

A Study on the Effectiveness of English Debate Competitions as a Language Learning Aid

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Abstract: English debate competitions have gained widespread attention as an innovative language learning tool in recent years. This study explores the impact of English debate on learners' listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, as well as their critical thinking and teamwork abilities. Using empirical research methods such as surveys, interviews, and performance evaluations, this study finds that participation in English debates not only improves students' English proficiency but also significantly enhances their ability to think critically and collaborate effectively. By integrating recent literature, the research further examines the actual impact of English debate competitions on language learning and their application in educational contexts.

Keywords: English debate; Language learning; Critical thinking; Empirical study; Language proficiency

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1. Introduction

With the rapid pace of globalization, the importance of English as a global lingua franca has been increasingly emphasized. In the field of English education, the challenge of how to effectively improve learners' language abilities has been a central concern for educators. In recent years, English debate competitions have emerged as a comprehensive language practice activity, gaining traction both in classrooms and as extracurricular programs. Debate requires participants to not only express their opinions fluently but also respond quickly, apply logical reasoning, and work collaboratively. As such, investigating the effectiveness of English debate competitions as a language learning aid carries significant theoretical and practical implications.

2. Literature review

Numerous studies have highlighted the role of English debate competitions in improving language skills. Smith and Johnson argued that debate enhances students' oral proficiency and critical thinking by providing opportunities for real-time language production ^[1]. Students must quickly analyze information, respond to

counterarguments, and organize coherent responses, all of which improve their ability to apply language dynamically. Li conducted a study on university students and concluded that those participating in English debates showed remarkable improvement in listening comprehension, reading, and writing skills ^[2]. This was attributed to the extensive language input and output during the preparation and competition phases. Brown and Green also pointed out that debate activities increase student engagement, which promotes language retention. Based on these and other recent studies, it is evident that English debates have significant potential as an auxiliary tool for language learning ^[3]. Zhang explored the effectiveness of English debates in improving English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' performance. His study concluded that students who participated in debates showed marked improvements in both their linguistic and critical thinking abilities. The findings highlight the role of debates in facilitating active language use and critical engagement in the classroom setting ^[4].

3. Research design

3.1. Participants

The study was conducted at a university with 120 undergraduate students majoring in English. These students were randomly divided into two groups: an experimental group (60 students) and a control group (60 students). The experimental group engaged in an English debate competition training program for one semester, while the control group followed the standard curriculum without debate activities.

3.2. Research methods

To investigate the effectiveness of English debates, the following research methods were employed:

- (1) Pre and post-test assessments: Both groups took pre-tests and post-tests that measured their abilities in speaking, listening, reading, and writing. These tests were designed using standard language proficiency exams to ensure reliability.
- (2) Questionnaire surveys: Both groups were asked to complete surveys before and after the experiment, evaluating their confidence in language skills, critical thinking abilities, and attitudes toward teamwork.
- (3) Semi-structured interviews: 15 students from the experimental group were selected for follow-up interviews to provide deeper insights into their personal experiences and perceived benefits from debate participation.
- (4) Performance comparison: The scores from both groups in speaking, writing, and listening tests were compared, along with critical thinking evaluation tests designed based on Bloom's Taxonomy.

3.3. Data analysis

Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) statistical software was used for quantitative analysis of the data collected. An independent-sample *t*-test was applied to compare the differences between the pre and post-test results of both groups. Descriptive statistics and qualitative analysis were also used to interpret the survey and interview data.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Impact on speaking ability

The most significant improvement was observed in the speaking abilities of students who participated in the

debate training. The experimental group demonstrated a substantial increase in fluency, pronunciation, and the ability to construct logical arguments, as reflected in their post-test scores.

Table 1. Speaking skills test scores (mean)

Group	Pre-test (mean)	Post-test (mean)	Improvement (%)
Experimental	70.4	86.1	22.2
Control	69.8	75.5	8.2

The *t*-test revealed a significant difference ($P < 0.01$) between the experimental and control groups' post-test results.

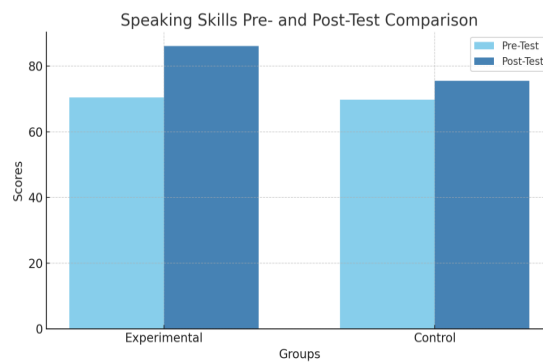


Figure 1. Speaking skills pre and post-test comparison

In addition to improved fluency, students in the experimental group reported greater confidence when speaking English. They highlighted the structured nature of the debate, which requires them to organize and articulate their thoughts quickly under pressure, as being instrumental in enhancing their public speaking and impromptu speaking skills.

4.2. Impact on critical thinking skills

The development of critical thinking was another significant outcome of the English debate competition. Students in the experimental group showed an improved ability to analyze arguments, identify logical fallacies, and construct counterarguments.

Table 2. Critical thinking assessment scores (mean)

Group	Pre-test (mean)	Post-test (mean)	Improvement (%)
Experimental	70.4	86.1	22.2
Control	69.8	75.5	8.2

The qualitative data from the interviews supported these findings, with many students mentioning that debate forced them to evaluate multiple perspectives critically and structure their arguments logically.

4.3. Impact on writing and listening skills

While speaking and critical thinking were the primary skills targeted in the debate competitions, students in the experimental group also experienced gains in writing and listening. The necessity to gather evidence, read extensively for argument preparation, and comprehend opposing arguments during debates led to a moderate improvement in these areas.

Table 3. Writing and listening skills test scores (mean)

Skill	Group	Pre-test (mean)	Post-test (mean)	Improvement (%)
Writing	Experimental	68.2	77.5	13.6
Writing	Control	67.9	70.5	3.8
Listening	Experimental	72.1	81.6	13.2
Listening	Control	71.5	74.2	3.8

The qualitative data revealed that debate participants engaged in a significant amount of reading and writing while preparing for competitions. They not only needed to write coherent arguments but also anticipate and counter opposing viewpoints, enhancing their ability to write persuasively and critically.

4.4. Students' feedback

From the interviews, students in the experimental group expressed overwhelmingly positive feedback about their participation in English debate competitions. They emphasized the value of debate in helping them think quickly, argue persuasively, and collaborate with their peers effectively.

Table 4. Students' perceptions of debate benefits (%)

Benefit	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Improved speaking skills	65	30	5	0	0
Enhanced critical thinking	60	35	5	0	0
Better teamwork skills	50	40	10	0	0

5. Conclusion and recommendations

The findings of this study indicate that English debate competitions significantly enhance language learning by improving students' speaking abilities, critical thinking skills, and to a lesser degree, their writing and listening skills. Debate provides a dynamic, interactive learning environment that encourages active participation and real-world language application, making it an effective tool for language educators.

Future research could expand to investigate the long-term effects of debate on language proficiency, as well as how debate might benefit learners with different language backgrounds. For educators, it is recommended to integrate debate activities into the curriculum, ensuring that debate topics are tailored to student's proficiency levels and interests to maximize engagement and learning outcomes.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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