



Exploring Students' Perceptions of Debates for Enhancing English Communication and Critical Thinking: A Swinburne Vietnam Study

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ABSTRACT

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In recent years, Vietnam has witnessed the emergence of numerous innovative approaches to English language instruction. One such method gaining traction is the integration of debates as a means to augment students' communication skills and cultivate critical thinking abilities. This study seeks to investigate university students' attitudes toward incorporating debate into their academic curriculum. The research was conducted with first-year students at Swinburne Vietnam, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The results illuminate the suitability, advantages, disadvantages, and areas for improvement in optimizing debate as an effective educational tool. By highlighting both the strengths and weaknesses, this research contributes to the ongoing enhancements of debate practices, fostering continuous development and refinement of this pedagogical approach in Vietnam's educational landscape.

Introduction

Debates have been prevalent in Vietnam's educational settings recently. According to Professor Vu Duc Vuong, Director of the General Education Program - Hoa Sen University (Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam), "Debate was employed too late in Vietnam, despite its popularity since the Ancient Greek time" (Dang, 2016, para. 14). They can take the form of an extra-curriculum activity or mandatory teaching-learning content. The students will be divided into two teams: affirmative or proposition on one side and negative or opposition on the other. Often, they will debate a contentious topic by putting forward their arguments backed up with various evidence and expert opinions to prove their points of view. The formats may vary from school to school, but each side generally takes turns presenting their perspectives. Questions can be raised during the debates so that debaters can challenge their opponents. In some educational institutions, Vietnamese can be the language for debate; however, in others, English is in use to facilitate

the student's foreign language development.

Swinburne Vietnam Alliance Program (Swinburne Vietnam) is a collaborative university-level initiative established in 2019 between FPT University (Vietnam) and Swinburne University of Technology (Australia). Within this program, students can choose from a diverse range of academic disciplines, including Computer Science, Business, and Media and Communication. A unique aspect of Swinburne Vietnam is that all courses are conducted in English, adhering to Australian educational standards. As a result, students are required to possess a strong command of the English language.

To facilitate students' language proficiency and cultivate essential 21st-century global citizenship skills, Swinburne Vietnam offers the Global Citizenship Education Program, which comprises six levels, ranging from beginner to advanced. This program not only enhances students' English language skills but also fosters critical thinking, teamwork, problem-solving, and other vital qualities of a global citizen.

One of the activities integral to this program is debate, where students actively engage in activities designed to improve their English communication abilities while simultaneously nurturing their global citizenship competencies.

In previous studies worldwide, researchers have pointed out the relationship between the use of debates in teaching English at schools and the enhancement of students' communication skills (Akerman & Neale, 2011; Scott, 2008; Aclan & Aziz, 2015) and critical thinking (Tumposky, 2004). Various benefits of this approach have been identified and discussed. However, there is a lack of research that specifically examines the current situation in Vietnam related to this issue. Consequently, the research presented in this report aims to clarify this matter. By investigating the implementation of debate activities in Vietnamese schools, this study seeks to provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of using debates as a pedagogical tool in enhancing students' English language proficiency. Furthermore, it aims to explore the practical challenges and opportunities in integrating debates into the Vietnamese educational context and assess whether debates are suitable for all students. The findings of this research will not only provide empirical evidence but also serve as a foundation for educational policymakers and practitioners to make informed decisions regarding incorporating debates into English language teaching methodologies in Vietnam. Ultimately, this research will contribute to improving English language education in the country.

Literature Review

Debates

The history of debates can be traced back to 2080 B.C. in Egypt, and Protagoras in Athens, Greece, is believed to have initiated debate use for educational purposes between 481 and 411 B.C. (Doody & Condon, 2012). Then, academics continued employing debate as an efficient and effective teaching method. Debate's golden age in educational settings was from the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, then suffered a setback. Subsequently, the debate re-gained its fame in the 1980s when educators began to promote teaching methods that encouraged students to think critically and logically (Darby, 2007).

Freeley and Steinberg (2008) defined debate as the advocacy and inquiry process, which ends up with a persuasive judgment on a motion. In education, the debate is a long-established learning-teaching tactic that presumes a given positive or negative on a particular issue (Fluharty & Ross, 1996, as cited in Darby, 2007). More specifically, an academic debate refers to a two-team competition where each team argues for a different side of a particular statement about a community-based issue (Nur, 2017). Apart from the two groups, a moderator monitors the debate, and a board of adjudicators observes, gives comments, and decides on the winning side when the debate ends. Usually, there are five primary steps in an academic debate: constructive speech, cross-examination, attack, rebuttal, and summary (Nur, 2017). In a debate, a Point of Information (POI) allows a non-speaking debater to briefly interrupt and ask a concise question or challenge the speaker's argument. The debater with the POI usually has a brief time, like 15-30 seconds, and it encourages active interaction among debaters (Aclan & Aziz, 2015).

Debates in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) can serve as valuable activities to enhance language proficiency, proper sentence structure, and pronunciation and promote knowledge acquisition, social interaction skills, and effective communication (García-Sánchez, 2020). In the study conducted by Aclan et al. (2016), it was highlighted that debates can serve as an educational strategy for enhancing soft skills. They categorized this process into three key stages: the pre-debate phase, the actual debate, and the post-debate phase. Their research findings indicated that during the pre-debate stage, skills such as teamwork, critical thinking, and problem-solving are commonly improved. On the other hand, in the actual debate phase, the most frequently enhanced skills are rapid critical thinking and effective communication abilities (Aclan et al., 2016).

Critical thinking

It is challenging to seek a proper definition of critical thinking as specialists have come up with numerous terms and interpretations (Zare & Othman, 2015). In particular, Hadley and Boon (2022) defined critical thinking as an ability to identify the underlying assumptions and beliefs behind the messages one encounters daily. It is a mental skill that can be learned. This notion shares some similarities with other scholars' ideas. According to Ennis (1987), critical thinking is sensible and reflective thinking concerned with choosing what to believe or do. Likewise, Norris (1985) describes critical thinking as the logical choice of whether to accept or not. Exercising critical thought is beginning to question and reevaluate what we often consider normal (Sofa, 2004).

Critical thinking is considered one of the essential skills for students to acquire. According to Tran's (2023) study, the majority of university students expressed a preference for critical thinking, collaboration, and literacy in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), which can contribute to enhancing their employability after graduation. This inclination is reflected in students' behaviors such as posing questions, engaging in collaborative idea-sharing, fact-finding, information sharing, and embracing diverse perspectives, as indicative of the manifestation of critical thinking (Le, 2023).

Debate plays a significant role in promoting critical thinking, particularly in educational settings. Tumposky (2004) argued that debate helps nurture students' critical thinking skills and

awareness of ideas. However, he also cautioned that debate might, over time, undermine and distort the learning process. For instance, students might prioritize persuasiveness over accuracy to influence others' opinions. On a positive note, El Majidi et al. (2015) conducted a study involving 44 secondary education students learning a foreign language. They found that these students had a favorable view of the debate task. They described it as an enjoyable and stimulating activity that not only enhanced critical thinking but also encouraged active participation, teamwork, and language proficiency. Interestingly, the students preferred debate over traditional coursework because it offered a holistic approach to developing various interconnected skills and abilities. Furthermore, other research studies have also indicated a connection between debates, critical thinking, and effective communication skills in the field of education (Hall, 2011; Yang & Rusli, 2012).

Communication skills

Communication skills contain both oral and non-oral features. While oral factors refer to conversation, negotiation, and discussion, the non-oral factors include writing, body language, and facial expression (Alshumaimeri & Alhumud, 2021). According to Al-Mahrooqi (2012), more than knowing the basic rules of grammar and vocabulary is needed to have good communication skills; one also needs to be able to express oneself effectively and correctly.

There are many approaches to teaching communication skills in English-teaching contexts. One is using debate as an educational tool, which brings many advantages to English language learners. According to Akerman and Neale (2011), debate enhances the development of communication skills because it requires oral communication. Debating involves the learner in action, allowing teachers to create an atmosphere encouraging students to participate actively in the learning process rather than passive recipients of knowledge as in lectures (Scott, 2008). Aclan and Aziz (2015) found that the pre-debate part of a debate can significantly increase students' vocabulary, which they claim to use during and after the debate. This connects with the Noticing Hypothesis by Schmidt (1990) in that debaters pay attention to new linguistic aspects, such as vocabulary and syntax, they come across when reading, use them, and eventually, incorporate them into their interlanguages. Furthermore, students engaged in in-class debates have highlighted the development of communication skills as a significant benefit (Munakata, 2010). This is because debates involve the use of presentation skills like hand gestures, eye contact, and tone of voice. Through active participation in debates, students were able to practice and enhance their public speaking abilities, leading to increased self-confidence (Ryan, 2006; Roy & Macchiette, 2005). Moreover, students also had the opportunity to become proficient in communication and persuasion by employing non-verbal techniques (Roy & Macchiette, 2005).

Debates as a means of teaching English in Vietnam

Recently, debates have gained recognition as a valuable pedagogical tool for enhancing English language skills in Vietnam. Many educational institutions are enthusiastically promoting debate competitions as extracurricular activities for their students. However, Dr. Nguyen Hoang Khac Hieu from Ho Chi Minh City University of Education has observed that there is still a substantial deficiency in cultivating critical thinking skills among Vietnamese students within

the academic setting (Dang, 2016); in this context, debates serve as an in-class activity that educators can utilize to address this gap. More needs to be done regarding research on this topic. Therefore, this study aims to shed light on the merits and drawbacks of employing debates in teaching English and enhancing students' critical thinking and communication skills.

Research problem

Educators, faculty members, and parents in Vietnam frequently regard debates as a highly effective and efficient method for instructing students in English and fostering the development of their critical thinking and communication abilities. Nonetheless, there is a dearth of understanding from the learners' standpoint regarding the actual impact of this approach. As noted by Nguyen Ngọc Quynh, President of Debate Empowering Sociality, a debate has been a relatively recent addition to Vietnam's educational landscape, with a presence of just six years (Dang, 2016). Consequently, there is a need for a better understanding of students' perceptions of debates and how they feel about these activities. Through this study, students enrolled in Swinburne Vietnam's Global Citizenship Education Program can express their perspectives on the studied subject. The research aims to identify the benefits and drawbacks of employing debates in teaching English and helping students improve their critical thinking and communication skills from the learners' eyes. Furthermore, this research also illuminates the applicability of debate as an educational tool, raising questions about its suitability for diverse student populations. The questions that need to be answered in particular are:

- Research Question 1: What are the advantages and disadvantages of using debates to teach English and enhance critical thinking and communication skills from students' perspectives?
- Research Question 2: What can be done to make better use of debates?
- Research Question 3: Are debates suitable for all students?

Methods

Pedagogical Setting & Participants

This study will be conducted in the Center for Global Citizenship Education (CGCE), Swinburne Vietnam (Hanoi). CGCE serves as the institution actively delivering the Global Citizenship Education Program, with debates being an obligatory element of the curriculum for all students. It is crucial to emphasize that the Global Citizenship Education Program is compulsory for every student, irrespective of their chosen major. This program is meticulously designed to furnish students with academic English proficiency and provide them with opportunities to refine their communication skills, critical thinking abilities, problem-solving acumen, creativity, and innovation. Remarkably, debates represent a unique hallmark of the Global Citizenship Education Program, setting it apart from major-specific courses. The participants are seven first-year students currently studying at CGCE. This group of students consists of five males and two females. They are all 18 years old and have been given debate instructions during their course at CGCE. While certain students may already have some exposure to debate formats, it remains essential for them to attend all debate training sessions at Swinburne Vietnam to ensure that every student possesses a uniform foundation. Furthermore,

students with prior debate experience generously share their expertise with their peers, offering valuable insights to help them navigate and overcome challenges in debates. In addition, they obtained IELTS certificates with a minimum overall band score of 6.0 as an entry requirement of Swinburne Vietnam.

The study's sampling process adhered meticulously to the specified rigorous methodology, employing a purposive sampling approach to ensure the inclusion of a diverse and representative group of participants. This widely employed research method relies on the investigator's convenience, allowing for the selection of respondents available at the appropriate location and time. Notably, its advantages encompass broad applicability, cost-effectiveness, and the absence of a requirement for a comprehensive population list, as demonstrated by Acharya et al. (2013). Through the application of this approach, participants with varying levels of experience in the Global Citizenship Education Program and debate were intentionally chosen, encompassing individuals entirely new to debates and those with prior experience.

Design of the study

In the field of applied linguistics, qualitative approaches are extensively employed, particularly in studies that emphasize the exploration of participants' perspectives (Wafaa, 2019). In this research, qualitative methodologies are employed to explore students' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of debates as an instructional approach aimed at enhancing English communication and critical thinking skills through interviews with seven students studying at CGCE. The researcher clarified the study's objectives and obtained consent from all participants. The data must only be gathered in research activities with their written agreement (Tiu Wright, 2009). Also, pseudonyms were employed by the researcher when presenting the research findings. Utilizing pseudonyms in research findings was essential to protect the confidentiality of participants, concealing their true identities and aligning with ethical research standards, preserving anonymity (Dornyei, 2007).

Data collection & analysis

Semi-structured interviews are selected for their adaptability and ability to facilitate organic dialogue (Dornyei, 2007), offering flexibility in guiding discussions and enhancing research reliability and validity (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). The interview guide, meticulously developed following Kallio et al.'s five-phase model (2016), enhances qualitative research trustworthiness through prerequisite identification, prior knowledge utilization, preliminary guide formulation, pilot testing, and comprehensive guide presentation.

Pilot testing, a common research feasibility assessment method (Maxwell, 2013), ensures question appropriateness. In this study, the guide was trialed with two students, with input from CGCE researchers as recommended by Kallio et al. (2016) to broaden perspectives. This led to removing a redundant section on students' English language improvement plans, streamlining the interview process. These adjustments align the guide with the research's focus on students' debate experiences in CGCE. Valuable insights gathered during pilot testing enhance the guide's efficiency and effectiveness, ensuring alignment with research objectives and respecting participants' time (Maxwell, 2013).

Following the pilot testing phase, the interview guide was refined and finalized. Subsequently,

official interviews were conducted with seven students who had been invited in advance, enabling them to schedule the interviews at their convenience. The interviews were recorded using mobile phones and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. To improve information security, the interview recording files will be kept on computers that require passwords.

Furthermore, this study will use thematic analysis, which enables thorough data interpretation and interpretive discussion on a wide range of subjects (Boyatzis, 1998). Thematic analysis, a crucial tool employed in this study, systematically identifies recurring themes and patterns within qualitative data. It offers several benefits: (1) In-depth understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives regarding the debate in the Global Citizenship Education Program at CGCE; (2) recognition of commonalities and variations, facilitating key insight extraction; (3) support for nuanced data interpretation, uncovering underlying meanings; and (4) encouragement of interpretive discussions, allowing researchers to explore theme significance within broader research objectives (Boyatzis, 1998). This methodology ensures rigorous analysis, enriching the study's understanding of students' perceptions and experiences while upholding data security protocols.

Results/Findings

Research Question 1: What are the advantages and disadvantages of using debates to teach English and enhance critical thinking and communication skills from students' perspectives?

Advantages

Speaking skill improvement

All participants said that their speaking skills improved when they participated in debates in various aspects. Duy Anh emphasized that his English communication ability progressed through using voice, tone, and persuasive language when debating.

Duy Anh: When I learn to debate, I have to learn how to... I have to learn **how to use my voice, my tone**, and also **my words to persuade people**. It has a specific purpose of the speech.

Meanwhile, Chau highlighted how debates had increased her confidence in giving opinions and building strong explanation skills.

Chau: Thanks to the debate program, I can be **more confident in giving my opinion in building strong agreement and explanation skill**.

Huy mentioned that debates provide practice in public speaking and presentation, improving speaking skills.

Huy: We [...] in high school still and have been getting get used to the **public speaking** and the **giving presentation speech**, but not actually the face-to-face argument like in debate. [...]. So as someone who practices debate, I'm sure that their **speaking skill has improved** because... they know how to form an argument logically and therefore persuade people more easily.

Thu expressed how debate helped construct arguments using competitive language, enhancing speaking skills.

Thu: Oh, I think **debate has definitely improved our speaking skills** because first of all, it helps us to **construct arguments in just this different kind of language**. It's very **competitive**. We have to bring up arguments. It makes you have to think quick on your feet and it helps you have this critical thinking and competitive language that when you speak to another you're not only expressing your opinion, you're also trying to convince them, therefore helping people just really have this not only speaking skill in debate but also helped us having more confident in speaking and giving, like **presenting your opinion in a way that captures people's attention**.

Minh described how debate helped implement ideas into words, improving speaking skills.

Minh: Speaking English is **not just about like talking gibberish**, it's about like **implementing your ideas into words** and when I was when I learned how to debate, I learned how to use my critical thinking into speaking and how to kind of **combine my speaking skill with the ideas I have**, the ideas I've got in my head and I think that's that's how it helped me.

Tung described using polite language and learning different methods of speaking through debates.

Tung: On YouTube people are not used to talking politely or respectfully. So I use slang and I use improvised words, word phrases a lot. In here I know how to like **use a polite word** but still **respecting the opponent**. It's just a **good way to learn**, a good method.

Critical thinking skill enhancement

All participants believed that debates made a beneficial impact on their critical thinking skills. For example, Duy Anh noted that debates required preparation from both sides, promoting critical thinking.

Duy Anh: I think it certainly helped me improve my critical thinking. The way that we have to come up with the idea from the motion, right? So we have to **prepare both of the sides**, so we have to **put ourselves in different positions**. That is the **practice in critical thinking**.

Huy highlighted that debates involve researching, analyzing arguments, and finding evidence, enhancing critical thinking.

Huy: Yes, this is also a yes, because as I mentioned, the **debate has a lot of preparation phase**. And also you have to, you have to continuously **write and take note** and **think about the opponent argument** in the middle of the debate. And therefore, you can rebut them. And so I think that part and the preparation phase has a lot to do with critical thinking.

Thu mentioned that debate encourages thinking about different perspectives and constantly questioning, promoting critical thinking.

Thu: debate about is not about what you personally believe in, but it's about **researching and understanding an idea that maybe you don't agree with**, but you get to **understand why a crowd is thinking that way**. And you get to take in all this information and you digest it. And it's really just about **two sides giving you constructive criticism** and you try to find what questions. Just **trying to find questions**, you're putting out questions constantly.

At the same time, Minh emphasized that debates fostered critical thinking by encouraging participants to think differently and find gaps in arguments.

Minh: Debate is all about trying to **find the gaps** and trying to **think differently** when it comes to an **argument**. And when you debate, it's really essential to **find those gaps to attack and defend yourself**.

Tung acknowledged that debates improve critical thinking skills by encouraging participants to question their perspectives and seek answers.

Tung: Our **perceptions are changed** and we must **question ourselves what's right and what's wrong**. And we realize that... everything is not that simple and we need to **dig deeper to find the true answer** and most of this is based on our own experience to come up with the real answer it's pretty diverse.

Disadvantages

Preparation and Rebuttal Skills

Huy noted the difficulty in the preparation phase of debates, expressing the need for improvement, particularly in critical rebuttals.

Huy: I think as I mentioned, the preparation phase **we have not have a lot of experience** with debate. So I have some difficulties in that.[...] And also the rebut part, **people in our part have not been critical enough in rebutting the opponent**. And they just listen to the opponent and then head right on to their argument with everybody.

Chau discussed the complex format of debates, time management, and the challenges of preparing a comprehensive argument system within limited time constraints.

Chau: The second challenge is **the format of the debate** because as usual, I tend to have like from six to seven minutes to debate, and my case is really like and then I have to set the goals, and then I have to target the audience to, it is like, who do I have to solve the problems, and then build the argument system with explanation, with solution, with policies, it is like really complicated. And so I have... **I have a long time to explain my case** [...] Everything is really fast. And I have only four minutes to talk about all the arguments. And **we don't have much chance to rebut the commentator** because the speaker two and the speaker three also speak their, have to speak their argument too.

Tung expressed a short time frame to understand and execute debating, highlighting a need for skill development in speech delivery and body language.

Tung: Even though I love debating, I **have a really short time** to like... **get to know**

it and execute it and before I know it I can't do it anymore. So I'm pretty... the **journey lasts pretty short** so **I still have some some other skills** like my **speech** and my **body language** I need to **work on**.

Language Barriers

Chau addressed the language barrier as a major challenge in debates, lacking confidence in academic English and fearing a lack of understanding by judges and opponents.

Chau: As I said before, **the first and the most challenging for me is the language**. Because in Swinburne, we have to use English all the time. And I'm not really confident in my English speaking, especially in academics. So **it is hard for me**, it is quite hard for me to catch up with by debating in English. **Especially sometimes when I have to rebut my friend**, I have to rebut my friend. **I know how to rebut it but I cannot express** in but it is **quite hard for me to express in English** because I afraid that **they would not understand and the judge would not understand**.

Duy Anh expressed difficulty in catching the main points or important details when listening to friends or opponents in debates.

Duy Anh: When I listen to my friends or the opponents, **it's really hard to catch the point**. Sometimes it just slips away. The main point or some details just slip away. **I can't catch it**.

Emotional Challenges and Ethical Considerations

Thu discussed the emotional turmoil of debating topics they personally disagree with, emphasizing the importance of understanding different perspectives and balancing personal morals.

Thu: I think that it takes a lot and **it takes an emotional turmoil**, especially when you're presented with a topic or at least a side of the topic that you do not believe in. And I found a lot of debaters really **having a battle with the ethics of it**. And like, why are we debating about something that I personally don't believe in? And **it took a lot of me to get over that and understand that what I debated personally doesn't need to be what I believe in**, but rather just trying to understand point of view. And also when the topic is very controversial, you have to find data that is legit, but also **crafting up arguments that are not harmful to what you're debating against about**.

Research Question 2: What can be done to make better use of debates?

Motion Selection

Both Chau and Duy Anh highlighted the need for carefully selecting debate motions. Chau suggested that some motions were too argumentative, making it difficult for the affirmative team to present their case effectively. Duy Anh had a desire for more balanced motions that allowed both teams to have equal opportunities to argue their points.

Chau: And the second thing is the motion of the debate. I think most of the motion that we have given is **quite argumentative** [...] and the topic, some of the emotion would be like **the negative team would have many things to say**, but **it is really hard**

for the affirmative team.

Duy Anh: I don't know, it's quite subjective, but sometimes I find the motion is **one-sided**. [...]. It is **not really balancing**. Yeah. Yeah, okay. You need something that can be debatable.

Preparation Support

Huy proposed the idea of providing students with more detailed preparation guidance. He suggested that mentors or counselors could offer advice and help teams identify overlapping claims during the preparation phase. This would enable teams to improve their debates and perform better.

Huy: Maybe you could **provide student with somewhat more detailed preparation phase**. Like, like if they, in my team, our team had three claims, which we think kind of overlapping on each other. But we have only realized that after we have done the debate. So I think that with some **counseling or with some advice from somewhat mentor**, we could improve our debate and therefore perform better in the actual debate.

Research Question 3: Are debates suitable and appropriate for all students?

Minh and Chau highlighted the challenges of implementing debate as a teaching method for individuals with limited English proficiency or a lack of English background, raising questions about its suitability for all students. They argued that it could be difficult for these students to effectively communicate their ideas in English, potentially hindering their ability to fully engage in debates.

Minh: I think it's a very good way to teach English, but for people with **a little of English background**, for someone **who's very new and not very used to speaking English, that's just very hard** and they cannot really implement their ideas well. When you see the debate, there are only four members and our class, they try to choose the best people who can speak English well. Students with **no English background, they have difficulties and they will not have a chance to experience debates**.

Chau: **I think debate would be suitable for students in high level**. And it is like really, we can really easily to see that because when students in the level like three or four in GC, their ability and their proficiency in **English is really low**, they are **not like really confident** in talking with usual topics in English.

Discussion

The insights gathered from interviews with student participants provide valuable insights into the pros and cons of using debates as a tool for teaching English and improving critical thinking and communication skills. This discussion will center on the main themes that surfaced during these interviews, which encompass the advantages of using debates, the difficulties encountered by students, the strategies suggested by participants to enhance English teaching through debates and foster critical thinking, and the appropriateness of debates for the students.

Advantages of Using Debates

The participants in this study expressed various significant advantages associated with incorporating debates into English teaching. Specifically, debates emerged as a powerful tool for improving speaking skills, providing students with valuable opportunities to enhance their abilities in persuasive language, voice modulation, and effective communication techniques. Students highlighted the essential role of structuring well-organized arguments and translating their thoughts into clear expressions. Furthermore, debates were recognized for their role in enhancing critical thinking skills. Participants stressed the importance of thorough preparation, research, and analysis when constructing persuasive arguments. They praised debates for their capacity to stimulate critical thinking by encouraging students to consider diverse perspectives, challenge their own beliefs, and identify gaps in arguments. Moreover, participants attributed debates to boosting their confidence in expressing their opinions and constructing convincing arguments. Engaging in debates led to a profound increase in their self-assurance when it came to public speaking and presenting their ideas. In summary, students strongly believe that debates provide them with numerous benefits. This implies that the utilization of debates in English teaching is advantageous for students from a pedagogical perspective.

In concurrence with previous research, the interview results affirm the efficacy of debates as a teaching method to enhance students' English communication and critical thinking skills. The attitudes and responses of the students align with the findings of prior studies conducted in the field of language teaching and learning (Akerman & Neale, 2011; Tumposky, 2004; Alasmari & Ahmed, 2013; Aclan & Aziz, 2015). In summary, debates emerge as a potent catalyst for a range of educational benefits, including the development of communication skills through oral expression, the stimulation of critical thinking, the cultivation of confidence, and the facilitation of language development.

Disadvantages of Using Debates

In addition to recognizing the manifold advantages, participants in the study also illuminated specific challenges associated with using debates as a means to enhance students' communication and critical thinking skills. Notably, time constraints emerged as a prominent hurdle, significantly impeding participants' ability to engage deeply and effectively in debates within the confines of limited timeframes. Participants expressed the need for more extensive preparation time, believing it would enable them to construct more comprehensive and thorough arguments. Furthermore, participants raised concerns about emotional challenges and ethical dilemmas linked to debates. Engaging in debates on topics they personally disagreed with stirred emotional turmoil, emphasizing the importance of appreciating diverse perspectives and balancing personal values with the demands of the debate. Overall, this suggests that some students may face challenges related to time management, language proficiency, and emotional regulation, and teachers should develop strategies to help them overcome these difficulties.

These findings are consistent with earlier research that has underscored the downsides of using debates for language teaching purposes, as highlighted by Somjai and Jansem (2015). Debate undeniably demands a substantial investment of preparation time to ensure its seamless execution. It necessitates students to thoroughly prepare their arguments in advance, facilitating

their ability to effectively counter opposing viewpoints. Additionally, it requires students to maintain emotional composure while defending their arguments, a skill that can be challenging for many students. Moreover, Darby (2007) has pointed out that one of the primary limitations of debates lies in their emphasis on competition, with a focus on winning and losing, often at the expense of compromise and consensus building, which are essential for reaching the best solutions. This competitive aspect may lead some students to trivialize issues in their pursuit of victory, while others may find the confrontational nature of debates uncomfortable. Additionally, some minority students, regardless of gender, may hail from cultures that prioritize group harmony over individual opinions and arguments. These cultural differences can further compound the challenges associated with debates.

Ways to improve debate-based teaching and learning

The participants shared their perspectives on various aspects of debate organization, structure, and support that could enhance the overall experience and learning outcomes. Based on their inputs, the following solutions and suggestions can be proposed:

1. **Balancing Motions:** It is important to carefully select debate motions to balance the affirmative and negative teams. Participants can engage in more fruitful debates by choosing motions that allow both sides to present their arguments effectively. This balance will also promote a fair evaluation of skills and ideas.
2. **Preparation Support:** Students suggested that teams could benefit from more detailed preparation guidance, such as mentoring or counseling. Providing students with advice and assistance during the preparation phase can help them refine their arguments, identify overlapping claims, and deliver more cohesive and effective debates. Experienced debaters, teachers, or debate coaches could offer this support.

These recommendations underscore the necessity for modifications in the organization of debate events, emphasizing the need for educators to implement these changes effectively. They are in accordance with the guidance provided by scholars on how to enhance the overall efficacy of debating organizations. One key aspect is ensuring that debate topics are selected in a manner that allows for an equitable distribution of both supporting and opposing arguments, as advocated by Susanto (2023). Furthermore, in the case of students who initially lack confidence in participating in debates, it is imperative to offer them supplementary support aimed at enhancing their delivery and communication skills. This recommendation is consistent with the insights provided by Brown (2015) and Lustigova (2011).

The appropriateness of debates for the students

The central question in this discussion is whether debate is appropriate for students with varying levels of English proficiency. Some argue that debate is better suited for those with higher English proficiency because they believe that students with lower proficiency levels may struggle with the language demands and timing required in debates. The implication is that there is an urgent need to thoughtfully structure debate activities to make them inclusive for students with varying levels of English proficiency. This entails recognizing the importance of scaffolding activities and the essential role they play. To address the varying proficiency levels within debate teams, teachers should be prepared to offer additional support to ensure that all students can actively participate and derive educational benefits from these activities. This

approach aligns with prior research on teaching debate to lower-level students. When teaching debate, it is essential to follow a systematic, scaffolded approach, as recommended by Lustigova (2011). This method begins by assisting students in expressing their own opinions and gradually introduces language structures, grammar rules, and new vocabulary throughout the learning process. Additionally, previous research emphasizes the importance of grouping students with similar proficiency levels for group activities. This strategy aims to prevent fatigue among lower-level members and helps maintain their motivation (Hadavi, 2004, as cited in Mohammad et al., 2016).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the utilization of debates in Swinburne Vietnam's Global Citizenship Education Program comes with its set of advantages and disadvantages. On the positive side, debates contribute to the improvement of students' speaking skills, foster critical thinking, boost self-confidence, and aid in language development. However, they also pose certain challenges, including time constraints, emotional considerations, and language barriers. To enhance the effectiveness of debate-based teaching and learning, participants have put forth several valuable suggestions. These include the careful balance of debate motions and the provision of preparation support. It is also important to consider the organization of debates and tailor them to different proficiency levels.

Furthermore, this research is not without its limitations, which pave the way for future studies to build upon. The most apparent constraint is the relatively small sample size, involving just seven students. Consequently, it is imperative for future research endeavors to expand the participant pool, allowing for a more comprehensive exploration of the subject matter. Moreover, this study relies exclusively on semi-structured interviews as its research instrument, lacking triangulation techniques to validate findings. Future researchers should consider a wider range of data collection methods to bolster the reliability and credibility of their results. Additionally, it is essential to acknowledge that this study is specific to a tertiary education alliance program, and its findings may not universally apply to other educational settings, such as larger universities and high schools. As such, future research should venture into these diverse contexts to gain a more nuanced perspective. Finally, it is worth emphasizing that this research primarily centers on the viewpoints of students. For a more holistic analysis of the subject, future researchers should also delve into the perspectives of teachers, providing a more well-rounded understanding of the issue.

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Biodata

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