



Enhancing University English Majored Seniors' Speaking Skills through Using the Debating Technique

Tran Thi Kim Tuyen

Sai Gon University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

Email: tktuyen@sgu.edu.vn

Abstract.

Developing effective speaking skills is a key objective in English language education, particularly for university students majoring in English. Nonetheless, many learners face persistent challenges with fluency, coherence, and confidence in academic and communicative contexts. This study examines the use of structured debating as a pedagogical strategy to support the development of speaking skills among senior English majors at the university level. Grounded in communicative language teaching (CLT) principles and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory—which emphasize interaction, scaffolding, and learner engagement—this quasi-experimental research explores the potential of debate to enhance speaking fluency, critical thinking, and communicative competence. Two groups participated: an experimental group engaged in regular debate-based speaking activities and a control group received traditional speaking instruction. Data were collected through pre- and post-tests, classroom observations, and student reflection journals. Results indicated that the experimental group demonstrated notable gains in speaking performance, particularly in areas such as fluency, use of academic vocabulary, and structuring of arguments. Additionally, qualitative feedback suggested increased student motivation and critical engagement. While further research is needed to generalize these findings, the results suggest that structured debate, when grounded in sound pedagogical theory, holds promise as an instructional approach for enhancing oral proficiency and fostering broader communicative skills in university-level EFL contexts.

Keywords: Debate, debating technique, speaking skills, English, English majored seniors.

1 Introduction

Speaking remains one of the most challenging and complex skills for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), requiring not only linguistic accuracy but also fluency, confidence, and the ability to engage in spontaneous, meaningful interaction (Bygate, 2009; Goh & Burns, 2012). For university students majoring in English—particularly in contexts where English is not the dominant language—oral proficiency is essential for academic success and future career prospects. In Vietnam, English-majored seniors at institutions such as Sai Gon University are expected to demonstrate high levels of communicative competence. However, despite years of language instruction, many still struggle to express their ideas clearly, confidently, and coherently in both academic and social settings Thuong Hoai Le et al (2025).

Although communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based language teaching (TBLT) have been widely promoted in Vietnam's EFL curriculum (Littlewood, 2007), many classrooms continue to emphasize accuracy over fluency, with limited opportunities for extended or authentic oral interaction. This misalignment between pedagogical practice and communicative demands has highlighted the need for more interactive, student-centered methodologies that can better foster speaking competence.

One such approach is classroom debate, which draws on principles of dialogic learning and the sociocultural theory of language development (Vygotsky, 1978), emphasizing collaborative meaning-making and cognitive engagement. Debate activities have been shown to encourage learners to formulate and defend arguments, develop critical thinking, and engage in spontaneous speech under time constraints—skills that directly support oral fluency and discourse management (Kennedy, 2007). Despite growing international interest, the application of debate as a speaking strategy remains limited in Vietnamese EFL settings, where research on its implementation and outcomes is still scarce.

This study addresses this gap by investigating the impact of structured classroom debate on the speaking performance of English-majored seniors at Sai Gon University. Specifically, it explores how debate influences key aspects of speaking proficiency, including fluency, coherence, vocabulary use, and confidence.

To guide this investigation, the study is driven by the following research questions:

Question 1. To what extent does the use of the debating technique improve the speaking skills of English-majored seniors at Sai Gon University?

Question 2. How do students perceive the use of debate as a method for developing their speaking proficiency?

By addressing these questions, the study aims to contribute both theoretical insights and practical strategies for enhancing EFL speaking instruction through interactive, cognitively demanding tasks such as debate.

2 Literature review

2.1 Theoretical and conceptual framing

This study is grounded in core concepts from second language acquisition (SLA) and communicative language teaching (CLT), with particular emphasis on the development of speaking competence through task-based learning. Speaking competence is understood here as the ability to produce spoken language that is fluent, coherent, and contextually appropriate—drawing on both linguistic knowledge and the capacity to manage real-time interaction (Goh & Burns, 2012). Within this framework, fluency refers not only to speed and flow of speech but also to the speaker's ability to express ideas with minimal hesitation and self-correction (Skehan, 2009). Critical thinking, in turn, is conceptualized as the ability to analyze, evaluate, and construct arguments—a cognitive skill that supports coherent discourse and persuasive communication (Ennis, 1993).

The study is informed by Canale and Swain's (1980) model of communicative competence, which includes four key components: Grammatical competence (accuracy in vocabulary and syntax), Sociolinguistic competence (appropriateness of expression in context), Discourse competence (cohesion and coherence), and Strategic competence (ability to overcome communication breakdowns). Bachman's (1990) extended model further incorporates pragmatic competence and language use in authentic tasks, which aligns closely with the pedagogical goals of debate-based instruction.

From a pedagogical standpoint, the study draws on principles of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), in which language learning occurs through meaningful, goal-oriented tasks that reflect real-world communication (Ellis, 2003). Debate, as a form of complex, open-ended speaking task, demands that learners engage in extended discourse, draw on a range of lexical and syntactic resources, and respond to interlocutors in real time. Such tasks are believed to facilitate lexical access, syntactic restructuring, and interactional competence, all of which are essential for spoken language development (Bygate, 1999; Long, 2015).

Debate also promotes cognitive engagement by requiring learners to organize arguments, anticipate counterarguments, and adjust their language output dynamically. This aligns with Swain's (2005) Output Hypothesis, which posits that producing language under communicative pressure pushes learners to refine their linguistic forms and enhance accuracy. Furthermore, Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory provides an additional lens, suggesting that debate fosters learning through collaborative dialogue and scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

In summary, the integration of debate into speaking instruction is theoretically supported by communicative competence frameworks, TBLT principles, and cognitive-interactionist theories of SLA. This framing not only informs the design of the intervention but also provides an analytical lens through which to interpret student outcomes in terms of linguistic, cognitive, and interactional development.

2.2 The importance of speaking skills in language learning

Speaking is considered one of the most essential skills in second language acquisition. According to Richard Jack C. and Rodgers Theodore S. (2001), speaking is the foundation for communication and a key indicator of language proficiency. In EFL contexts like Vietnam, the ability to communicate orally in English is crucial for academic success, future employment, and global integration (Brown H. Douglas, 2007). Moreover, Nunan David (2003, p. 48) emphasizes that developing speaking competence is often a top priority for language learners.

2.3 The role of debating in language education

Debating is a student-centered, interactive method that requires learners to argue for or against a specific issue using evidence and reasoning. This process fosters fluency, critical thinking, and confidence (Kennedy Shiela Y., 2007). Debate also encourages learners to develop argumentative structures and respond quickly in real-time interactions key aspects of communicative competence (Alasmari Ali, 2020). According to Krieger Daniel (2005), debate is a valuable speaking activity that integrates language use with logical reasoning and public speaking.

2.4 Key concepts and review of relevant studies

Debate technique: This refers to the structured format in which two opposing teams argue a proposition. It is commonly used to enhance reasoning, persuasion, and oral fluency.

Speaking skill: In TESOL, this refers to learners' ability to express themselves clearly, fluently, and accurately in spoken English.

Several studies support the effectiveness of debate in EFL contexts. Zare Pezhman and Othman Mazlin (2013, p. 1548) found that debate improved Iranian EFL learners' speaking skills, particularly fluency and coherence. However, these studies often lacked control groups, long-term observation, or focused solely on general EFL learners without targeting English majors specifically.

2.5 Limitations of previous research

Despite encouraging results, previous research lacks a focused examination of how debating impacts senior university students majoring in English. Many studies are either limited to short-term interventions or do not consider students' academic level and curriculum context. Furthermore, research in the Vietnamese higher education setting remains scarce.

2.6 The purpose of the research

To address these gaps, this study investigates how the debating technique enhances speaking performance among English-majored seniors at Sai Gon University. It offers a contextualized, longer-term intervention and includes both quantitative and qualitative data. The purpose is to provide deeper insights into the pedagogical value of debate in developing speaking skills among advanced EFL learners in Vietnam.

3 Research methodology

3.1 Research design

This study adopted a quasi-experimental mixed-methods design, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data to examine the effectiveness of debate-based instruction in improving students' speaking skills. The research involved two groups: an experimental group that received debate- focused instruction and a control group that followed the standard speaking curriculum. This design enabled comparison of outcomes while capturing learners' experiences and attitudes through multiple data sources.

3.2 Participants

A total of 100 senior English-major students from Sai Gon University participated in the study. The participants were divided into two equal groups ($n = 50$ each) based on convenience sampling, drawn from intact classes assigned by the university's scheduling system. Group assignment was based on class enrollment, and no students were reassigned during the study.

To ensure baseline equivalency, all participants completed a university- administered English placement test prior to the intervention. The results confirmed that both groups had comparable levels of proficiency (intermediate to upper-intermediate). A summary of participant demographics is provided below:

Age range: 21–23 years old

Gender distribution: 64% female, 36% male

Language background: All participants were native Vietnamese speakers with a minimum of six years of formal English instruction

This demographic balance contributed to the internal validity of the between-group comparisons.

3.3 Instructional procedure

The intervention spanned a period of 10 weeks, with both groups receiving two 90-minute sessions per week. Instruction was delivered by the same lecturer to eliminate instructor-related variability.

Experimental group (Debate-based instruction):

Students engaged in structured debate activities each week. The format alternated between team debates and individual persuasive speaking, following formats such as the Lincoln-Douglas and Oxford style. Topics were aligned with course themes (e.g., education, social issues, technology), selected based on their relevance and accessibility. Each session included:

Topic analysis and vocabulary building
Argument construction and rebuttal techniques
Structured debate performances

Peer and instructor feedback sessions

The lecturer acted as a facilitator, guiding topic preparation, moderating debates, and offering formative feedback on content and language use.

Control group (Traditional instruction):

The control group followed the university's standard speaking curriculum, which included pair work, presentations, role-playing, and textbook-based discussions. No debate activities were incorporated. Instruction emphasized fluency, pronunciation, and grammatical accuracy through teacher-led drills and communicative practice. This allowed comparison between traditional methods and debate-based approaches.

3.4 Data collection instruments

Data were collected using a combination of standardized tests and qualitative tools:

Pre- and post-speaking tests:

Students completed oral tests at the beginning and end of the study. Tasks involved describing a situation, expressing opinions, and defending viewpoints. A standardized rubric (adapted from CEFR speaking descriptors) was used to evaluate: Fluency and coherence, vocabulary range and appropriacy, grammatical accuracy, pronunciation.

Two trained raters independently scored the recordings. Inter-rater reliability was established (Cohen's kappa = 0.84), ensuring scoring consistency.

Observation checklists:

Weekly classroom observations were conducted using a structured checklist measuring student participation, engagement, use of academic language, and argument quality. These provided insights into student behavior during debates and traditional instruction.

Reflective journals:

Students in the experimental group submitted weekly reflective journals, sharing their thoughts on the learning process, perceived progress, challenges, and enjoyment of the debate format.

Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews: At the end of the study, all students completed anonymous questionnaires exploring their attitudes toward speaking instruction. A sample of 10 students from each group participated in semi-structured interviews for deeper insights into their experiences and preferences.

3.5 Data analysis

Quantitative analysis: Pre- and post-test scores were analyzed using paired sample t-tests to determine within-group progress, and independent sample t-tests to assess differences between groups. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

Qualitative analysis: Reflective journals, observation notes, and interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic coding. Emerging themes included engagement, confidence, language use, and perceived improvement. Coding was validated by a second researcher to ensure reliability.

3.6 Ethical considerations

All ethical procedures were strictly observed throughout the research. The study received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee at Sai Gon University. Prior to participation:

Informed consent was obtained from all students, with assurances that participation was voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time.

Data were anonymized and stored securely.

Classroom activities remained consistent with curricular goals to avoid undue disruption.

Student performance data were used solely for research purposes and had no effect on academic grading.

4 Main findings

4.1 Fluency and confidence

The data revealed that the experimental group significantly developed their fluency and speaking confidence after engaging in structured debates. Students spoke more naturally, with fewer pauses and greater ease in expressing ideas.

4.2 Enhanced critical thinking and argumentation skills

Debate activities helped students develop structured, logical arguments. Students demonstrated better organization of ideas and clearer reasoning in post-test surveys and classroom performances.

4.3 Increased student engagement

Observation data and reflection journals indicated that students were more motivated and actively participated in debate-based speaking tasks than in traditional lessons. Debate added a competitive and purposeful element to speaking activities.

4.4 Positive student perceptions

Questionnaire and interview responses showed that students found debate both enjoyable and beneficial for improving their oral communication. Most participants stated they would prefer to continue using debate techniques in future speaking courses.

5 The results

5.1 Current state analysis using student survey data

Table 1. Speaking proficiency levels before and after debate based instruction (N = 100)

Scale	Score Range	Proficiency level	Before (%)	After (%)
1	1.0–4.0	Poor	0%	0%
2	5.0–6.4	Average	13%	4%
3	6.5–7.9	Fair	57%	33%
4	8.0–8.9	Good	21%	47%
5	9.0–10.0	Excellent	9%	16%

(Source: Collected by authors)

Before the 10-week intervention, most students (57%) were assessed at a fair level. Following the debate-based instruction, there was a marked shift: 63% of students achieved good or excellent scores, while those at average and fair levels decreased significantly. This trend suggests that structured debate activities positively impacted students' speaking proficiency, particularly in organizing and delivering extended spoken discourse (See Table 1).

5.2 Pre- and post-test score analysis

A paired sample t-test showed a statistically significant increase in students' post-test speaking scores ($p < 0.05$), confirming the effectiveness of the debating intervention. "p" stands for "probability" specifically, the probability that the results happened by random chance rather than because of the intervention (in your case, the debating technique). A p-value less than 0.05 ($p < 0.05$) means that there is less than a 5% chance that the improvements in students' speaking scores were random. In other words, we are 95% confident that the improvement was caused by the use of debate activities.

5.3 Observational and reflective findings

Classroom observations indicated greater student interaction, spontaneous speaking, and reduced anxiety. Reflective journals revealed that students developed better self-awareness about their speaking strengths and weaknesses.

5.3.1 Increased student interaction and engagement

During debate sessions, lecturers noted that over 80% of students were actively participating in discussions, compared to less than 50% in traditional speaking lessons.

Students engaged in:

Asking and answering questions without prompts. Challenging each other's arguments.

Using body language and eye contact more confidently.

This increase in interaction is a key indicator of improved communication competence, including:

Turn-taking skills. Listening and responding.

Using English spontaneously in a high-pressure but supportive environment.

Example: In one observed session, a group of students debated the topic "Should university education be free?" and were able to maintain a 10-minute structured discussion with minimal lecturer intervention a significant development from earlier sessions where they struggled to speak for more than 2 minutes.

5.3.2 Spontaneous speaking and reduced anxiety

Lecturers reported that students became more comfortable speaking without scripts or memorized lines by Week 6.

Anxiety-related behaviors (e.g., avoiding eye contact, long pauses, hesitancy) declined significantly.

According to reflective journals, about 70% of students said they felt "more confident" or "much more confident" speaking in front of others by the end of the course.

This reflects one of the key benefits of debate-based pedagogy: It provides a low-risk environment for trial and error.

Repeated exposure to speaking under time limits and peer evaluation builds resilience and confidence.

Example: A student who initially rated herself 3/10 in confidence stated in her journal that after several rounds of debate (see Table 2).

5.3.3 Improved self-awareness through reflective journals

Students used weekly reflective journals to analyze their own performance.

Journals showed growth in metacognitive awareness, with students identifying:

Specific grammar or vocabulary weaknesses (e.g., "I use too many simple words").

Communication strengths (e.g., "I can speak clearly and organize my ideas").

Around 65% of students used their journals to set personal goals like "use more linking words" or "speak for longer without hesitation."

Reflection promotes autonomous learning, as students take ownership of their development.

By identifying and tracking their progress, students reinforce learning and build motivation to improve.

Reflective writing also enhances critical thinking, a core benefit of debate.

Example: One student reflected, "I realized I don't listen actively. I just wait for my turn. Now I try to understand and respond to my opponent's ideas."

These qualitative findings strongly support the quantitative results by showing real behavioral and emotional changes:

Table 2. Students' self-awareness before and after the intervention

Indicator	Pre-debate	Post-debate
Active participation	50%	>80%

Speaking confidence	Low(self-rated)	High (confidence increase)
Use of reflective strategies	Rare	Regular (75% set learning goals)

(Source: Collected by authors)

These qualitative indicators align with observed behavioral changes. Post-intervention, students reported increased classroom engagement, greater confidence when speaking, and more frequent use of reflective strategies such as self-monitoring and goal setting which are associated with autonomous language learning.

5.4 Student attitudes and feedback

100% of students agreed or strongly agreed that debate improved their ability to speak English fluently, think critically, and respond quickly. They also noted improvement in vocabulary and pronunciation (see Table 3).

Table 3. Observed response speed over time

Week of observation	Key behavior noted
Week 3	Long pauses; students took 15–30 seconds to respond
Week 7	70% of students responded within 10 seconds or less
Week 10	Most students able to spontaneously respond with confidence

(Source: Collected by authors)

Over the course of the study, a clear trend toward faster response times was observed. By week 10, most students could initiate responses without extended hesitation. This progression is indicative of improved linguistic processing speed, often linked to increased fluency and confidence.

Why did debate improve quick responses?

Debate formats such as impromptu rebuttals, timed speeches, and cross-examinations require participants to:

Process arguments quickly.

Form coherent responses under time pressure. Rely on fast recall of vocabulary and grammar.

This type of linguistic agility is rarely emphasized in traditional speaking classrooms, where students often rehearse or read from scripts.

Example: In reflective journals, a student wrote:

“At the beginning, I needed 30 seconds to prepare a response, but now I can speak right after my classmate finishes talking.”

“Debating helps me train my brain to think faster in English. I don’t get stuck like before.”

This shows real growth in spontaneity and fluency, developed through consistent debate practice.

Classroom observation evidence Instructors observed:

By week 3: Students hesitated and paused frequently.

By week 7: Over 70% of students could respond to a counterargument in under 10 seconds without major pauses or switching to Vietnamese.

Impact on communication skills

Improved responsiveness affects several dimensions of communication as the table 4:

Table 4. Students' response ability post-intervention

Skill area	Improvement seen through debate
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Fluency	Students speak with fewer pauses and filler words.
Listening comprehension	Faster processing of input leads to faster output.
Confidence	Quick thinking boosts belief in one’s language ability.

(Source: Collected by authors)

Students exhibited measurable improvements in spontaneous communication, a critical indicator of communicative competence. Debate tasks appeared to support the internalization of language structures, leading to smoother and more confident delivery.

Debate activities also significantly enhanced students’ listening comprehension. Since debates require participants to actively listen, process information quickly, and prepare timely rebuttals, students developed the ability to interpret spoken input more efficiently. As a result, their output became quicker and more relevant, showing a direct connection between improved listening and faster, more accurate speaking responses.

Lastly, a considerable increase was observed in students’ confidence when using the language. Debates often put students in high-stakes but supportive speaking situations, encouraging them to think quickly and trust their ability to express ideas under time pressure. This repeated exposure to spontaneous speaking builds psychological readiness and reduces anxiety, which are key factors in boosting long-term communicative confidence.

In short, the improvements across fluency, comprehension, and confidence indicate that debate is not merely a speaking exercise, but a multifaceted language development tool. By integrating critical thinking, active listening, and structured expression, debate helps students become more dynamic, responsive, and self-assured speakers.

Then, to better understand the impact of the debate intervention on students’ communicative abilities, a comparison was made between their performance before and after the activity across all measured areas as table 5.

Table 5. Comparison of key speaking metrics

Metric	Before debate	After debate
Students who could respond within 10 seconds	40%	75%
Average hesitation time (estimated)	15 seconds	5–7 seconds

Students performing at fair to excellent levels	58	95
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(Source: Collected by authors)

The percentage of students responding quickly and confidently nearly doubled. Likewise, hesitation time dropped significantly. These improvements suggest that debate not only developed speaking skills but also increased students' ability to perform under time pressure a key requirement for real- world communication.

Comparison of student response metrics before and after the debate intervention

The data clearly demonstrate notable improvements in students' responsiveness and confidence following the debate intervention. Three key metrics were used to evaluate the impact: response time, hesitation time, and self-assessed confidence in responding instantly.

Response time improvement

Prior to the debate activity, only 40% of students were able to respond to questions within 10 seconds. This figure increased significantly to 75% after the intervention. The substantial rise indicates that participating in debates likely helped students process questions more quickly and articulate responses more efficiently.

Reduction in hesitation time

The estimated average hesitation time before the debate was approximately 15 seconds, suggesting a considerable delay in students' willingness or ability to respond. After the debate, this hesitation time dropped to 5–7 seconds, indicating enhanced fluency and confidence. This decrease reflects improved spontaneous thinking and reduced anxiety or uncertainty when speaking.

Improvement in self-perceived confidence

Before the intervention, 22 students were assessed to be at an average level in terms of confidence when responding instantly, while 58 students were categorized from fair to excellent. After the debate, the number of students at the average level dropped to just 5, whereas 95 students were evaluated as having fair to excellent confidence levels. This shift highlights a marked growth in students' self-perception of their communicative competence.

The debate activity appears to have had a positive and measurable effect on students' communicative performance. The improvements across all three metrics suggest not only increased verbal agility but also enhanced self- efficacy. Engaging in structured argumentation likely encouraged students to think critically, respond under pressure, and express their thoughts more promptly skills that are essential in both academic and real-world contexts.

5.5 Lecturer observations

The lecturer observed a noticeable improvement in students' teamwork, listening skills, and ability to formulate arguments under time pressure.

In this section, the instructor observed significant improvements in students' communication skills as a result of the debate-based instructional approach. Specifically, the lecturer noted enhancements in:

Teamwork: Students exhibited better collaboration and coordination during group discussions and debates.

Listening skills: There was a marked improvement in students' ability to listen attentively and respond appropriately to peers.

Ability to formulate arguments under time pressure: Students demonstrated increased proficiency in constructing coherent arguments within limited time frames.

5.5.1 Teamwork enhancement

Increased collaboration: Students worked more effectively in teams, sharing ideas and supporting each other during debates.

Improved coordination: There was a noticeable improvement in how students organized their thoughts and presented arguments collectively.

Example: In a debate on the topic of "The impact of social media on Youth," students effectively divided roles, with one member presenting the introduction, another providing supporting arguments, and a third delivering the conclusion, showcasing their enhanced teamwork skills, demonstrating high-level coordination.

5.5.2 Improvement in listening skills

Active listening: Students demonstrated heightened attention to their peers' arguments, leading to more relevant and thoughtful responses.

Critical engagement: There was an increase in students' ability to critically analyze and engage with opposing viewpoints.

Example: During a rebuttal session, Students from Group C effectively countered an argument by Student from Group B, referencing specific points made earlier, indicating active listening and critical engagement.

5.5.3 Enhanced ability to formulate arguments under time pressure

Quick thinking: Students became more adept at organizing their thoughts and presenting arguments within the time constraints of debates.

Confidence in speaking: The pressure of timed debates helped students gain confidence in their speaking abilities.

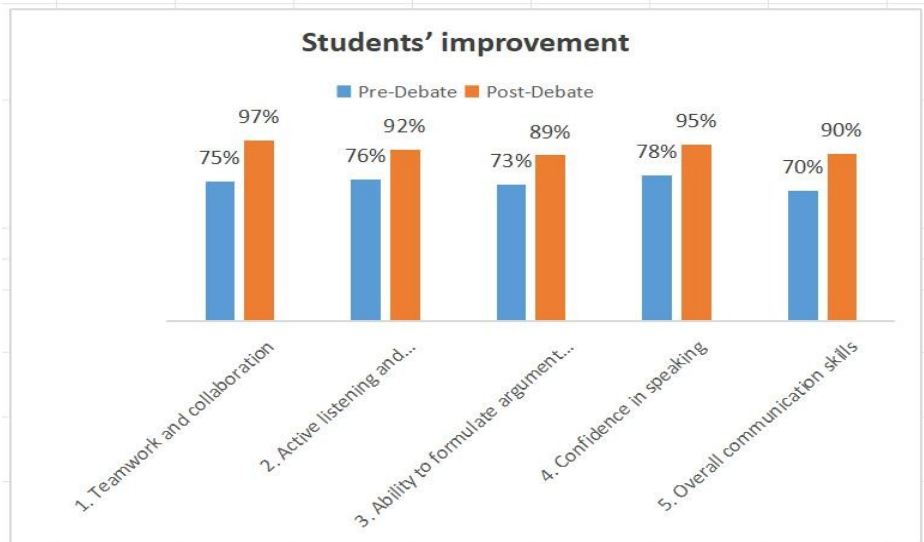
Example: In a timed rebuttal round, Students presented a well-structured counter-argument within the allotted time, demonstrating improved ability to formulate arguments under pressure.

5.5.4 Overall improvement in communication skills

Confidence: Students showed greater self-assurance in expressing their opinions and defending their viewpoints.

Enhanced public speaking skills: There was a noticeable improvement in students' public speaking abilities, including clarity of speech and effective use of body language.

Example: In the final debate session, Students in Fair-Good- E from Group E delivered a compelling argument with clear articulation and confident body language, reflecting the overall improvement in communication skills (see Fig. 1).



(Source: Collected by authors)

Fig. 1. Lecturer's observation checklist about students' pre-debate and post-debate improvement

Observation criteria

Teamwork and collaboration: An increase from 75% to 97% indicates a significant enhancement in students' ability to work effectively in teams.

Active listening and engagement: The rise from 76% to 92% suggests that students became more attentive and engaged during discussions.

Ability to formulate arguments under time pressure: The improvement from 73% to 89% reflects students' growing proficiency in constructing arguments within time constraints.

Confidence in speaking: The jump from 78% to 95% indicates a substantial boost in students' self-assurance when speaking.

Overall communication skills: The overall increase from 70% to 90% demonstrates a comprehensive improvement in students' communication abilities.

Lecturer observations confirmed that debate-based instruction strengthened several key communicative competencies. The most substantial gains were seen in teamwork, real-time reasoning, and self-confidence skills that are often undervalued in traditional speaking instruction.

6 Discussions

6.1 Significance of the findings

The results reinforce that debate is a powerful tool for developing speaking skills among English majors. It promotes active learning, encourages real-time thinking, and fosters both linguistic and cognitive development.

The present study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of debate-based instruction in enhancing speaking skills among English-major university students in Vietnam. The results, drawn from both quantitative and qualitative data, provide converging evidence that structured debates can significantly support learners' oral communication development.

The quantitative findings indicate clear improvements in students' speaking proficiency. The increase in the proportion of students attaining "good" and "excellent" ratings, as well as the reduction in average hesitation time, suggests that regular exposure to debate activities enhances learners' fluency, coherence, and confidence. These outcomes align with prior research highlighting the value of interactive, task-based learning in second language acquisition (Bygate, 2001; Ellis, 2003). Specifically, debate appears to offer a practical context for real-time language production, requiring learners to process input quickly, organize thoughts, and respond spontaneously—all of which are key to communicative competence.

The qualitative data from student reflections and classroom observations reinforce these patterns. Students reported increased motivation, confidence, and engagement in speaking tasks. Furthermore, they demonstrated more consistent use of self-regulated learning strategies, such as setting goals and monitoring performance skills associated with learner autonomy and sustained language development (Zimmerman, 2002). Observations also revealed marked improvements in active listening, collaboration, and responsiveness, suggesting that debate fosters not only individual language gains but also interpersonal communicative skills.

However, these positive findings must be interpreted within the context of the study's limitations. First, the quasi-experimental design and use of convenience sampling limit the generalizability of the results. The absence of a fully randomized control trial and the lack of detailed demographic matching between groups make it difficult to rule out alternative explanations for the observed improvements. For instance, factors such as motivation, prior debate experience, or class dynamics may have influenced outcomes.

Second, while speaking assessments were conducted using rubrics, the study did not employ standardized or validated measurement tools, nor was inter-rater reliability statistically confirmed. Thus, there remains a level of subjectivity in how speaking performance was evaluated. Similarly, while the data suggest a reduction in hesitation time and an increase in responsiveness, these measures were largely estimated rather than precisely timed using digital tools.

Third, although students reported gains in vocabulary and critical thinking, these areas were not directly measured, limiting the extent to which such claims can be substantiated. Future studies should incorporate discrete item tests, vocabulary profiling tools, or analytic scoring rubrics to assess these aspects more rigorously.

Finally, the study was conducted over a relatively short period (10 weeks), which may not capture long-term effects. The gains in confidence and fluency, though promising, may not be sustained without continued practice or follow-up instruction.

In light of these constraints, the findings of this study should be seen as context-specific and exploratory, rather than definitive. Nevertheless, they provide valuable insight into how debate-based instruction can enrich speaking pedagogy in EFL contexts especially in educational cultures that are still transitioning away from teacher-centered methods.

6.2 Interpretation of findings and alternative explanations

The observed improvement in students' speaking proficiency—particularly in fluency and spontaneous response supports the pedagogical value of debate as an interactive and cognitively engaging task. These findings are consistent with principles of communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based language teaching (TBLT), which emphasize the use of meaningful communication and real-time language use as drivers of language acquisition (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004).

However, the assertion that “debate significantly improved students' speaking skills” must be qualified. Several extraneous variables may have influenced these results. For instance, the novelty of the instructional method may have temporarily boosted motivation and engagement a known “novelty effect” in educational interventions. Additionally, the instructor's enthusiasm or the dynamics of particular student groups may have played a role in performance improvements. These factors were not controlled for and should be acknowledged as possible contributors to the outcomes.

6.3 Learner variability and limitations

While many students reported increased confidence and speaking ability, not all learners may benefit equally from debate-based instruction. Some students may experience linguistic anxiety, especially in high-pressure speaking environments where performance is public and time-constrained. Others may struggle with the cognitive load of formulating arguments in a second language, particularly if their vocabulary or critical thinking skills are underdeveloped. These difficulties were not systematically examined in this study but merit further investigation.

Moreover, the study's quasi-experimental design, limited sample size, and short intervention period (10 weeks) restrict the generalizability of the findings. There was no long-term follow-up to determine whether the improvements in fluency and confidence were sustained. Additionally, inter-rater reliability for the speaking assessments was not formally established, which raises concerns about the objectivity of performance evaluations.

6.4. Theoretical integration

The findings can be understood through the lens of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which posits that language development is mediated through social interaction and scaffolding. Debates create a context for collaborative dialogue, where learners co-construct meaning and extend their linguistic capabilities within their zone of proximal development. Furthermore,

Swain's (2005) output hypothesis suggests that productive language tasks—such as debate force learners to process language deeply and modify their output, which can promote acquisition.

The study also aligns with Bloom's taxonomy in that it encourages higher-order cognitive skills such as analysis, evaluation, and synthesis skills often underrepresented in traditional EFL instruction.

6.5. Pedagogical implications

From a TESOL perspective, the integration of debate into speaking curricula offers clear pedagogical value, particularly in fostering student-centered, communicative classrooms. Debate tasks can serve as a bridge between linguistic performance and critical thinking, helping learners develop not only oral fluency but also argumentation skills and active listening.

However, for debate to be an effective long-term strategy, it must be adapted to learners' proficiency levels and supported by explicit instruction in language functions, such as agreeing, disagreeing, clarifying, and summarizing. Teacher training is essential to ensure that instructors can scaffold participation appropriately and manage classroom dynamics to minimize anxiety and maximize inclusion.

6.6 Toward a sustainable debate-based pedagogy

To support sustainable language development, Sai Gon University could adopt a multi-tiered approach that includes integrating debate modules into the core curriculum, providing professional development for lecturers, and creating opportunities for intra- and inter-institutional debate competitions. Investment in digital tools, such as AI-assisted speaking labs or debate simulation software, may also enhance access and provide low-stress environments for practice.

These steps would align with international TESOL trends that emphasize communicative competence, digital literacy, and learner autonomy. Future research should aim to replicate the current findings across diverse contexts, employ more rigorous assessment tools, and explore how debate-based learning affects other language domains such as grammar, vocabulary, and pragmatics.

6.7. Implications and recommendations for practice

The findings of this study carry several important implications for English language teaching, particularly in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) tertiary settings like Vietnam, where traditional teacher-centered instruction remains dominant.

6.7.1 Pedagogical implications

The results underscore the potential of debate-based instruction as a powerful tool for enhancing learners' oral proficiency, engagement, and critical thinking. Structured debates compel students to engage actively in the learning process, formulate arguments under time pressure, listen attentively to opposing views, and respond spontaneously—all of which are core elements of communicative competence. These features make debate highly compatible with communicative language teaching (CLT) and learner-centered approaches that emphasize interaction, autonomy, and real-world use of language.

Incorporating debate into the curriculum can address common challenges in speaking instruction, such as low student participation, lack of fluency, and limited opportunities for extended speech production. Furthermore, the collaborative nature of debate enhances students' soft skills, including teamwork, self-confidence, and persuasive communication—competencies that are increasingly valued in academic and professional contexts.

6.7.2 Recommendations for practice

Based on the outcomes and classroom observations, the following recommendations are proposed for educators and curriculum designers:

Integrate debate systematically into speaking courses, not as an isolated activity, but as a core pedagogical strategy with clearly defined outcomes aligned with curriculum goals.

Provide structured training and scaffolding, especially in the early stages. Teachers should model argumentation techniques, provide useful language chunks (e.g., signposting, rebuttals), and establish clear rubrics for performance assessment.

Balance structure with flexibility: While formal debate formats (e.g., Oxford style) offer rigor, educators may also explore adapted formats that reduce anxiety and are better suited to local classroom contexts.

Assess both language and content: Evaluation should capture not only linguistic performance (fluency, coherence, accuracy) but also the quality of arguments, logic, and interactional strategies.

Foster a supportive classroom environment where students feel safe to express opinions, make mistakes, and take risks in speaking. Building confidence is crucial for sustained oral development.

Offer diverse and culturally relevant debate topics to ensure student interest and encourage meaningful discussion. Topics should be challenging enough to promote critical thinking while remaining accessible to students' linguistic level.

Provide ongoing feedback and encourage self-reflection through journals, peer reviews, and post-debate discussions. These practices help students internalize learning and develop metacognitive awareness.

Collaborate with other instructors to ensure consistency and scalability, especially when implementing debate across multiple classes or programs.

7 Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the positive impact of using the debating technique as an instructional strategy to enhance the speaking skills of English-majored seniors at Sai Gon University. As speaking remains a core skill in language learning, especially in academic and professional contexts, it is essential for students to develop fluency, coherence, critical thinking, and confidence. Traditional teaching methods often fall short in providing learners with meaningful opportunities to speak, interact, and think spontaneously in English. In contrast, debate encourages learners to engage actively with language through structured argumentation, teamwork, and real-time communication.

The quantitative results from pre- and post-tests, along with survey data, clearly showed that students who participated in debate-based instruction experienced significant improvement in their oral performance. The number of students reaching the "good" and "excellent" levels increased notably, while those at "fair" and "average" levels declined. Qualitative feedback from observations and student reflections confirmed that debate helped students overcome anxiety, express ideas more clearly, and gain greater confidence in public speaking.

Furthermore, students expressed highly positive attitudes toward the use of debate, noting its effectiveness in not only improving speaking skills but also enhancing their critical thinking, vocabulary usage, and engagement in learning. The study thus fills an important gap in the literature by focusing on senior English majors in the Vietnamese university context, an area that has received limited attention.

In conclusion, integrating debate into speaking instruction presents a practical and effective approach for TESOL educators. It supports both linguistic development and cognitive growth, aligning well with communicative and learner-centered teaching models. Sai Gon University and other institutions should consider adopting debate as a long-term strategy to improve English-speaking outcomes and better prepare students for global communication demands.

Contribution and limitations

This study offers preliminary insights into the potential benefits of debate-based instruction in enhancing speaking skills among English-major students at the tertiary level in Vietnam a relatively under-explored context in TESOL research. By focusing on senior students at Sai Gon University, it addresses a localized pedagogical gap and contributes to the broader discussion of communicative language teaching and learner-centered strategies in EFL environments.

Contribution

While the positive impact of debate on learners' fluency, coherence, and confidence is supported by both quantitative and qualitative data, the study's contribution should be understood as context-specific and exploratory. It highlights how structured debating activities can complement traditional speaking instruction by promoting active engagement, critical thinking, and spontaneous language use. These findings may inform educators seeking to diversify classroom speaking activities, particularly in contexts where traditional, teacher-led approaches are dominant.

However, the study does not position itself within wider theoretical debates in Second Language Acquisition (SLA), such as task-based learning, output hypothesis, or interactionist perspectives. Nor does it provide a fully developed or replicable debate framework for instructional implementation. As such, the results should not be generalized to all EFL settings without caution.

Limitations

Several important limitations must be acknowledged:

Sample and generalizability: The study involved a relatively small sample of 100 students from a single institution, limiting its representativeness. Findings may not extend to learners with different linguistic backgrounds, proficiency levels, or educational settings.

Study duration: The intervention lasted only 10 weeks, which may be insufficient to capture long-term language development or sustained attitudinal shifts.

Subjective evaluation and measurement: Although speaking tests were scored using rubrics and inter-rater reliability was established, the assessment of speaking skills particularly in areas like fluency and coherence remains partly subjective. Reflective journals and surveys, while insightful, are also inherently self-reported and prone to bias.

Control of variables: Despite efforts to standardize instruction across groups, potential uncontrolled variables—such as student motivation, prior speaking experience, and peer dynamics—may have influenced outcomes.

Lack of theoretical anchoring: The study would benefit from a stronger theoretical foundation that situates debate within established SLA frameworks, thereby increasing its relevance to global scholarly discussions.

Implications and future research

Given these limitations, the study's findings should be interpreted with caution. Future research should aim for longitudinal designs, larger and more diverse samples, and stronger theoretical integration. Moreover, developing a replicable debate-based curriculum model, along with standardized assessment tools, would enhance the study's practical value for educators and curriculum designers.

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