

Debate: One of the Key Factors to Improving Students' English Language Speaking Skills

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ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, English debates have become very popular in Cambodia. Most students with experience debating in English tend to have good English-speaking skills. It is interesting to learn more about the effect of debating in English on these students' English language skills. Thus, this research paper aims to look into the debate's impact on the English language speaking skills of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) university students who have participated in debate competitions in Cambodia. It was a case study at The University of Cambodia (UC). The qualitative approach was used, and the total participants in the study were ten undergraduate students who participated in a debate competition in the English language in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. The study results showed that the respondents positively perceived a debate. They reported that debate improved their English language speaking skills. In conclusion, the debate has positively impacted my speaking performance and other critical thinking skills. Therefore, it should be added to the university's program as an extracurricular activity.

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1. INTRODUCTION

English has become the world language. Many countries have included this language in their school curricula so that children can learn it from an early grade [1]. Neau [2] noted that English first appeared in Cambodian schools between 1970 and 1975 and disappeared from the school curriculum until 1989. He also noted that when English was reintroduced to the Cambodian school curriculum, there were no official textbooks, so Cambodian government teachers in government schools used some popular textbooks like English for Today, Headway, and Streamline until the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport started publishing the English For Cambodia series in 1997.

English is essential nowadays [3], and the language is usually used in debates [4]. A debate can be formal or informal. In a formal context, the debate is highly structured. A formal debate involves two sides: the pros and cons. It is organized according to rules previously agreed upon. Debates may be judged to declare a winning side. That is the decision that has to be made. An informal debate is a simple form of communication in the form of an argument about a specific issue. Such an informal argument contains little or no supportive evidence. The main goal of such a debate is to assert a particular issue.

In education, a debate is usually conducted for educational purposes. Schools or universities usually organize it. For academics, a debate is an official discussion by professionals to gain support or show off their work or intelligence. Sometimes, a debate is organized to increase awareness of an issue or promote a particular topic.

Debating is considered one of the most effective strategies to help students develop various skills for learning success. Various critical thinking skills, other specific skills, and strategies were developed through active involvement in the debate. Students are asked to prepare for the debate by analyzing and evaluating the source, comparing and contrasting the source, identifying the argument, and distinguishing between relevant and irrelevant information. Students should be encouraged to ask critical questions, develop solutions, and assess solutions to problems. With such skills, students will become good strategic learners.

Debate helps students develop effective learning strategies. Students participating in the debate can develop linguistic competence and other academic skills because debate relies on authentic language use and communication with an audience. According to Hu [5], debate has become an essential means of achieving language objectives, which include vocabulary development, writing skills, note-taking skills and strategies, reading skills, article analysis, critical thinking development, the input of authentic materials, and public and communication skills. Lucas and Katz [6] argued that debate reinforces all four language skills. By actively participating in the debate, students will become good listeners and more effective speakers through their presentations. They will develop strong reading, writing, and note-taking skills during debate preparation. These skills are suitable for their speaking performances. The debate has a close link to speaking skills, which are the skills that give us the ability to produce effective oral communication.

Debaters must have developed specific speaking skills before entering the competition. For these reasons, debaters have to go through a lot of speaking practice and employ many strategies that help them improve their speaking skills. According to Fauzan [7], mastering speaking is challenging for EFL learners since it requires much effort. He goes on to say that speaking skills do not constantly occur in real-time and that the person we are talking to is usually waiting for us to speak correctly. Golkova and Hubackova [8] also claimed that receptive skills are more commonly practiced than productive skills such as writing and speaking. This might be because productive skills require relatively more effort than receptive skills. However, Alasmari and Ahmed [9] argued that learners are given too few opportunities to practice English in an EFL setting in real-life situations. In this regard, teachers teach more strategies for writing and speaking activities independently and integrate such activities into students' daily activities, for example, by establishing a

speaking club or speaking corner where students could go to practice speaking independently.

The concept of debate has existed in almost all forms of academic, social, and political discourse. However, as for the Cambodian context, the concept debate in the English language has just been promoted in the Cambodian educational context in the past decade. Because of globalization and the emergence of English as Cambodia's most prominent foreign language, debates over training and competition in English have drawn significant attention. Private and public language schools, high educational institutions, and government agencies across sectors have widely promoted the debate.

Cambodian EFL teachers always encourage students to participate in many English-speaking activities. To promote students' oral skills, many universities and language schools in Cambodia encourage their teachers to use debate as one of their extracurricular activities. Therefore, this study investigates how debate impacts the English-language development of EFL learners in Cambodia. This study has two objectives, which are as follows: to find out what effective methods debate students use to improve their English-speaking skills and to investigate to what extent the debate impacts student speaking skill development.

1.1. Perceptions of Debate on English Learning

According to Gunawardena, Lowe, and Anderson [10], a debate is a formal process of argument that is represented and interacted with. This is done to gain the support of the judges and the audience. With so much effort put into improving education, the debate is regarded as the first and most important technique. As a result, academia has encouraged integrating debate into an educational program. With the support and sponsorship of colleges, the debate will move beyond its traditional activities [11].

All this desire will encourage all relevant parties to improve and organize a quality and competitive debate, yielding remarkable success. Some teachers of English are reluctant to teach debate because they think it is beyond their students' language ability or proficiency. However, debate can be a powerful tool. Debate improves students' speaking performances [11].

In a debate, two opposing teams provide statements on a particular subject, make motions to support their claims, and refute those of the other team. In an English as a Second Language (ESL) class, a discussion based on a recent lesson's topic can help students improve their language, vocabulary, and critical thinking abilities. A discussion is engaging and suitable for teens or young adults who quickly become bored when learning a second or foreign language. The usage of debates in ESL classes combines several advantageous elements that help students become more proficient in both the language and the necessary abilities. Even a less experienced class is brought to life by debates, which teach students to speak English spontaneously and directly.

1.2. The Impact of Debate on Students' Critical Thinking

The ability to analyze and use proof to support ideas is known as critical thinking, not just accepting facts as sufficient evidence. This thinking proceeds through self-

direction, self-discipline, self-monitoring, and self-correction. Critical thinking and cognitive thinking skills are found in education, research, finance, management, and other legal professions. Critical thinking is also essential in the new knowledge economy. Generally, information and technology are the newest drivers of the modern economy, which requires critical thinking to act as a promoter in a fast-changing context.

Moreover, critical thinking improves language and presentation skills. Explicit and systematic thoughts lead to the successful expression of ideas by the speakers. Creativity can also be promoted by critical thinking, which is when trouble strikes and a new invention or solution follows with critical ideas and creative ways of solving that trouble. Furthermore, critical thinking should be one of the best strategies for self-reflection. Undoubtedly, critical thinking skills contribute to the triumph of a person's life in dealing with harsh situations. Critical thinking is broad, and its definition varies according to fields and experts. For this reason, it is practical that critical thinking may have more than one definition, which presents challenges to teachers and instructors in the fields.

From this perspective, debate helps students understand and communicate different argument forms more effectively in different contexts. Debate helps develop critical thinking, analyzing, synthesizing, and impromptu speaking skills. Debaters also can improve communication skills because debate provides a unique educational experience that promotes depth of study, enhances students' critical thinking through a complex analysis of arguments, and offers excellent pre-professional career preparation [12]. In addition to improving English skills, debaters also considered the enhancement of communication/public speaking, critical/analytical thinking, and debating/argumentation skills as significant benefits [13]. Participation in the debate can boost student self-confidence, accelerate learning across the curriculum, and improve critical thinking and communication skills [14]. The principal goal of the debate design is to motivate students to carry out extensive practice in language and critical thinking skills.

Some students seem to be able to handle complex tasks as though they were nothing. Developing self-esteem and confidence can be a challenge for many students. Unfortunately, there is no prescribed course on these skills in our school curriculum; however, many educators feel the answer to building self-esteem and confidence for students is through debate.

More often than not, debaters cannot manage their fear and nervousness. This is another big, challenging problem often found in non-native debaters. Debating can be nerve-racking because participants speak in public and present ideas that opponents will attack. A fear of public speaking is a type of nervousness known as "speech anxiety." Anxiety is the way our bodies prepare us for a dangerous situation.

Debate forces students to do many things they may not usually do in a regular discussion. They will need the critical thinking ability to analyze issues and information, often on their feet, to present an argument. They will need to articulate their thoughts in a way that makes sense to their audience.

1.3. Debate and Other Skills Development

The ability to understand and engage in a discipline's discourses and rhetorical situations by delivering formal oral presentations or performances and expressing and interpreting ideas in clear oral presentations or performances are examples of oral skills. The following is a discussion on the relationship between debate and oral skills.

Debating can be used brilliantly to boost students' speaking in English [9]. The application of debate in EFL classrooms will drive out students' fear of the English language and improve their fluency, pronunciation, and vocabulary [15].

Debate may be used to teach speaking in English classrooms [16]. It can be a tool to make students practice a few macro-skills of the English language in real life [9]. Because it stimulates students in several cognitive and linguistic ways, the debate is also a fantastic exercise for language development [17]. It offers beneficial speaking, writing, and listening practice. The development of argumentation abilities for persuasive speaking and writing may be significantly aided by debate.

Speaking is a communication process that involves the creation, acquisition, and processing of information, with a focus on meaning production. Speaking ability is the capacity for verbal communication utilizing the target language in a practical, functional, and accurate manner. Speaking is crucial and effective communication for ESL and EFL students and teachers. Even though in recent years, oral skills or communicative competence have been given a special place in the educational curriculum for English teaching in colleges and universities, the amount of time and effort dedicated to tasks and activities in which learners make use of speaking skills to interact with each other using the second or foreign language remains small in the curriculum. It is generally agreed that speaking skills are the skills that students will need most in real-life situations [18]. Speaking is very important for everyday communication, and most often, an individual's first impression and evaluation are based on their ability to speak fluently and understandably [18]. Furthermore, it is stated that speaking is the first means children acquire a language. Speaking is also the only means for changing a language, and it includes a large portion of the everyday involvement of almost all people with language activities.

As people hold the assumption that learning English is something related to oral abilities, the primary goal of ESL learners in developing their speaking skills [18]. When an individual states that some language learners are good at English, people will automatically assume he or she must be able to speak the English language well. In addition, oral skills can be beneficial in developing and improving other skills.

Suitable forms of a debate involve a high level of interaction among students where they present and support arguments, question or rebut arguments, and finally, make an appeal or summary [9]. These are challenges concerning speaking competency, such as fluency, accuracy in vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and critical thinking. Speaking incompetently leads to a problem in the delivery of the argument. This might be the cause of the lack of vocabulary knowledge. Many students lack the vocabulary needed to communicate their ideas clearly and the desire to speak English, while others lack the requisite strategic and communication skills, which may cause their inability to maintain

engagement [19]. For most English language learners, the most challenging skill to master is the inability to communicate verbally in English, also known as speaking.

2. METHOD

2.1. Research Design

The qualitative method starts with presumptions, a worldview, the potential application of a theoretical lens, and the analysis of research questions that explore the meaning people or groups attribute to a social or human situation [15]. Collecting data sensitive to the context of the people and locations under investigation, inductive data analysis, and new qualitative approaches to the inquiry were all employed by qualitative researchers to explore this issue. The final report was presented featuring participant voices, the researcher's reflexivity, a complex description and analysis of the issue, and it added to the body of knowledge or issued a call to action.

2.2. Research Tool and Sample Size

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 out of 150 students at The University of Cambodia (UC). Each interview took approximately 30 minutes and was conducted in English to determine their English proficiency. The researcher tried to reduce the disruption and establish a warm rapport with them to get the maximum amount of information. The researcher notified each interviewee that the conversation was being recorded and ensured he or she felt comfortable. The researcher wanted to be transparent and ethical with my interviews; thus, each interview was transcribed as soon as the interview was completed.

Table 1. Participants' Information

Participant Code	Gender	Age	Major	Year of Study	Level of Debate
P1	M	24	EL	4	University
P2	F	24	IR	4	University
P3	M	22	IR	4	University
P4	F	24	IR	4	University
P5	F	25	IR	4	University
P6	F	25	IR	4	Regional
P7	M	22	IR	4	University
P8	M	20	IR	4	National
P9	M	22	IR	4	University
P10	F	21	IR	3	International

Note: EL = English Language, IR = International Relation

Those debaters, as noted before, were UC undergraduate students and balanced in gender; they also had different majors that provided diverse perspectives. While the sample size was tiny, the researcher wanted to ensure that each debater had enough relevant

experience and did not repeat each other; the researcher also had to limit the scope to ensure the researcher could complete the research project on time. Fifty percent of female participants were included in the interview. In this study, the researcher used snowball sampling or chain referral inspection, a technique that has been widely utilized in subjective sociological research [20]. Using this technique, the researcher selected one debater and asked him to refer me to others, as the subject was particular, and it was not obvious to find many other interviewees. This research required information on insiders or a select group to find the individuals to interview.

The study's target participants were undergraduate students at The University of Cambodia. All the participants are students in the International Track. They all have attended an Intensive English Program, a bridging course that prepares students for an academic program in the English language. The eligible participants were those who had experience in debate competitions or training. The kinds of competitions or training they had can be at university, national, regional, or international levels. Fifty percent of them were female. Nine participants were in year four, and one was in year three. Almost all of them majored in IR, and one had an English major. Seven of them had experience debating at the university level. The rest have both university-level and national, regional, and international levels. It is noted that all these debaters have good English language backgrounds. All of them received intensive English training before they continued their undergraduate studies.

2.4. Analysis

Each recorded interview was transcribed in Microsoft Word soon after completion. The researchers used two types of analysis in this project: the first was content analysis, a method that determined similar themes among the interviewees. The researchers noted the similarities, categorized similar ideas, and discussed them in detail. Researchers chose discourse analysis, which looked at the words, phrases, and sentence structures to determine if there was a deeper meaning [21]. The researcher remained objective throughout this analysis.

3. RESULT

3.1. The Challenges of Debating in the English language

From the respondents' perspective, their everyday challenges in debating in English are limited English language skills, the ability to identify the relevant and quality source, self-confidence, teamwork, time management, and presentation skills. Among these challenges, English skills seem to be the most challenging issue. Nine participants out of ten reported that the language barrier was the most challenging to debate in English. These language barriers include limited vocabulary knowledge of the topic, difficulty understanding the content, and the ability to convey their message to the audience.

...I face a lot of new vocabularies that I need to understand the context between the general context and that topic context...[P1].

...another thing is about the explanations, the challenge is about explanation here meaning that, if we are poor in explanation, then this is the weakness.... [P2].

The second main challenge faced by participants was time management, which resulted from poor teamwork and short notice. The issue of short notice for debating competitions usually happens with debating in classes or at the school level. Most of them report that they had a problem working as a team. Although issues happened throughout the debating process, the most significant ones occurred during the debating competition. The respondents also reported being given short notice for most classroom-level (university-level) debates. Without sufficient time, they could not be well prepared. These students have also attended and completed assignments from other courses.

...yes! indeed, being common a debate team, teamwork...is very challenging, because most of us are students, and it is hard for us to manage our time very well, what to do these parts and what to do next parts, and contrasting ideas between one member and another member make the topic become quite hard... [P10].

...is about time management and it is really important ...and teamwork also important as well... [P4].

..yes, of course, because during the class, there is not only one assignment, there are many assignments, and we don't have much time. Thus, I think it is more challenging because we have to spend time debating and also need another time to do the assignment... [P2].

Following limited English language skills, time, and teamwork issues, the skills to search and identify relevant information for the topic are also challenging for them.

...I face that I need more time to research to find more information to provide a valid source... [P1].

This finding shows that although most reported that English language skill was their primary challenge, it does not necessarily mean they have poor English skills. The reason may be that the topic's content is new to them.

3.2. Vocabulary Development through Debate in English

Most respondents are majoring in International Relations (9 participants), but they have participated in debates in different areas and on different topics, such as law, economics, environment, community, and culture.

...I learned many vocabularies by debating. These include technical words or new words by researching from the internet and dictionaries as well. It depends on my debate, or when I could not find it, I ask for advice from my lecturer or discuss it with the team...[P4].

During the debate, the participants reported that they learned a lot of English vocabulary, such as new words, technical words, and keywords for their topic. The standard techniques or strategies to help them with vocabulary issues were asking their lecturers, mentors, and team members; checking a dictionary; going to the library; and researching the internet. In some cases, they had to confirm the meaning of some terms at relevant ministries, institutions, and organizations. Through effort and a comprehensive source, the participants have been exposed to rich English contextual language, especially a wide variety of vocabulary.

3.3. Speaking Skill and Strategy Development Through Debating

The respondents reported that to prepare for the debate, they had used different learning strategies and techniques, including outlines, bullet points, reciting what they have written down, trying to understand what they are going to say, repeated rehearsing, speaking alone in front of the mirror, voice recording, watching English movies, listening to English songs, speaking English to foreigners, talking to friends and the lecturer in English, and doing group discussions in classes in the English language.

Among these strategies, speaking in front of the mirror was reported as the most popular strategy used by all participants to prepare for their oral debate competition. They believed this technique would help them with their speaking speed, pronunciation, and vocabulary. Then, after building up some confidence, they rehearse what they plan in front of their friend. This is the second common technique they use before the competition. One of the participants reported that:

...normally, our class is conducted in English, and when I go back home, I always practice with my sister, my nephew, and my niece. At the workplace, I also practice with my colleagues, my manager, and others. I also practice in front of the mirror when I need to practice debating, public speaking, or making a presentation to my friends. I feel excited when I speak English with my friends because I do not care about others looking at us, we want to say or speak something that we like to talk about, and most of my friends like to speak English...[P5].

Although these students use many strategies to prepare for their debate competition, speaking in front of mirrors and rehearsing with friends are the most common.

3.4. Perception of Debate on English Speaking Skills

All respondents reported that the debate had improved their English-speaking skills. They all have positive perceptions of debates. They could use new vocabulary and technical words in their speaking. They could present their points more precisely using academic and official words. Their ability to memorize the scripts, pronunciation, and grammar had increased, and more importantly, their English proficiency had improved. In addition to their English-speaking skills, they believed that debate helped them improve others, such as public speaking, communication, and critical speaking skills. They reported that they had increased self-confidence. They felt more comfortable with public speaking. They had improved their critical thinking skills. Using new vocabulary and technical words with the current context they are speaking in, how to convey the message to the public, using more academic and official words, memorizing the scripts, pronunciation, grammar, English proficiency, and so on. It is noted that all debaters have a positive perception of debating in the English language.

4. DISCUSSION

The present study's finding shows that understanding the texts in English, managing time, having good knowledge of keywords, having reasoning skills, and having confidence were the main challenges faced by most participants. Most participants have similar challenges, which are relevant to English language skills. As English is the official

language for their debate, they may have problems with vocabulary, reading comprehension, the structure of arguments, and their confidence in using the language.

The findings imply that in the Cambodian context, where English is a foreign language, even if the students learn it since primary school, challenges of using the language for communication, especially in debates, are still prominent and significant problems. For example, many students have ideas concerning what to say. However, they cannot push their mouths open. Houn and Em [22] noted that this is because they are not accustomed to using English daily, and most of the time, the students do not hear English in their living context or surroundings.

Issues of concepts surrounding debate topics usually challenge non-native speakers. Students who learn English as a foreign language usually find reading and speaking in the target language more challenging because of their diverse linguistic abilities, cultural knowledge, attitudes, and motivation [23]. He argued that these students are not only slow readers due to a lack of automaticity but also inefficient and unskilled in comprehension. As a debater, it is essential to have updated information about current issues and understand concepts in different fields [9]. This means they need both language skills and the ability to research various issues to present their logic and argument to convince judges and audiences. The primary issues with oral communication were poor pronunciation, a small vocabulary, little exposure to the target language, and interference from the first language [24]. His research also shows that the pupils lacked confidence and could not arrange their thoughts and meanings.

The respondents have different strategies on how to practice to improve their speaking skills, such as making outlines, writing down bullet points, reciting what they have written down, trying to understand what they are going to say, practicing again and again, speaking alone in front of the mirror, recording their voices, watching English movies, listening to English songs, speaking English to foreigners, talking to friends and a lecturer in English, doing group discussions in English classes, and also doing a rehearsal before a debate competition or presentation. The debate can be used brilliantly to boost students' speaking in English [9]. The use of debate in EFL classes will drive out students' fear of the English language and improve their fluency, pronunciation, and vocabulary.

Debate may be used to teach speaking in English classes. It can be used to make students practice a few macro-skills of the English language in real life [9]. Because it stimulates students in several cognitive and linguistic ways, the debate is also a fantastic exercise for language development [17]. It offers beneficial speaking, writing, and listening practice. The development of argumentation abilities for persuasive speaking and writing may be significantly aided by debate.

A compelling debate involves plenty of interaction between students who present and support ideas, challenge or refute arguments, and then conclude with an appeal or summary [9]. These are challenges concerning speaking competency, such as fluency, accuracy in vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and critical thinking. Speaking incompetently leads to a problem in the delivery of the argument. The problem might be the limited knowledge of vocabulary. Many students lack the enthusiasm to speak English,

and the vocabulary needed to convey their ideas, while others lack the essential strategic and communication skills, which may be why they cannot maintain engagement.

The researchers have learned from the ten respondents that the Cambodian responses agree with Alasmari and Ahmed's [9] findings. As discussed, they feel more confident and believe they have strengthened their English language skills and other soft skills like public speaking and critical thinking.

5. CONCLUSION

At the classroom or university level, the debate has been prevalent among the lecturers and students at The University of Cambodia. However, this form of debate is not very formal or highly structured since it is mainly used in classroom assessment. As UC has introduced English as the medium of instruction, most of these debates are in English. As English is essential throughout all the debating processes, most of these debaters find preparing for and competing in debate challenges enjoyable. However, with experience and good training in debate, students become confident in debating and real-world communication. Although it takes the required skills, a strong commitment, and hard work, it does pay off. Most students undergoing strenuous training on the debate can improve their English language, leadership, and thinking skills. Lexical skill is one of the skills they gained through debating. Debaters generally improved their knowledge of technical terms they learned while preparing for the debate in different fields and sectors both inside and outside the UC community. In addition to this vocabulary knowledge, debaters also claimed to improve their oral skills. This skill is beyond their average language communication skills. This means these debaters have gained a good knowledge of critical communicators who can professionally present themselves in their native and English languages.

The debate positively impacts students' English language skill development and other skills, such as communication and critical thinking skills. Therefore, the debate should be further promoted and integrated into the curriculum.

This research study was conducted to determine how debate impacts the English language speaking skills of EFL students currently pursuing a bachelor's degree at The University of Cambodia. The study is a qualitative study that was conducted on a few numbers of participants at only a private university in Phnom Penh. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized more significantly than other universities in other provinces in Cambodia. It attempted to discover undergraduates' specific challenges concerning English language skill development. Many limitations need to be expanded on.

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