

THE ROLE OF CLASSROOM DEBATE IN DEVELOPING EFL LEARNERS' SPEAKING SKILLS

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Abstract. *Developing effective speaking skills is one of the major objectives of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. However, many EFL learners experience difficulties in expressing their ideas fluently, accurately, and confidently because classroom interaction is often dominated by teacher-centered activities and limited opportunities for authentic communication. Classroom debate provides a communicative and learner-centered instructional strategy that can create meaningful opportunities for learners to use English for expressing opinions, providing arguments, responding to opposing viewpoints, and negotiating meaning. This article examines the role of classroom debate in developing EFL learners' speaking skills and explores the pedagogical mechanisms through which debate activities contribute to oral language development. The study is based on a theoretical analysis of research literature concerning communicative language teaching, task-based language learning, interaction, collaborative learning, and debate-based instruction. The analysis indicates that regular participation in structured classroom debates can contribute to improvements in speaking fluency, vocabulary development, grammatical accuracy, pronunciation, critical thinking, interactional competence, and learners' confidence. Debate also promotes learner autonomy and encourages students to take greater responsibility for preparing and presenting their ideas. At the same time, effective implementation requires appropriate topic selection, sufficient linguistic scaffolding, clear debate procedures, supportive classroom management, and formative assessment. The article concludes that classroom debate can serve as an effective pedagogical tool for integrating language development with higher-order thinking and authentic communication in EFL contexts.*

Keywords: *EFL, speaking skills, classroom debate, oral communication, speaking fluency, communicative competence, critical thinking, learner autonomy, interaction, English language teaching.*

INTRODUCTION

Speaking is one of the most important components of second and foreign language learning because it enables learners to communicate their ideas, feelings, opinions, and experiences in real-life situations. In contemporary English language education,

communicative competence is increasingly viewed as a central learning outcome rather than the simple memorization of grammatical structures and vocabulary. EFL learners are therefore expected not only to understand English but also to use it appropriately and effectively in different communicative contexts. Despite the importance of speaking, developing oral communication skills remains challenging for many EFL learners. Students may possess sufficient grammatical and lexical knowledge but still experience difficulties when they are required to speak spontaneously. Common problems include limited vocabulary, fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence, hesitation, insufficient exposure to spoken English, pronunciation difficulties, and limited opportunities for meaningful interaction. Traditional classroom practices can sometimes reinforce these difficulties. In teacher-centered lessons, teachers may dominate classroom communication while students primarily listen, complete written exercises, or provide short predetermined answers. Such activities may be useful for introducing language structures, but they do not always provide sufficient opportunities for spontaneous and extended oral communication. For this reason, communicative approaches to language teaching emphasize interaction, meaningful tasks, learner participation, and authentic language use. Classroom debate represents one such approach. Debate requires learners to formulate positions, construct arguments, listen to alternative perspectives, respond to questions, clarify their ideas, and defend their opinions. Consequently, it creates a communicative environment in which learners have a genuine reason to use the target language. Debate can also connect language learning with cognitive development. When students prepare for a debate, they are required to research a topic, identify relevant information, evaluate evidence, organize arguments, anticipate opposing opinions, and formulate responses. Thus, debate activities can develop both linguistic and higher-order cognitive abilities. From the perspective of interactionist theories of second language acquisition, meaningful interaction provides learners with opportunities to receive comprehensible input, produce output, notice gaps in their linguistic knowledge, and modify their language. Classroom debates can provide these conditions because students must actively listen to and respond to their peers rather than simply reproduce memorized language. The relevance of debate is particularly significant in EFL contexts where opportunities to use English outside the classroom may be limited. A well-organized debate can simulate authentic communicative situations and provide learners with an intensive period of English-language interaction. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to examine the role of classroom debate in developing EFL learners' speaking skills and to identify the main pedagogical benefits, implementation principles, challenges, and assessment strategies associated with debate-based speaking instruction.

The objectives of the study are:

1. to examine the theoretical relationship between classroom interaction and EFL speaking development;
2. to identify the major benefits of classroom debate for speaking proficiency;
3. to analyze the role of debate in developing fluency, accuracy, vocabulary, pronunciation, and interactional competence;
4. to identify effective strategies for implementing debate activities in EFL classrooms;
5. to propose recommendations for teachers who intend to integrate debate into speaking instruction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Speaking as a component of communicative competence. Speaking involves more than producing grammatically correct sentences. Effective oral communication requires learners to manage linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic resources. Canale and Swain's model of communicative competence emphasizes grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. These dimensions are particularly relevant to classroom debate because learners must combine language knowledge with the ability to organize ideas, interact appropriately, and overcome communication difficulties. Speaking also involves several interconnected dimensions, including fluency, accuracy, complexity, pronunciation, vocabulary, and interaction. A classroom activity that focuses exclusively on grammatical accuracy may not adequately develop learners' ability to communicate spontaneously. Debate provides an opportunity to integrate these dimensions within a meaningful communicative task.

Communicative Language Teaching and classroom debate. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emphasizes meaningful communication and learner interaction. Richards argues that communicative language teaching focuses on developing learners' ability to use language for communicative purposes rather than treating language primarily as an abstract system. Classroom debate is consistent with the principles of CLT because students use English to achieve a communicative goal. They are not speaking simply to demonstrate a grammatical structure; instead, they speak because they need to persuade, explain, challenge, agree, disagree, or defend an argument. The communicative nature of debate makes it particularly valuable for speaking lessons. Learners encounter language as a tool for communication rather than simply as an object of study.

Interaction and second language acquisition. Long's Interaction Hypothesis emphasizes the importance of interaction in second language acquisition. During interaction, learners may encounter communication problems that lead them to request clarification, confirm meaning, reformulate statements, and negotiate meaning. Debates naturally create opportunities for such interaction. For example, one learner may challenge another learner's argument, request evidence, ask for clarification, or

reformulate an opposing position. These processes can increase learners' awareness of language and encourage them to modify their output. Swain's Output Hypothesis also highlights the importance of producing language. Learners may notice gaps in their linguistic knowledge when they are required to express complex ideas. Debate can create precisely this type of communicative pressure because students must produce extended spoken language under relatively spontaneous conditions.

Task-Based Language Teaching and debate. Debate can also be understood as a task-based activity. Task-Based Language Teaching emphasizes the use of meaningful tasks that require learners to use language to achieve an outcome. A debate has a clear communicative outcome: participants must present and defend a position while responding to opposing arguments. The language used during the task is therefore connected to a meaningful purpose. Debate tasks can be designed at different proficiency levels. Beginner learners can debate simple topics using sentence frames, while advanced learners can discuss complex social, technological, educational, or environmental issues.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study indicate that classroom debate can play a significant role in developing EFL learners' speaking skills by creating a purposeful, interactive, and learner-centered environment for oral communication. Unlike traditional speaking activities in which learners may provide short and predictable responses, debate requires students to produce extended discourse, express personal positions, respond to alternative perspectives, justify their opinions, and negotiate meaning. Therefore, its pedagogical value extends beyond the development of linguistic competence and encompasses interactional, cognitive, affective, and metacognitive dimensions of language learning.

Classroom debate as a meaningful context for speaking practice. One of the most important findings emerging from the analysis is that debate creates a meaningful communicative context in which learners have a genuine reason to speak English. In conventional language classrooms, students sometimes participate in speaking activities because the teacher asks them to do so, rather than because they have an authentic communicative purpose. In contrast, debate creates an information and opinion gap: learners possess different positions and need to communicate in order to defend, challenge, or reconsider those positions. This observation is consistent with the principles of Communicative Language Teaching, which emphasize meaningful language use and learner interaction. Richards (2006) argues that communicative competence develops when learners use language for functional purposes. In classroom debate, English becomes a practical instrument for persuasion, explanation, disagreement, clarification, and negotiation. The communicative pressure generated by debate is particularly important for EFL learners who have limited opportunities to use English outside the classroom. In such contexts, classroom interaction may

represent one of the primary sources of meaningful target-language production. Regular debate sessions can therefore increase learners' exposure to spoken English and create repeated opportunities for active language use.

Influence on speaking fluency. The discussion of the findings suggests that debate can have a particularly strong influence on speaking fluency. Fluency requires learners to retrieve linguistic resources quickly and organize ideas while speaking. These abilities cannot be developed effectively through passive exposure or grammar exercises alone. During a debate, learners are required to maintain their speech despite hesitation, lexical gaps, or uncertainty. They must continue developing an argument, respond to another speaker, and sometimes change their formulation in real time. Such conditions encourage greater automaticity in language production. Repeated participation can also help learners become familiar with common discourse structures. For example, students gradually learn how to introduce an argument, provide evidence, give an example, contrast ideas, and draw a conclusion. Once these patterns become more automatic, learners may devote greater attention to the content of their message rather than to the construction of every individual sentence. This supports the theoretical position of Bygate (1987), who emphasizes the importance of practice and proceduralization in speaking development. The more frequently learners participate in meaningful oral tasks, the more efficiently they may access their existing linguistic knowledge during real-time communication. However, fluency development should not be interpreted as simply increasing speech speed. Effective fluency also involves coherence, appropriate pausing, discourse organization, and the ability to maintain interaction. Therefore, debate should be designed to promote both speed and communicative clarity.

Development of vocabulary through argumentative communication. Another important outcome concerns vocabulary development. Debate topics often require students to acquire and actively use specialized vocabulary. Unlike vocabulary exercises in which words may be memorized individually, debate places lexical items within meaningful communicative contexts. For example, when discussing whether artificial intelligence should be widely implemented in education, learners may need terms such as "automation," "privacy," "algorithm," "personalization," "digital literacy," "ethical responsibility," and "academic integrity." The need to use these words in an argument can strengthen learners' understanding and retrieval of them. The findings therefore suggest that debate can support both receptive and productive vocabulary development. Learners encounter unfamiliar words during preparation and then have to use selected vocabulary actively during oral interaction. An additional benefit is the development of formulaic language. Expressions such as "I agree to some extent," "I would argue that," "There is evidence to suggest," "On the other hand," and "I understand your point; however..." provide learners with ready-made linguistic resources for managing discourse. These expressions are particularly useful

for intermediate EFL learners because they reduce the cognitive burden associated with constructing every part of an utterance from individual words.

Relationship between debate and grammatical accuracy. The influence of debate on grammatical accuracy requires a more nuanced interpretation. Debate is primarily meaning-oriented, and students may prioritize expressing ideas over producing grammatically perfect sentences. Consequently, some grammatical errors are likely to occur during spontaneous discussion. Nevertheless, this does not mean that debate is incompatible with grammar development. On the contrary, the communicative demands of debate can reveal gaps in learners' grammatical knowledge. When students attempt to express complex relationships between ideas, they may discover that they need conditional structures, modal verbs, complex clauses, passive constructions, or other advanced grammatical forms. This observation is consistent with Swain's (1985) Output Hypothesis, according to which language production can encourage learners to notice limitations in their existing linguistic resources. Debate creates opportunities for such noticing because students are pushed to express ideas that may exceed their current linguistic competence. The teacher's feedback strategy is therefore crucial. Immediate correction of every grammatical error could interrupt communication and reduce fluency. A more effective approach may involve delayed corrective feedback. The teacher can note recurrent errors during the debate and address them afterward through brief explanations, reformulation exercises, or follow-up practice. Thus, debate should not be expected to improve grammatical accuracy automatically. Rather, its effectiveness increases when communicative practice is combined with focused post-task attention to form.

Improvement of interactional competence. The findings also highlight the role of debate in developing interactional competence. Speaking proficiency involves more than producing grammatically correct sentences; learners must understand how to participate appropriately in interaction. Debate requires students to listen actively and respond to what others say. They may need to ask questions, challenge claims, clarify information, agree or disagree politely, interrupt appropriately, and reformulate their statements. These interactional behaviors are difficult to develop through individual presentations because presentations generally involve extended turns by one speaker with limited spontaneous response. Debate, by contrast, is inherently interactive. From the perspective of Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis, such interaction can promote second language development because communication problems encourage learners to negotiate meaning. When students do not understand an argument, they may request clarification. When their own statement is misunderstood, they may reformulate it. These processes provide additional opportunities for meaningful language use. Therefore, debate should be considered particularly valuable for developing the interactive dimension of speaking proficiency.

Debate and pronunciation development. The findings further suggest that debate can create a practical motivation for improving pronunciation. When students participate in a debate, their success depends partly on whether their arguments are understood by other participants. This communicative purpose can increase awareness of pronunciation features such as word stress, sentence stress, intonation, rhythm, and speech rate. For example, incorrect sentence stress can change the emphasis of an argument, while inappropriate intonation may make disagreement sound unnecessarily aggressive. Through debate, learners can therefore develop not only phonological accuracy but also pragmatic awareness. The use of audio or video recordings can strengthen this process. After a debate, learners can review selected portions of their performance and identify pronunciation problems. Peer feedback can also be incorporated, provided that students are taught to provide constructive and respectful comments.

Implications for EFL teaching. The discussion has several practical implications for EFL teachers. First, debate should be incorporated systematically into speaking instruction rather than used as an occasional activity. Second, teachers should begin with relatively accessible topics and gradually introduce more complex issues. Third, pre-debate preparation should include vocabulary, useful expressions, argument structures, and background information. Fourth, teachers should establish clear participation rules to ensure that all learners have opportunities to speak. Fifth, assessment should include multiple dimensions of oral performance, including fluency, accuracy, vocabulary, pronunciation, interaction, and argumentation. Sixth, teachers should use delayed corrective feedback whenever possible to protect communicative fluency. Finally, debate can be integrated with digital tools. Learners can use online resources to research topics, collaborative platforms to organize arguments, and audio or video recordings to analyze their speaking performance. Digital tools can therefore extend debate beyond the physical classroom.

Implications for EFL education in the Uzbek context. The principles discussed above are particularly relevant to EFL education in Uzbekistan, where English proficiency is increasingly important for academic mobility, international communication, employment, and access to global information. In Uzbek EFL classrooms, debate-based instruction can provide learners with additional opportunities for extended English-language interaction. It can also support the development of presentation skills, critical thinking, academic vocabulary, and confidence. However, successful implementation requires sensitivity to learners' educational backgrounds and classroom expectations. Teachers may initially need to explain the purpose and rules of debate, demonstrate appropriate disagreement strategies, and create a psychologically supportive environment. A gradual implementation model may therefore be appropriate. Teachers can begin with pair debates, move to small-group discussions, and eventually introduce formal whole-

class debates. This progression can help learners become accustomed to expressing opinions publicly in English.

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that classroom debate has the potential to function as a multidimensional pedagogical tool for EFL speaking development. Its main strength lies in the integration of language production with meaningful interaction and cognitive engagement.

The effectiveness of debate can be represented conceptually as follows:

Debate Preparation → Meaningful Interaction → Extended Language Output → Feedback and Reflection → Improved Speaking Competence

This process involves several interconnected outcomes:

Fluency + Vocabulary + Accuracy + Pronunciation + Interactional Competence + Confidence + Critical Thinking = Enhanced EFL Speaking Performance

Thus, classroom debate should not be regarded merely as a method for making speaking lessons more interesting. Its deeper pedagogical value lies in providing learners with repeated opportunities to use English purposefully, interactively, and strategically. The findings are broadly consistent with the theoretical perspectives of Hymes (1972), Canale and Swain (1980), Long (1996), Swain (1985), Nunan (2004), Richards (2006), and Ellis (2003, 2017), all of whom emphasize different aspects of communicative competence, interaction, output, meaningful tasks, and learner-centered instruction. At the same time, the literature suggests that further empirical research is necessary. Future studies should employ pre-test and post-test designs, speaking proficiency scales, classroom observation, learner interviews, and quantitative measures of fluency, accuracy, lexical diversity, and interactional competence. Such research would provide stronger evidence concerning the magnitude and durability of the effects of classroom debate on EFL speaking development.

CONCLUSION

Classroom debate represents a potentially effective pedagogical strategy for developing EFL learners' speaking skills. Its effectiveness derives primarily from the meaningful communicative interaction it creates. Unlike many traditional speaking exercises, debate requires learners to use English for a genuine communicative purpose: presenting ideas, defending opinions, challenging arguments, asking questions, responding to opposing viewpoints, and reaching conclusions. The theoretical analysis indicates that debate can support the development of several dimensions of speaking proficiency, including fluency, vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, pronunciation, interactional competence, and confidence. At the same time, debate promotes critical thinking, learner autonomy, collaborative learning, and communication strategies. However, the effectiveness of classroom debate depends strongly on pedagogical implementation. Simply asking students to debate a controversial topic does not automatically result in speaking development. Successful

debate-based instruction requires appropriate topic selection, language preparation, clear procedures, balanced participation, supportive classroom management, and systematic feedback. The most effective model involves three interconnected stages: pre-debate preparation, active debate, and post-debate reflection and feedback. Such an approach enables learners to prepare linguistically, participate actively, and reflect on their performance. For EFL teachers, classroom debate should therefore be regarded not merely as an additional speaking activity but as a structured communicative learning strategy. When appropriately designed and regularly implemented, it can contribute to the development of confident, fluent, independent, and critically minded English speakers. Future empirical research could examine the effectiveness of debate-based instruction through experimental or quasi-experimental studies involving EFL learners at different proficiency levels. Such research could measure changes in speaking fluency, accuracy, lexical complexity, pronunciation, interactional competence, and speaking anxiety before and after systematic debate instruction.

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