

# English Competitive Debating Challenges Teachers' Voices

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## ABSTRACT

English competitive debating is currently on the rise at the varsity level due to its extensive English four skills enhancement. However, some students find it challenging to win the debate. This study investigated the challenges the debate teachers face when preparing their students to compete in the tournament. This study utilized a qualitative case study with three debate teachers as the subjects. Data were gathered using open-ended interviews. The study discovered that the teachers' main challenges were students' lack of prior English skills before entering the tournament, less accessibility to tournaments due to financial constraints, and student's decreased motivation due to a string of losses. The teachers tried to fix the problem by providing tons of debate videos, books, and training sessions as often as possible before tournaments. The teachers found that some students felt burned out after the training session and did not enjoy the activity. Other challenges were the lack of funding from universities and the lack of time allocation to train. This study requires additional extensive research on students' perspectives about debating and their expectations of their teachers.

**Keywords:** *Challenges, Competitive debating, English skills, Training session*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Debating activity has been around for a very long time. It is considered one of the best activities to improve all four important skills in language use (listening, speaking, reading, writing) (Green & Klug, 1990; Li et al., 2019; Othman et al., 2015). To make debate activity more intensive and rewarding learning activity, many high schools and universities across the globe formed an adjusted version of competitive debating. Currently, competitive debating fame is rising due to the tremendous benefit it brings to create an exhilarating learning environment and the better accessibility of competition due to the rise of online learning (Pusat Prestasi Nasional, 2020; Snider & Schnurer, 2002). Since English competitive debating is quite a niche activity, there is a need to analyze further the challenges and issues teachers face when introducing the activity to their students.

Many studies have proven that debate activities promote a strong incentive to increase speaking skills. Saidah, Munir and Anam (2020) studied ten EFL intermediate-level students using communication strategies with task-based debate activity. Saidah used Dornyei and Scott's (1997) taxonomy of communication

strategies during debate activity, such as avoidance, achievement, and stalling strategies. The result showed that the students were challenged to use the English language to strengthen their argument. They were able to critically assess when to use strategic vocabulary fillers to ease their anxiety, lack of a word, and lack of grammar structure to maintain constant communication. Moreover, students were enthusiastic to try again since the contexts were very recent. (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997; Saidah et al., 2020). Saidah's research result also correlated with other recent studies on the same topic (Alasmari & Ahmed, 2013; Fauzan, 2016; Zahra, 2019)

With the increase of fame and activity, competitive debating brings its challenges and problems. Zulfahmi (2017) interviewed and observed high school competitive debating teachers in Indonesia and found several hurdles that the teachers face. There were students' English backgrounds, teachers' competitive debating experience, the school's facility and funding, students' motivation, and access to competitions. Many teachers could not solve these problems only by classroom teaching and training, since all of the training will not be useful if there is no access to competitions, and students will not stay if their chances of success are low. (Zulfahmi, 2017)

The benefits of competitive debating are clear, yet it is seldom introduced in the classroom. Zare and Othman (2013) discovered that many students who have less confidence in speaking are often pressured to think and speak simultaneously, and it decreases their motivation to speak. Teacher's perspectives and preferences slowed down the dissemination of competitive debating. Fallahi and Haney (2007) found out that teachers are more comfortable using dedicated books and materials, which decreases the chance to integrate debating activity as an English lesson. Teachers are also afraid of bringing a controversial topic to be discussed in the activity since the discussion may be turned to be offensive and unproductive (Fallahi & Haney, 2007; Zare & Othman, 2013). This research explores the teacher's perspective on the challenges of proliferating competitive debating activity to their students, specifically in tertiary education.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***2.1. Competitive Debating***

Competitive debating is highly regarded as one of the debating activities that many universities worldwide are raring to compete (Snider & Schnurer, 2002). One of the uniqueness of competitive debating is the critical thinking focus and the requirement to learn broad and different topics. Competitive debating employs authentic, up-to-date content. Moreover, it focuses on using several language skills, e.g., a persuasive speech act that requires analytical skill and extensive usage of vocabularies to ensure the audience/adjudicators about the proposed points (Danaye Tous, Tahriri, & Haghighi, 2015; Metsämäki, 2012). Hence, students are more inclined to learn the language because it is more relatable, and it conveys authentic usage of language that they can put in use directly in practice. The debate is also related to the students' writing skill, e.g., applying cohesive and fast note-taking in case building part, listening skill in the argumentative response/rebuttal part, and reading skill in motion interpretation and material gathering part (Iwamoto, 2008; Rybold, 2006; Zare & Othman, 2013).

The most commonly used competitive debating format is the parliamentary style, which also has different branches of type, e.g., Asian Parliamentary, British Parliamentary, or Australasian Parliamentary style. Still, those different styles only differ in speaking time and interjection method, but the essence is always the same. (Alasmari & Ahmed, 2013)

British Parliamentary Debating Style (hence abbreviated as BPDS) is the official competitive debate tournament format that the Indonesian government chooses to fund. The tournament is used as a qualifier platform to select the best representative of Indonesian debaters to attend WUDC (World Universities Debating Championship), the world's biggest debating tournament. Four teams are representing two sides: Government and Opposition. Each side consist of two teams, and each team consist of two members. The Opening and Closing teams are defending the same side. They are judged as two different teams. Opening and Closing teams are defending the same side. They are judged as two different teams. Case-building or preparation time is fifteen minutes, and substantive speech is seven and twenty minutes. Point of Information (hence abbreviated as POI) is allowed between the first and sixth minutes (Pusat Prestasi Nasional, 2020).

#### ***2.1.1. Competitive debating Versus Classroom debating***

There are several main differences between competitive debating and classroom debate activity. Snider (2002) emphasized that competitive debating has a tremendous benefit with its transactional nature in using the turn-taking in speaking and the time constraint in the debate. Those elements are required to make a good discussion that follows a specific order so that all participants will get their turn to express their opinions. In classroom debate, the discussions' flow tends to be chaotic; One group tries to overwhelm the other by their voice, intimidation, or body gestures. The teacher sets no goal, so the discussion can go haywire because it is hard to maintain a good conversation. As a result, everybody has a different time expressing their opinion (Snider & Schnurer, 2002)

Moreover, classroom debating activity is originated from competitive debating. The classroom activity methods are simplified to cope with the large amounts of students and the time limit in the classroom. In competitive debating, the structure is more rigid, and the activity allocates more speech time for the participants (Aclan & Abd Aziz, 2015). Competitive debating offers bountiful prizes, academic scholarships, and school-wide fame to the participants, making it one of the special English language activities. The rigid rules allow the participant to be more disciplined, structured, and more driven since the objective is clear (Pusat Prestasi Nasional, 2020).

Classroom debating is the catalyst for competitive debating to thrive since it serves as a good introduction to more strenuous activity. Fauzan (2016) applied debating activities to increase peer engagement and speaking skills. The results have shown a significant increase in motivation and speaking confidence due to extensive use of authentic materials as a debating topic. Moreover, the activity used a non-restrictive speaking structure that allows students to explore their preferred vocabularies to express their words. (Fauzan, 2016). In other parts of the world, classroom debate activity also brought out similar results (Aclan & Abd Aziz, 2015; Alasmari & Ahmed, 2013; Darby, 2007).

### 3. METHOD

This study used a descriptive qualitative design. According to Heigham and Croker (2009), qualitative research is developed to identify the issues from the participants' perspective and debulk the meaning and interpretations given by them (Heigham & Croker, 2009). The participants were interviewed. The interview's initial data became the base to gain a more in-depth understanding of the challenges that teachers face in implementing English competitive debating activity to their students.

In order to analyze the teacher's perspective of the challenges in implementing English competitive debating activity, the research question was formulated "What are the English competitive debating teacher's perspectives on the challenges in implementing the activity?"

The data were collected using open-ended interviews. The interview was done via Google Meet since it was deemed to be well-organized and efficient for both sides. Since the COVID-19 pandemic disrupts face-to-face interviews, online discussions were held for around three hours with all participants in the same meeting.

The participants in this study were three Indonesian English lecturers in different universities. Two lecturers are from Bandung, West Java, and one lecturer is from Jakarta. The participants' names are Julian, Willem, and Tania (all names are pseudonyms). All of the teachers have taught English for at least three years before the data collection. They have an ample amount of experience in competitive debating back when they were still bachelor degree students, and they have national-accredited judging and teacher credentials.

The interview data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman (1994) data analysis method: Data reduction,

data display, and data verification. (Miles & Huberman, 1994) The interview data result was separated, displayed, and verified based on the challenges they faced in introducing and teaching English competitive debating.

## 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are divided into several major themes from the interview data. There were three themes: students' prior English skills, the financial constraints to attend competitions, and the lasting effect of their defeat in competitions.

### 4.1. Student's prior English skill issue

#### 4.1.1. Speaking Skill Issues

The findings showed that all three teachers agreed that English skills were the major setback in competitive debating, specifically related to their speaking skills. Julian is a competitive debate teacher in the university and high school, and he faced the same issues there. Julian stated that "*The students who want to continue debating are the only ones who already have strong confidence in all English skills, particularly their speaking skills. Many of the newbies quit after their first training due to the pressure to speak with strong context for seven minutes while creating counter-arguments to their opponents.*"

Tania agreed with Julian's statement and added, "*My students' fear of public speaking is the main catalyst of decreased motivation. No matter how long they were given time to case-build, the fear of being mocked due to their bad English, and they forgot everything that they have prepared.*"

Willem stated that "*Many of my students write all of their speech in their notes, and they read it verbatim to us during their speech time. I told them not to do that, but they told us that writing everything calms them down, and they can read their notes whenever they need to. The problem is that they read their notes verbatim, not using it only as a reminder.*"

To build speaking confidence, constant exposure to the activity and openness are essential. Fauzan (2016) implemented Classroom Action Research and used classroom debating activities as the main instrument to encourage speaking. He found that the students required constant exposure to authentic content material and openness to talk about everything (Fauzan, 2016). Tania, Julian, and William have managed to provide exposure to speaking training but cannot alleviate the pressure to

achieve their tall standards. Thus, the students' fear of public speaking is not entirely alleviated.

The most advisable approach to encourage speaking confidence is by slowly scaffolding the approach. Haidara (2016) analyzed several psychological factors that affect students' speaking confidence, such as the insecurity and fear of making mistakes, shyness, and hesitation. (Haidara, 2016) Julian and the others did not address fear and insecurity and try to solve it by simply modifying the practice structure, specifically Willem that did not allow them to use their notes, which exacerbated their fear of public speaking.

The teachers put an enormous amount of pressure on the students to achieve winnings in debating, but less emphasis on learning to speak. Julian's statement clearly shows that he prefers students with confidence in their speaking skills to continue debating since he pressurized the newbies to speak for seven minutes. Willem's action to strictly reprimand his students is also a depiction of pressure. Snider and Schnurer (2002) emphasizes that debating training should be less pressurizing but more engaging, thought-provoking, and fun. (Snider & Schnurer, 2002). In this case, the teachers are required to wean off the pressure and let the students be more flexible in their approach to speak.

The teacher's statement can be traced back to other research that draws the correlation between debating and speaking skill issues. Wahyuni et al. (2020) interviewed Acehnese lecturers about the challenges they faced in implementing debating activity in their debating club. She found that many of the club members were discouraged from joining debate competitions. The students felt shy when their opponents speak fluently in the match, affecting their whole performance. Thus, the members were comfortable in managing the club but not joining another competition (Wahyuni et al., 2020)

#### 4.1.2. Learning Methods

Some findings also showed that the teachers used different coping strategies. Tania described several coping strategies that her students used to survive in competitions. *"I told them to write down the important pointers in their notes as a cue, and they creatively use post-it notes and markers to highlight the important points so that they will not forget. One of them uses strategic pauses, in-between their speeches to remember the structure of their speech"*.

In terms of speaking skills, the teachers were also concerned about the students' inability to cope with their

opponents' speech. Tania stated that *"Not only my students are afraid to refute the statement from their opponents, often they cannot hear what their opponent's arguments. If they cannot hear their arguments, it will be impossible to pinpoint the exact rebuttals to counter the arguments. This is the recurring issue that makes them lose several key competitions."*

Julian often encountered the listening skill issue in their training session. Julian stated that *"When I give them video tutorials or lectures on specific topics, most of them require more than double the time of the video duration to understand the entire content. I understand that the content is not easy, but most of them complained that the presenters either speak too fast or uses unknown vocabularies."*

To solve the issue, Julian gave his students many interactive infographics from Youtube that includes English subtitles, so it is easy to follow. Julian stated that *"To win competitions, I need to provide my students with an ample amount of materials so that they will not draw a blank when the motion is launched. I like watching videos and learn from them, so I gave them motion and infographic videos as their research resources. They liked it better than printed materials from newsreel"*. Julian noticed that some of his students use vocabularies that they heard from the videos daily.

Willem made a similar approach, but he gave debating exhibition videos to his students. Willem stated that *"When I was an active competitive debater, I copied many good arguments from world-class debate tournament videos. I gave my students the videos and told them to summarize the video contents. This exercise allows them to learn specific debating jargons and created their matter bank"*. Willem felt that the exercise is essential to familiarize his students to competitive debating environment, but he understood that the exercises were not easy for his students to digest; Most of them complained that the debaters spoke too fast, and it was hard to follow the debaters' train of thought.

Tania used the same method as Willem, and the result mirrored Willem's experience. Even so, Tania's issue was more centralized on the materials engagement. Tania stated that *"My students are bored and not interested at all in these exhibitions. They preferred direct training sessions rather than watching debating materials. From my own experience, practice is indeed necessary but learning from the expert enhances my understanding much faster."* Due to that reason, Tania gave more face-to-face training sessions rather than the debating

exhibition videos but stressed the importance of learning from the video.

The approaches used by Willem, Julian, and Tania were the standard approach in teaching competitive debating to the students and to ease their anxiety. In Willem's case, he believed that to deliver a good speech. Debaters need to be comfortable in a competitive debating environment and watching debating videos. Julian's approach was more material-based, as he recommended more infographics and exposure to English-based resources. Snider (2002) agreed to these approaches and stated that the students' comfortability and familiarity were the keys to provide them the space to learn (Snider & Schnurer, 2002). Although, both of them agreed that the learning progress was slow and required consistent practice.

The teachers have managed to provide an engaging and flexible method of learning to the students, which is a great effort to reduce public speaking pressure. Julian's method allows the student to be more familiar with the debating scene, and Willem's video becomes a source of examples for students to follow. Hiland (2017) addressed the issue of novice debaters growth problem, and fear of public speaking was one of the most crucial parts in maintaining a debating career. Speaking skill is often discarded, and the debating club selects students that are already fluent without encouraging the teacher to build speaking skill from the ground up (Hiland, 2017). With that being said, Julian and others struggled to build their students' speaking confidence but still have problems reducing the pressure and expectation in practice.

#### **4.2. Institution's financial constraints**

Financial constraints also impacted on debate activities. Willem was concerned about the institution's financial constraints to assist the debating club's accessibility in quality training and competitions. Due to the university's limited funding to the debating club, the institution could not hire dedicated teachers to train the students in every extracurricular meeting. Therefore, the debating club needs to rely on the seniors and the experienced club members to teach newcomers. Willem was hired by the institution only when the major tournament is getting closer, and he was required to quickly assess the students' problems in a very short time frame (two or three weeks before the tournament). Willem complained that he could not help the students to the best of his ability due to the constrained timeline.

Another problem lies in the university's inconsistent funding. The university only extensively funds the

debating club when a government-mandated annual tournament was held. The tournament's name is National University Debating Championship (abbreviated as NUDC). Willem, Tania, and Julian agreed that students need to enter as many competitions as possible to increase their exposure in the debating environment. Still, tournaments can cost a lot of registration money and travel expenses, and the universities do not have enough funds. Even if the COVID-19 pandemic allows the tournament to exist in an online environment, universities also experienced a financial setback and unable to fund the tournaments.

Julian stated that *"Universities' lack of funding created the vicious cycle in debating club's growth. NUDC is usually conducted at the end of the semester, and most students do not have enough experience to win the tournaments due to a lack of tournament exposure. Regardless of the result, the students who have participated in NUDC are required to teach their juniors. The students with less to no experience are being anointed as capable seniors, and the freshmen did not have another avenue to learn from an experienced teacher. The cycle is repeated, and the student's growth is severely stunted."*

Zulfahmi's research confirmed the pattern of the problem. Zulfahmi interviewed several English teachers about their challenges in teaching competitive debating, and one of the significant issues is the lack of funding and the institution's interest. To solve the problem, the lecturers tried to streamline the registration process, encouraged other debating clubs to create a tournament that was exclusively dedicated for the newcomers, and consistently offer pro-bono teaching session to the underprivileged institution. The result showed that the student's engagement rose extensively, and they were excited to compete in a stress-free newcomers-only debating tournament. (Zulfahmi, 2017)

The problems of financial constraint are the lack of access and severely limited talent pool. Hiland (2017) pinpointed the correlation between limited funding and talent selection. The funding severely limits the pool of talent that can be developed since teachers and tournaments are expensive. Most debate clubs select a student with strong English fluency to curb down the cost of speaking skill lectures. (Hiland, 2017) In Willem's case, the clubs still allow newbies to join but burdening seniors with teaching sessions.

### 4.3. The Effect of the Defeat

The teachers felt that the consistent defeat in tournaments decreases student's interest in competitive debating. Since most tournament participants are returnees from the previous tournaments, it is challenging for a debating club with severe financial constraints to win the competition. These problems resulted in repeated losses whenever the students entered the tournament. Tania stated that "*Our debating club did not have many members since most of them quit in the middle of their first year. The members complained that the tournament's motion trend changes so rapidly that they cannot keep up, since they cannot attend tournaments as often as other well-funded universities.*"

Julian was concerned about student's motivation to stay in a competitive debating circle. Julian stated, "*One of my students was the most active member in the debating club, but after two or three competitions, he suddenly quit the club. I asked what's wrong. He told me that he has no fighting chance with other universities since they entered more competitions and have more sessions with dedicated teachers. He'd rather spend his time in the activity that rewards him for his hard work.*"

Willem's students understand that competitive debating enhances their English skills and critical thinking. Still, they claimed that competitive debating is too taxing and mentally burdens them since they need to commit to training every day. Willem and Tania claimed that exposure to competitive debating allows their students to be more expressive and open, but it forces them to be very dedicated to an extracurricular activity. The students stated that they wanted to focus on their studies rather than endlessly competing in tournaments

The sense of defeat and motivation goes hand-in-hand. Willem and others tried to create a training environment with less pressure, but the real competition does not play easy and destroys students' motivation with a barrage of losses. Zulfahmi (2017) emphasized the devastating effect of the loss on the students' motivation. Often, the student felt that their effort was not paid off and move to another activity. Other students who have won at least one tournament have a higher percentage of continuing debating than their counterparts. (Zulfahmi, 2017).

Not only that, but it also exacerbated the issue of funding and talent pool. Losing tournaments does not bring pride and glory to the university, and the debating club will have less funding next year. Therefore, debating clubs are forced to limit their talent pool to the elites, thus

curbing access to the debating scene. (Hiland, 2017) Voluntary support from the institution is required to help the debating club without the winning antecedent. If that happens, the debating club can focus more on developing new talents than forcing the newcomers to win competitions, resulting in extreme pressure.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study analyzes the challenges that teachers face in teaching English competitive debating to the students. This study revealed three challenges shared by the participants; Lack of students' prior English Skills before joining the activity, the institution's financial constraints, and the decreased motivation and willingness to join competitive debating due to the students' strings of losses. The most prevalent challenge that the teachers felt was the lack of students' prior English skills, which causes them to be demotivated in training and tournaments. The teachers tried to mitigate that by providing training materials and encouragement. Still, the institution's funding constraints with lack of competition accessibility ultimately demotivate students to participate in competitive debating.

This study's findings will be of interest to anyone desiring to find out the challenges that English teachers face in proliferating English competitive debating. Future research should be emphasized on the student's perspective and challenges in the English competitive debating scene.

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