For that reason, instructors need to employ various instructional techniques to accommodate students with differing learning styles. Studies also suggest that learners make improvements when teachers make use of techniques that get students involved actively in learning. Classroom debate is a systematic instructional approach which has the potential to nurture the active engagement of students. Using classroom debate as a teaching/learning approach brings many advantages to learners, which include promotion of critical thinking skills, mastering the course content and improving the speaking abilities. However, classroom debate carries its own limitations, challenges and even opponents, too. This article makes an attempt to introduce classroom debate as an instructional strategy, review earlier research studies on it and discuss its limitations and challenges as well as its benefits to students in general and ESL/EFL learners in particular.

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**Key words:** Classroom Debate • Critical thinking • Communication skills • Analytical skills

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### INTRODUCTION

Protagoras is known to be the father of debate for implementing it in an educational environment over 2400 years ago in Athens, Greece [1]. Debate was first incorporated in American higher education in the 19<sup>th</sup> through 20<sup>th</sup> century, but did lose its popularity till 1980s as a teaching/learning instrument [2, 3]. However, it became popular again in the United States and has been practiced over the last three decades. It has been providing a good educational experience for students in high schools and universities [4]. The use of classroom debate has been expanded to students in all subject areas, regardless of their academic level. Through debate, students learn how to use the library, to reason, to analyze, to clarify ideas and to present arguments [5, 6]. Previous studies have demonstrated that debaters consistently value and highly rate the development of speaking skills, communication skills and critical thinking skills [4, 5, 7, 8]. Advocates of debate across curriculum in the United States argue that higher education system has generally failed to equip their students with fundamental oral communication skills [6, 9]. It has been reported that [6] the majority of students in higher education graduated

showed low communicative competence, because a small proportion of their required subjects they take entail communication skills.

The Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools conducted an extensive research study [10] which concluded that academic success can be assessed acceptable only when learners are asked to “express the results of their disciplined inquiry in written, symbolic, oral discourse and in performances for audiences” (p.8). Earlier studies [6] suggested that for the past decade or so, a great deal of cognitive experts have shifted focus to educational practices and learning. The studies they have done have reached to the similar results which is now commonly classified under the umbrella of ‘constructivism’. Based on what has been reported in the literature, the main principle of constructivism advocates that learning and education entails the active building of knowledge [11]. Instructors and textbooks definitely can offer assistance which is beneficial for building new understanding and knowledge, yet the very memorization of knowledge cannot result in successful learning. Studies suggest that information and facts that are only memorized will stay passive even if they are pertinent to new conditions. The results obtained from cognitive

studies suggest that flourishing classrooms involves interactive learning. Moreover, these studies indicate that learning diminishes when students are forced into passive roles and practices. In order to get the students more active and involved in learning process, they need to be provided an opportunity to communicate verbally [6].

Those who advocate the use of debate across curriculum believe that the debate approach provide students with superior access to the content of any given subject. Research findings [12] illustrates oral skills practices as “a personal contribution that we make to the development of our own analytic competence” (p. 23). When learners are supported to think aloud, particularly, when they perform critical skills with classmates, they expand their experience which might then be applied to their own internal reasoning procedures. The use of language orally constructs skills and knowledge which are more relevant to critical thinking than smooth verbal presentation.

To summarize, debate encourages students to learn course content better, since they are engaged in the course content actively, broadly, deeply and personally. It also trains them to assess the data they get on a daily basis. In addition, debate provides a valuable opportunity to develop learners’ speaking ability.

**Previous Studies on the Effects of Debate on Teaching and Learning:** This section reports the results of previous research conducted to study the effects of classroom debate on teaching and learning. It begins with a review of past research on the use of classroom debate among students from different fields of study and then focuses on debate use in ELT settings.

**Debate in the Context of General Education:** Debate has been used in educational settings to present benefits to learners from different backgrounds that learn together in groups. This is clearly reflected in the results of research conducted by [13] in which it is argued that one of the most fundamental and beneficial characteristics of debate is that, people who work together in achieving the same goal will eventually grow to feel more positive about each other and will be motivated and capable of having constructive interaction when performing a collective task.

Debate promotes interactive learning. When people from different cultures cooperate to resolve an issue, they are more likely to come up with innovative ways of dealing with the problems. Today, with the development internet and computer technology, autonomy and

different perspectives, debate technique can empower learners even more than was previously the case [14]. Moreover, it can promote social activities that extend beyond classroom activities. It has the potential to enhance critical and creative thinking as well as reasoning, communication skills and problem-solving skills [1, 15-18].

It has been noted [17] that, compared with individualistic and competitive learning, the collaborative approach to learning appears to result in “higher level reasoning, more frequent generation of new ideas and solutions and a greater transfer of what is learned within one situation to another” (p. 38). Previous research studies added some other significant research findings about learning through debate and interactive learning environment [1, 15, 19]. The results of these studies suggest that, compared with students who do not utilize debate and interactive learning: (1) students who learn cooperatively show more academic improvement comparing those learning through competitive and individualistic learning styles; (2) interactive learning enhance learners’ short term and long term memory and also critical thinking skills; (3) cooperative experiences promote positive self acceptance, which means students’ learning, self-esteem, liking of school and motivation will be improved; (4) it results in constructive communication among learners and, (5) promoted academic ambitions, demonstrating more positive social activities and more constructive communication among students will be developed through interactive and cooperative learning environment.

In a study, it has been attempted to explore learners’ perceptions about classroom debate participation [20]. The findings demonstrated that, while a few students reported distress and anxiety with the competitiveness feature of the debates, most of them reported that they felt quite happy with participating in debate exercises. Students who participated in debate sessions expressed that engaging in debate encouraged them to explore the content of the course deeply. They also stated that they were exposed to many different perspectives and hence assisted them to connect broadly to the content of the course. A number of participants indicated that this mentioned deep involvement and engagement took place while they attended to multiple viewpoints. Lastly, learners reported that participating in classroom debates helped them explore the course content for themselves. However, some students articulated negative attributes of classroom debate as well. They considered that listening to other students debating has not been an active and

educational activity. Moreover, a number of students thought that some of the debate motions and questions were devised poorly, either unclear or biased in favor of only one side of the debate. And some voiced a sense of frustration.

Findings of an earlier study [20] suggest that debate preparation is a beneficial small group task, in which every student noticeably benefits from the same inputs of their classmates. Furthermore, the results indicated that classroom debate exercises appear to be an outstanding method of incorporating group work into subjects and courses. Moreover, the author claims that debating promotes “generating diverse points of view on a subject” (p. 12). He claims that conventional teaching/learning approaches cut off learners from the open questions and competing answers which so regularly drive our own interest in our subjects.

An action research was conducted among undergraduate students majoring political science to examine the influences of classroom debate on the development of learners’ critical thinking skills and understanding of complex political issues [21]. The author believes that classroom debate should be incorporated into curriculum of undergraduate courses. The data collection was done among three undergraduate classes throughout three semesters in a state research university. The source of the data collection was essays provided by students who participated in the debates, learners’ reflection papers and the researcher’s notes and writings reflecting debaters’ performance. Furthermore, another source of data collection included reflective conversations the author had with her colleagues that were invited to observe the debates and be the external judges.

Analysis of the data shows that classroom debates helped the learners get involved in the intellectual practices which illustrate critical thinking skills. The author proposed an argument in the study in which it is claimed that academic debate can be incorporated with the courses of college and university students to promote a variety of affective, intellectual and practical skills, which include critical thinking skills, deeper comprehension of the issues being debated, communication and teamwork skills. The participants of the study stated that classroom debates provided an opportunity for them to practice and promote their presentation and teamwork skills. The students also reported that they enjoyed the opportunity to take part in classroom debates and they are happy to be given the opportunity. It has been reported in the

literature that for many the debate activity played a pivotal role for the students as an excellent tool of learning [21].

Moreover, the researcher has also reported her own perspectives about incorporation of debate in her course [21]. She states that:

For me, debates turned out to be a superior tool of instruction and evaluation. Gauging students’ performance in debates, I could measure their achievements, diagnose learning problems and learn more about students’ perspectives and attitudes towards the studied material. Critical reflections on my students’ debate experience allowed me to learn more about the aspects of debate that are crucial for making this educational technique work (p. 172).

On the other hand, the researcher also stated that not every single student benefited classroom debates in terms of learning the debated issues [21]. In other words, some students reported that they failed to get to understand the debated issues deeply and broadly or to get the chance to practice and apply critical thinking skills and some individuals also expressed that classroom debates made them anxious and stressed. In addition, an advocate of debates across curriculum also stated that some students criticized that the debate activities did not leave any time for lectures and also any time to discuss the assigned readings [19]. However, the researcher claimed that this issue can be addressed if the instructors spend more time in class and clarify the rationale for conducting classroom debates. Moreover, the teacher can introduce one or two “take away points” (a kind of mini-lecture) to each session which is subjugated by the debate activities. Furthermore, studies find it effective and helpful to address this criticism and resolve this issue through post debate synthesis or discussion [19]. Moreover, some students raised issues regarding the students’ performance assessment of the subject and their final score and its association with the load of classroom participation and some learners also expressed discomfort to different features of the format of the debates, while liking the exercise in general [19].

However, it has been argued that boundaries and obstacles should not undermine our motivation and discourage instructors and educators to use this teaching/learning tool in classrooms [21]. The researcher also [21] claims that she discovered, through research, that it is possible to recognize the benefits of classroom debate if we make an attempt to have a good plan for the conditions of debate and to clearly explain the real

purposes of debate to learners. Developing thinking skills and positive behaviors, like showing interest in social issues, tolerating multiple viewpoints and accepting the fact that people are free to think in a different way should be the emphasis of debates and should be set for the achievement of these goals through debate exercises. Finally, in helping our students acquire and promote cognitive skills, we need to be patient and should not expect big changes and transformations in a short period of time. No teaching methods and learning tools can change students into critical thinkers over night, as like any other skills, these skills are also developed throughout the lifetime. However, practicing these skills can make fundamental changes. Participating in educational exercises developed to improve and promote thinking skills is a significant and helpful step towards mastering these skills [21].

In a recent study, the association between participating in debate and college-readiness among high school students in Chicago Public School district has been explored [22]. The researchers identified vulnerable students via an index which included 8th grade success, poverty grade and taking part in special education. The findings demonstrated that students who participated in classroom debates were three times more probable to finish high school and achieve the college-readiness scales on the English, Reading and Science sections of the American College Test (ACT). This relationship was parallel for both low-risk and at-risk students. The results also indicated that students who attended more debates managed to obtain higher scores on all sections of the ACT. The results showed that a significant correlation exists between classroom debate involvement and improved academic performance for at-risk adolescents.

As mentioned earlier, debate is not advocated by everyone and it has its opponents too. For instance, it is claimed that debate can promote a bias towards dualism [23]. Almost in all cases, only two sides are presented and discussed in debates, but there may be various practical answers or merely one single justifiable viewpoint. A researcher, though, claimed that this issue can be resolved if a couple of learners are assigned to act as conciliators in each debate session [24]. So, they can offer substitute or peace-making positions to the two sides of debated issues to avoid bias towards dualism.

Furthermore, argues indicate that debate can also turn the peaceful environment of the classroom into a confrontational atmosphere which might not do well with some students from some specific cultures and

backgrounds [23]. Moreover, this confrontational atmosphere can also provoke women, who are often “uncomfortable with oppositional forms of communication” (p. 54). Nevertheless, in another study classroom debate has been used in a course entitled “Psychology of Women” and the researcher claimed that she controlled this issue simply via grading only based on students’ participation rather than on performance [25]. However, this confrontational feature of classroom debate is viewed by some other scholars as a privilege rather than a weakness. For instance, it is argued that participating in classroom debate strengthens learners’ capability to handle disagreements outside of classroom as well [26]. Opponents also claim that taking part in a debate simply highlights the participants’ current set of beliefs and does not help promote a rational analysis of the debated issue. On the other hand, it has been reported that the only time students managed to change their positions and accept alternative viewpoint was only when they were involved in a debate or a role play [27]. In addition, a technique was offered to keep students away from developing biased assimilation. It was suggested that the students must be instructed to do research and study both sides of the debated issue and keep them in the dark till the last minute to inform them which side they will support [28]. Moreover, the findings stated that “It is important that the format of the exercise encourages students to consider the opposite [28]. Only then are students likely to be more open to new perspectives and spend less time reinforcing old beliefs” (p. 110).

**Debate in ELT Context:** It is commonly recognized that language learning happens more successfully when it occurs in a meaningful, authentic and supportive context [29, 30]. Research studies suggest that classroom debate offers opportunities for students to negotiate meanings and it allows them to have more access to linguistic input and output, both conditions that promote effective language learning [1, 6, 31]. In recognition of such thinking, learning through interactive and cooperative approaches like classroom debate is a major feature of communicative language teaching [32]. It is also a major characteristic of the learner-centred approach to language learning, because it offers an active learning environment through authentic interaction in meaningful contexts between learners and between learners and teachers.

Studies describe debate as a very complicated type of direct communicative interaction in which high level of discourse skills are applied [33]. Debating entails a

complex process discussion in which the regular and usual level conversation is passed beyond, requires the debater to listen to the speaker critically and actively and calls for sophisticated linguistic competency and critical thinking skills as well.

Although using classroom debate as a teaching/learning tool carries its own challenges, limitations and opponents, a lot of researchers, scholars and instructors still support it [1, 6, 31, 34]. For example, it is reported [34] that debate can be a very helpful tool for learning a second/foreign language since it “engages students in a variety of cognitive and linguistic ways” (p.1). It is a clear fact that debate has the potential to improve speaking ability, since the activity requires a lot of speaking practices and verbal discussions among debaters. Moreover, it can promote and foster efficient and successful listening, reading and also writing. Because, students need to do in advance research on the topic which they are going to debate. They need to use skills such as scanning, skimming and critical reading skills so that they can selectively choose the relevant and useful evidence and reliable references to supports their claims and arguments. Participating in real debate necessitates critical and careful listening, since every side needs to listen carefully to the opposite group’s cases and put together and prepare rebuttals. In addition, the writing skills will be improved, since debaters need to take notes and write down convincing, challenging speeches. It is also argued that debate has the potential to promote and cultivate necessary skills for debate discussion and convincing argumentation [34]. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, debate is known for having the capacity to promote the skills of critical thinking which include synthesis, analysis and evaluation, since these skills are crucial constituents in formulating the rebuttals. According to the results of a study [35] debate plays a significance role in facilitating “analytic thinking skills and self-conscious reflection on the validity of one’s ideas” (p. 210). Another study [36] suggests that a lot of learners demonstrate observable improvement in terms of their capability to articulate and support viewpoints and identify the weaknesses in each others’ arguments. In a study [37], the researcher has employed classroom debate among his students in Japan, witnessed and reported a noticeable raise in the number of learners that could express their points of view more comfortably which were different from those of others. The researcher [37] claims that this improvement is the result of the skills and

knowledge which originated from debates participation and practices led the students to get used to expressing opinions.

It is also stated that second/foreign language proficiency can be promoted in ways that are exciting and challenging for learners, when they get prepared to participate in debate [38]. But, almost all the available sources and materials on debate belong to American students in high schools and colleges. Almost no material is on hand for debate instruction to EFL/ESL learners [39, 40]. Even the very little works which have been published on debating for EFL/ESL learners mainly have focused only on the format and procedures of the debating [41-43]. As such, misunderstanding can happen and instructors who refer to such materials may be convinced that only learning how to debate and getting familiar with the format of the debate is the main goal. But, as it was reported [38], debate is to be practiced and used as a teaching/learning tool for increasing language proficiency and fluency as well as academic study skills not only as an end in itself.

Another study was conducted [38] in which classroom debate was employed as a teaching/learning tool among Japanese EFL college students. Debates were held for a whole semester consisting of fifteen weeks. They students attended the debate twice a week for 75 minutes each time. The findings showed that eighty percent of the students approved the debate exercises and consistently rated classroom debate as the most exciting activity. Debaters provided a lot of remarks and feedbacks about the debate exercises over the years. In a four-year course of action not even a single learner has suggested to eliminate the classroom debate from the course. They have commented that debate is motivating, exciting and their English skill has been improved through debate exercises. A number of debaters also stated that they liked the verbal communication, thinking practices, preparing counter arguments and presenting them. Others mentioned that they liked searching and looking for evidences and resources to support their arguments and they also stated that they learned a lot of things including the significance of research from different resources of information. Many others have repeated this statement regarding group work. They stated that they think the debate was best because they have learned to work with classmates and it made them proud of themselves.

It was concluded that their students enjoyed debating exercises and discussions [38]. The study also concludes that classroom debate build up academic

language skills, second/foreign language fluency and public speaking skills which assist ESL/EFL learners be prepared for successful academic study. Besides, classroom debate also encourages cooperation and teamwork, though inspiring and promoting critical thinking. It is hoped that more language instructors will start making use of classroom debate in their classes [38].

In another research the effects of debate on oral communication skills among Taiwanese undergraduate EFL learners were studied [44]. Twenty one students participated in the study and they were randomly divided into control and experimental groups. Classroom debate sessions were held for six weeks among the experimental group while the control group received the traditional format of teaching. The results of the study revealed that students in experimental group progressed significantly comparing to the control group, according to the scores of the pre-test and the post-test. Moreover, the results and the students' feedback demonstrated that classroom debate not only improved participants' public speaking skills, but also critical thinking skills, communication skills, organization skills and note-taking skills as well.

An attempt was made [45] to do a research in which classroom debate was used as a teaching/learning technique among his EFL undergraduates in Japan. Twenty students, in their third and fourth years of study, participated in the study. The participants' level of language proficiency ranged from intermediate to elementary level. The study was conducted for one semester comprising of thirteen weeks and the students and the researcher met for one and a half hour two times a week. Two debates were completed in the whole study and each of which took about thirty minutes to complete. The teacher selected the first topic and eight weeks were granted to the students to get ready for debating. The topic of the second debate was selected by the students and they had five weeks to get prepared. It was argued [45] that, it is so significant to give the students enough time for preparation was considered extremely important, because it is not fair to expect them to debate an issue critically and intelligently when they have not been given adequate chance to comprehend it.

Before the study was finished, the participants were asked to complete a feedback form including three open ended questions to report their perceptions to the debate experience. The questions asked the students about the first debate topic, if they liked it, if they were content with the difficulty level and the things they felt they learned on the course all together.

The format of the first question was the Likert Scale ranging from one to five (one represented not interesting

at all and five being very interesting). The mean score of the first question was found to be 4.4. The second inquiry was likewise scored on a scale, with the most frequent answer being 'hard but manageable'. A small number of respondents reported that they felt it was the 'right level'. Based on the results, only one student reported it to be "too difficult". Finally, regarding the third question, different answers were provided by the students. The researcher [45] summarizes a number of typical selected responses as follows:

- I think I could learn how to criticize for information we get and about peoples' opinions. I couldn't speak English well, but I became to think it is fun to speak English with various people.
- I try to consider a problem in all its aspects and read newspaper more.
- I learned how to debate, collect data and so on.
- I think we can get the skill to gather information and to speak more strongly and so on.
- I think many classmates understand a little how to make a Critical Thinking. Also I never forget 'Be Suspicious' (p. 9).

In the end, the author concluded that the course was a triumph and he claims that "the students felt they had gained something that would help them in their future studies and careers" [45; p. 9].

## CONCLUSION

In summary, it can be concluded that the studies reviewed above all point to a similar direction. Classroom debate is an effective learning strategy particularly because it promotes student-student interactions. Obviously, active learning cultivates multifaceted thinking procedures and develops maintenance, absorption, comprehension and appropriate use of course content; as a result, learners benefit much when teachers make use of educational techniques that encourage students' active involvement. As a result, participating in debate exercises must not be restricted to those on forensics teams but must an experience offered to learners in a broad diversity of university classrooms [31].

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