

Use of Debate Strategies to Increase the Effectiveness of a 1st-Year Conversation Course at the College of Basic Education in Kuwait

Reem Sh. AlRubaie¹, Khaled M. Shuqair¹ & Badria A. Alhaji¹

¹ English Department, College of Basic Education, The Public Authority for Applied Education and Training, Kuwait

Correspondence: Reem Sh. AlRubaie, English Department, College of Basic Education, The Public Authority for Applied Education and Training, Kuwait. E-mail: reemalrubaie@gmail.com

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Abstract

This study investigated the incorporation of debate strategies in a first-year English as a Foreign Language (EFL) conversation course at the College of Basic Education in Kuwait. It examined how the nature and scope of debate activities influenced students' oral fluency, critical thinking skills, and confidence in public speaking. Qualitative data collected revealed key thematic areas related to learner attitudes, linguistic repertoires, and the challenges arising from debate sessions. The findings indicated that debate activities significantly enhanced engagement, thinking abilities, and public-speaking ease, especially among students with stronger English language skills. Many participants reported feeling more comfortable asserting their views and applying analytical skills. However, learners with weaker L2 proficiency faced periods of discouragement and a sense of exclusion. The study highlights the importance of employing diverse instructional approaches aligned with students' proficiency levels and proposes introducing an advanced debate course to enhance their interpersonal and communicative skills. These insights extend existing research on debate as a pedagogical tool and offer implications for educators aiming to enhance language education in teacher training programs.

Keywords: Debate Strategies, EFL (English as a Foreign Language), Oral Fluency, Critical Thinking, Teacher Education, Language Proficiency

1. Introduction

English language instruction's effectiveness, particularly for first-year university students, has been a significant focus of research within the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This interest arises from the unique challenges English language learners (ELLs) face when transitioning into higher education, where academic success is closely tied to language proficiency. For EFL learners, especially those new to university environments, developing speaking skills is often paramount. Traditional teaching methods that rely heavily on rote memorization and passive learning activities can be insufficient in fostering the kind of language proficiency required for active participation in academic and social settings. In response, there has been a growing interest in using debate as a strategy to enhance EFL students' speaking and critical thinking skills, particularly within first-year courses (Fauzan, 2016).

Debate serves as a dynamic instructional method that engages students actively in the learning process. Unlike traditional lecture-based approaches, debate provides a platform for students to articulate their thoughts, respond to counterarguments, and develop persuasive communication skills. These activities are essential in building the speaking proficiency needed for academic success. According to Nureldeen (2020), incorporating debate into the EFL classroom encourages learners to go beyond passive absorption of language and instead use English in an active, interactive manner. Debate requires students to prepare arguments, analyze different perspectives, and engage in real-time discussions, promoting a deeper engagement with the language.

Debate's interactive nature is particularly valuable for EFL learners because it provides opportunities for meaningful language use. This method helps students overcome their reluctance to speak, which is a common issue among learners who fear making mistakes in a new language. In a study on the use of debate in EFL classrooms, Gulnaz (2020) found that students who participated in regular debate sessions demonstrated improved confidence in speaking and a greater ability to structure their thoughts coherently in English. This suggests that debate can play a

crucial role in reducing language anxiety, thereby making students more comfortable with speaking in public and academic settings.

Additionally, debate supports the development of critical thinking skills, which are crucial for academic achievement. For EFL learners, mastering the ability to think critically in English can be particularly challenging because of the cognitive load of processing complex ideas in a second language. However, the debate process—requiring students to construct arguments, evaluate evidence, and refute opposing views—naturally aligns with critical thinking education’s goals. Ukeme and Uguma (2017) highlighted that through debate, students learn to express their own ideas and critically assess others’ arguments, a skill that is invaluable in both academic and real-world contexts. The emphasis on evidence-based argumentation helps students develop a more analytical approach to language use, which can translate into better academic writing and reading comprehension.

Moreover, debates foster a collaborative learning environment, which is beneficial for language acquisition. While traditional EFL classrooms may focus on individual learning, debate requires teamwork and peer interaction, encouraging students to learn from each other’s perspectives. This collaboration can create a sense of community within the classroom as students work together to construct and refine their arguments. Fauzan (2016) noted that such a collaborative approach can enhance students’ motivation to learn, as they see their peers as both supporters and challengers in the learning process. The sense of community and mutual support is particularly important for first-year students who may be adjusting to university life’s social and academic demands.

The adaptability of debate as an instructional method makes it suitable for various classroom contexts and topics. It can be tailored to fit students’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds, ensuring that the content is both relevant and challenging. For instance, debates can be designed around current events, ethical dilemmas, or academic subjects pertinent to students’ fields of study. This flexibility allows instructors to integrate debate into the curriculum in a way that aligns with broader learning objectives, such as improving critical thinking or fostering a deeper understanding of course material (Nureldeen, 2020). By engaging students with relevant and thought-provoking topics, debates can make the learning experience more engaging and intellectually stimulating.

Research indicating debate’s effectiveness in improving language skills, fostering critical thinking, and building confidence among learners supports debate’s potential to enhance EFL education. As more EFL educators seek innovative methods to support their students, debate stands out as a practical and impactful strategy. While traditional approaches to language teaching often prioritize grammatical accuracy over communicative ability, debate offers a balanced approach that integrates both aspects. It encourages students to use language fluently and accurately in a high-stakes environment, thereby providing a valuable complement to other teaching methods.

In summary, the integration of debate into EFL instruction for first-year students presents a promising avenue for enhancing both language proficiency and critical thinking skills. Through active participation, critical engagement, and collaborative learning, students can gain the confidence and competence needed to succeed in an English-speaking academic environment. As educators continue to explore methods that can more effectively support EFL learners, the strategic use of debate represents a dynamic approach to transforming the language learning experience.

1.1 Objective of the Study

The objective of this research is to investigate debate strategies’ effectiveness in enhancing the language proficiency, critical thinking skills, and self-confidence of first-year female students enrolled in an EFL conversation course at the College of Basic Education in Kuwait. Specifically, this research aims to explore the following key questions:

1. How do debate strategies affect the language proficiency of first-year female students in the conversation course?

This question covers the primary aim of the study by exploring the influence of debate activities on students’ language skills, including their speaking and communication proficiency.

2. In what ways do debate strategies enhance critical thinking among first-year conversation course students?

Given the literature’s emphasis on debates’ role in fostering critical thinking skills, this question addresses the cognitive benefits that debates may offer within an EFL context.

3. What challenges do first-year students encounter when participating in debate activities, and how do they perceive overcoming these challenges?

This question seeks to identify specific obstacles students face during debate sessions and how they address them, providing insights into potential areas for improvement in teaching strategies.

Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to the pedagogical discourse on integrating innovative teaching methods in EFL education, offering practical recommendations for educators and policymakers to enhance EFL students' learning outcomes, particularly in conversation courses' context.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Role of Debate in EFL Learning

Debate strategies have proven to be an effective tool in enhancing learning outcomes for EFL learners, especially in conversation-based courses. They foster active participation, critical thinking, and the practical use of language, transforming passive learning environments into spaces of interactive and collaborative engagement. This literature review explores various aspects of the use of debate in EFL contexts, including the theoretical foundations, empirical research on debate's benefits and challenges, and the specific skills it helps develop in learners. The focus is on both the global context and specific studies from the Gulf region, emphasizing how these strategies can affect conversation courses.

Debate is traditionally defined as a structured method of argumentation where participants present opposing viewpoints on a specific topic or issue. It involves presenting arguments, defending positions, and rebutting counterarguments in a formal or semi-formal setting (Kennedy, 2007). In the education context, debates are employed as a learning activity that goes beyond mere discussion, requiring students to engage in research, critical thinking, and persuasive communication. As a pedagogical tool, debate has gained recognition for its ability to foster active learning, particularly in language and communication classrooms. This use of debate strategies provides a transition from traditional, passive methods to more dynamic and interactive learning experiences (Bellon, 2000).

Debate's interactive nature aligns closely with active learning's principles, which prioritize student engagement over passive reception of information (Bonwell & Eison, 1991). By incorporating debates, students become more actively involved in their education, analyzing complex issues, constructing logical arguments, and clearly articulating their thoughts. This method is particularly valuable in EFL settings, where real-time language use and practice are crucial for improving fluency and building confidence (Fauzan, 2016). Debates' ability to encourage students to consider multiple perspectives further underlines their role in fostering critical thinking, as Krieger (2005) notes, which is essential for both academic and professional development.

2.2 Theoretical Foundations of Debate Strategies

Building upon this, the theoretical framework for using debate strategies in language learning is deeply rooted in constructivist theories, especially environmental constructivism. According to Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist perspective, learning through social interactions is pivotal, particularly within debate settings where students construct knowledge collaboratively. This perspective supports the idea that debates provide opportunities for learners to reach higher cognitive levels through interactions with more knowledgeable peers or instructors. This process mirrors Piaget's (1952) theory, which suggests that students move from concrete understanding to more abstract thinking as they encounter cognitive conflicts and resolve contradictions through argumentation.

This theoretical foundation further aligns with communicative language teaching (CLT), emphasizing authentic communication as a core part of language acquisition (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Debate naturally fits into this framework because it involves using language for real-world communication, requiring students to articulate coherent arguments. The role of Swain's (1985) output hypothesis is also significant here because it posits that producing language—such as during debates—helps learners internalize language structures, thus promoting both fluency and accuracy.

2.3 Empirical Insights: Debate Strategies' Benefits and Challenges

The integration of debate in EFL classrooms has been extensively researched, with studies highlighting both advantages and challenges. One primary advantage is the enhancement of communicative skills, where debates offer practical speaking, listening, and argumentation practice. Krieger (2005) emphasizes that debates engage students cognitively and linguistically, requiring them to synthesize information and express it persuasively. This approach can shift traditional classrooms' dynamics, making them more engaging and interactive. Nevertheless, this transition is not without its challenges. For example, disparities in language proficiency can affect students' ability to participate effectively. Saidaxmadovna (2024) pointed out that students with lower proficiency may feel overwhelmed during debates as they struggle to keep pace with more fluent peers, which can sometimes lead to feelings of exclusion.

Addressing this topic, it becomes clear that effective integration of debate requires thoughtful planning and adaptation. For instance, Firmansyah (2019) noted that debates' competitive nature can sometimes foster confirmation bias, where students prioritize evidence supporting their own viewpoints rather than considering alternative perspectives. This observation suggests the need for balanced debate structures that promote open-mindedness and fair participation. Educators must focus on creating structured, inclusive debate activities that support diverse learner needs while maintaining the pedagogical benefits of this approach.

2.4 Unique Features of Debate: Language Learning and Critical Thinking

Debates in EFL settings are distinct from those in general education because of their dual emphasis on language acquisition and cognitive development. Unlike general education debates, which focus on broader critical thinking outcomes, EFL debates emphasize using the target language for all aspects of argumentation, rebuttals, and collaborative discussions. This linguistic focus improves students' proficiency and enhances their cultural awareness as they engage with topics related to societal issues, ethics, and global perspectives. Al-Mahrooqi and Tuzlukova (2014) observed that debate activities in the Gulf region helped students adapt to diverse viewpoints while improving their communication skills under pressure.

Furthermore, debates encourage a shift toward student-centered learning, where learners take greater responsibility for analyzing information and forming arguments. This shift aligns with modern pedagogical trends emphasizing learner autonomy. Alasmari and Ahmed (2012) highlighted how debates, particularly in large EFL classes, break the passive learning cycle by fostering active engagement. This approach creates an environment where students practice communication skills that are relevant to academic success and transferable to professional contexts.

Beyond language acquisition, debates serve as a powerful mechanism for fostering critical thinking. Debates' structured nature compels students to analyze complex topics, construct logical arguments, and respond effectively to counterarguments. This process naturally cultivates analytical and reasoning skills. Alasmari and Ahmed (2012) found that students who participated in debates showed significant improvement in evaluating ideas and articulating their reasoning.

Kennedy (2007) further emphasized that debates challenge students to move beyond rote memorization by engaging with evidence, assessing argument validity, and refining their viewpoints. This combination of linguistic and cognitive benefits makes debate an especially effective tool for EFL learners, particularly in contexts where critical thinking is often underdeveloped.

2.5 Motivation, Stakeholder Expectations, and Classroom Dynamics

In addition to cognitive skills, students' attitudes and motivations play a crucial role in determining debate activities' success in EFL classrooms. Positive perceptions of debate correlate strongly with active engagement. Astuti, Suryani, and Kurniati (2022) suggested that students who view debates as an opportunity to improve their language skills tend to participate more eagerly, benefiting significantly from the experience. Meanwhile, Baker (2011) noted that anxiety or lack of confidence can hinder students' willingness to engage in debates. To mitigate this, educators must focus on creating supportive environments that help alleviate language anxiety, ensuring that all students feel capable of contributing to discussions.

This interplay between motivation and support reflects stakeholders' influence in shaping students' experiences with debate. Teachers, administrators, and even peers can shape the expectations around students' participation in debate activities. Fauzan (2016) noted that in teacher training programs, there is a particular emphasis on developing communication skills that future educators will model in their classrooms. These expectations can vary significantly depending on students' language abilities, with those more proficient often taking leadership roles during debates and those with lower proficiency encouraged to focus on steady improvement. Such varied expectations necessitate tailored instructional approaches to ensure that all students, regardless of their proficiency, benefit from the debate experience (Ukeme & Uguma, 2017).

Beyond individual motivations and expectations, several external factors influence student engagement in debate, including the classroom environment, behavior, and support structures. Motivation remains a driving factor; students who are intrinsically motivated tend to see debates as a challenge and a growth opportunity (Alharbi & Surur, 2019). At the same time, those with limited proficiency may need additional scaffolding to fully participate in debates. Nureldeen (2020) emphasized the importance of providing tools like vocabulary lists and structured outlines to support these students, making debates more accessible. Furthermore, a classroom culture that promotes open communication is critical for successful debate activities, as Ahmed (2020) noted. Such an environment ensures that students are

comfortable sharing their views and learning from each other, ultimately enhancing their language development through active engagement.

2.6 Addressing Gaps in the Literature

Despite the considerable research on debate strategies in EFL classrooms, significant gaps remain that this research aims to address. Most existing studies focus broadly on general EFL classrooms or advanced learners, overlooking first-year students' unique challenges and developmental needs in teacher training programs. These students, often at the beginning of their academic language-learning journey, require tailored pedagogical approaches to bridge the gap between foundational skills and higher-order learning outcomes.

One particular gap lies in the limited exploration of how debate strategies simultaneously enhance critical thinking and language proficiency in first-year EFL students. While studies such as Krieger (2005) and Kennedy (2007) have examined the cognitive and linguistic benefits of debates, their findings have largely concentrated on advanced learners or general EFL populations. First-year students, particularly those transitioning from secondary education systems with limited emphasis on communicative practices, may face unique challenges in adapting to debate-based learning environments.

Additionally, cultural and regional contexts remain underexplored in the existing literature. The Gulf region, for example, presents a distinct set of educational norms and linguistic challenges. Al-Mahrooqi and Tuzlukova (2014) noted that the traditional teacher-centered approach prevalent in Gulf classrooms often contrasts with the active, student-centered strategies required in debate activities. This mismatch may affect the adaptability of students to debate-based methodologies, further emphasizing the need for research examining how these strategies can be effectively integrated within such cultural frameworks.

Moreover, while much attention has been paid to debate's benefits, there has been less focus on addressing the practical challenges lower-proficiency students face, particularly in mixed-ability classrooms. Saidxmadovna (2024) highlighted how students with weaker language skills can struggle to participate meaningfully in debates, yet few studies have proposed concrete solutions or scaffolding strategies to support these learners. This gap is particularly relevant in the Gulf context, where classrooms often consist of students from diverse linguistic and educational backgrounds.

By addressing these gaps, this authors seek to make both practical and theoretical contributions to the EFL education field. It aims to demonstrate how debate strategies, when thoughtfully adapted to first-year students' cultural and linguistic needs, can transform traditional, passive learning environments into active, collaborative spaces. This research will also offer insights into how debate can serve as a dual-purpose tool for fostering critical thinking and language proficiency, with a particular focus on its applicability within Gulf-based educational settings.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This case study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design, using semi-structured interviews to gain insights into how first-year female students at the College of Basic Education in Kuwait perceive debate strategies' impact on their conversation course. The case study approach is particularly well-suited for this research because it allows for an in-depth exploration of a specific group of students within their real-life educational context (Yin, 2018). This method enables a detailed examination of how debate activities influence students' language learning experiences, providing a rich understanding of the phenomenon's individual and collective aspects.

A qualitative approach aligns with the study's objectives because it provides the means to comprehensively explore participants' subjective experiences and reflections (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research is effective for examining complex, context-specific phenomena that cannot be easily quantified, such as students' attitudes, challenges, and debate strategies' perceived benefits (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). By focusing on students' particular experiences in this educational setting, the case study approach allows for an in-depth understanding of how debate strategies affect their language proficiency, critical thinking, and classroom engagement.

The use of semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method further enhances the suitability of the case study approach. Semi-structured interviews provide a balance between maintaining a focus on the core research questions and allowing flexibility for new themes to emerge during discussions. This flexibility is crucial for exploring unanticipated insights that may arise from students' reflections, providing a richer understanding of their experiences. Yin (2018) emphasized that case studies are particularly effective when the researcher seeks to investigate a phenomenon within its natural setting, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are

not clearly defined. In the paper, the phenomenon, debate strategies, and the context, EFL instruction in a specific Kuwaiti college, are intricately linked, making the case study approach an ideal choice.

By adopting this methodology, the study aims to provide detailed insights that reflect the complex interactions between debate activities and language learning in the specific context of the College of Basic Education. This approach captures individual students' experiences and sheds light on broader patterns that can inform the use of debate as a pedagogical tool in EFL settings. It seeks to contribute to achieving a deeper understanding of how debate can transform conversation courses into interactive learning spaces, enhancing students' language skills and critical thinking capabilities.

3.2 Participants

The study involved 27 female students enrolled in a first-year conversation course at the College of Basic Education in Kuwait. The participants were chosen because they had experienced the implementation of debate strategies in their language course, making them ideal for providing insights into the method's effectiveness. The majority of these students came from Kuwait's public school system, where English is typically taught as a second language with varying levels of exposure to interactive teaching methods like debate. A smaller proportion of the sample included students from private schools, who often had a more extensive background in English because of different pedagogical approaches (Palinkas et al., 2015). The inclusion of students from both public and private school backgrounds ensured a diverse range of perspectives, allowing for a more nuanced analysis of how debate strategies influence learners with different levels of prior language exposure and varying degrees of proficiency. This diversity was essential for capturing a comprehensive view of how debate strategies can cater to differing needs within a mixed-ability classroom.

The sample size of 27 was appropriate for this qualitative study because it provided a sufficient number of participants to allow for in-depth exploration of individual experiences while still enabling the identification of patterns and themes across the group (Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013). The relatively small class size mirrored typical student-teacher ratios in conversation courses at the College of Basic Education, ensuring that the findings remained contextually relevant.

3.3 Sampling Method

Purposive sampling was employed for this research. This method involves deliberately selecting participants who have specific characteristics that are relevant to the research questions (Palinkas et al., 2015). Purposive sampling is particularly suitable for qualitative research because it allows for the selection of individuals who are best able to provide detailed, meaningful insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this research, students who actively participated in debate activities and had diverse backgrounds in terms of their previous schooling were chosen to ensure that the sample was representative of the variation in language proficiency and educational experiences present in the course.

This sampling approach was advantageous because it focused on depth rather than breadth, ensuring that the data collected from each participant were rich and relevant. It also allowed the researcher to include participants who could provide particularly valuable insights, such as students who showed noticeable improvement or who faced specific challenges during debate activities. This deliberate inclusion helped ensure that the data covered a wide range of experiences, capturing both the strengths and challenges of using debate strategies in language teaching.

3.4 Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with each participant. The interviews took place at the end of the semester after students had completed the course and had ample opportunity to engage with the debate strategies implemented in the classroom. Conducting interviews at this point allowed students to reflect on their experiences over the entire course, providing a comprehensive overview of how debate activities affected their learning. The timing was strategic, enabling participants to discuss both their immediate reactions to debate activities and their overall growth over time (Seidman, 2019).

Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 40 minutes, giving students sufficient time to share their thoughts and experiences in detail. The interviews' semi-structured format allowed the researcher to ask a consistent set of questions while also being open to exploring new topics or insights as they emerged during the discussion (Dörnyei, 2008). This approach is particularly effective in language education research, where participants may have varied experiences and perspectives that a rigid set of questions cannot fully capture. Semi-structured interviews' flexibility ensures that the interviews remain conversational, allowing participants to feel more comfortable and open about sharing their insights (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018).

3.5 Interview Questions and Their Purposes

1. How do you feel the use of debate strategies has influenced your ability to communicate in English during this course?

○ *Purpose:* To understand how students perceived debate strategies' impact on their speaking and communication skills, which were central to the goals of the conversation course. This question aimed to uncover whether debates helped students become more articulate and confident in their use of English.

2. What challenges have you encountered when participating in debates during the conversation course?

○ *Purpose:* To identify specific obstacles students faced when engaging in debate activities, such as difficulties with language use, anxiety, or adaptation to a competitive environment. Understanding these challenges was crucial for evaluating the feasibility and effectiveness of implementing debate as a teaching strategy.

3. Can you describe any specific instances where debating in class helped you understand a concept or improve your language skills?

○ *Purpose:* To elicit concrete examples of how debate activities contributed to students' learning, providing a deeper insight into the ways in which debate facilitates understanding and skill development. This question sought to move beyond general impressions to capture specific learning moments.

4. How do you perceive the difference in classroom engagement when using debate strategies compared to traditional teaching methods?

○ *Purpose:* To explore students' perspectives on how debate changes the dynamic of classroom participation and engagement compared to more passive learning methods. This question aimed to assess whether debate strategies make the classroom environment more interactive and engaging.

5. In what ways do you think your background (public or private schooling) has affected your participation in debates during this course?

○ *Purpose:* To understand how students' prior schooling experiences influenced their comfort and effectiveness in participating in debates. This question was particularly relevant for exploring differences in readiness and adaptability to debate activities based on prior educational contexts.

6. What changes, if any, would you suggest to improve the use of debate strategies in your English conversation course?

○ *Purpose:* To gather feedback on how the implementation of debate strategies can be refined to better meet students' needs and enhance their learning experiences. This question aimed to incorporate student voices into recommendations for improving the teaching approach.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to strict ethical guidelines to ensure participants' protection and privacy. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and students were informed of their right to withdraw at any point without penalty. Informed consent was obtained from each participant before the interviews began, with a clear explanation of the study's purpose, the nature of their participation, and the intended use of the data.

To ensure anonymity, participants' identities were kept confidential throughout the research process. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant in the interview transcripts, and any identifying information was removed. Additionally, the data collected from the interviews were securely stored, and only the researcher had access to the raw data.

Given that the participants were students, the research was conducted with particular sensitivity to the power dynamics between the researcher (who was also the course instructor) and the students. To minimize any pressure on students to participate, the interviews were conducted outside of class time, and students were reassured that their participation—or lack thereof—would have no impact on their course grades or standing in the program.

In conclusion, the methodology was designed to achieve a comprehensive understanding of how debate strategies affect first-year EFL students' language development, confidence, and critical thinking skills. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed for rich, detailed data collection, whereas the use of thematic analysis provided a systematic approach to identifying key patterns in the data. The ethical considerations ensured that the study was conducted with respect for participants' rights and well-being, making this research both methodologically sound and ethically responsible.

4. Results

The results are organized around the primary themes identified through the thematic analysis: confidence in public speaking, enhanced critical thinking, challenges for weaker students, and the prior educational background's influence. Each theme is supported with representative quotes from the participants, providing a rich understanding of their experiences with debate strategies in the conversation course.

4.1 Confidence in Public Speaking

One of the most prominent themes to emerge from the interviews was the increased confidence in public speaking that many students reported. The majority of participants noted that participating in debate activities helped them overcome their fear of speaking in English in front of others. This boost in confidence was especially significant for students who initially struggled with speaking anxiety.

For example, Participant A shared, "Before, I was always afraid to speak up in English because I thought I might make mistakes. But during the debates, I had to speak whether I was ready or not. Now, I feel much more comfortable expressing my thoughts in English." Participant D echoed this sentiment, mentioning that debates helped her to "be more assertive and clear when presenting arguments," a skill she believed would be beneficial in future academic and professional contexts.

Students also highlighted how debates' structured nature, including preparation time and clear guidelines, made it easier for them to participate actively. Participant G noted, "Knowing that I could prepare my points ahead of time made me feel less anxious and more in control during the debates." This sense of preparation contributed to the participant's growing confidence in speaking publicly, particularly in the context of academic discussions.

4.2 Enhanced Critical Thinking

Another significant theme was the development of critical thinking skills among students. Many participants emphasized that debates required them to think more deeply about the topics discussed, analyze multiple perspectives, and construct logical arguments. This process was seen as a departure from traditional learning methods, which they felt focused more on memorization rather than analysis.

Participant B explained, "When I debate, I have to think about what the other side might say and how to respond to their arguments. It has made me more analytical and better at seeing the strengths and weaknesses of different viewpoints." Similarly, Participant F remarked, "Debate has taught me not to accept information at face value. Now, I question things more and look for evidence." These insights suggest that debate activities played a crucial role in encouraging students to engage in higher-order thinking processes such as evaluation and synthesis.

The emphasis on evidence-based argumentation was particularly noted as a valuable skill. Participant C shared, "In my previous classes, we were rarely asked to justify our opinions. But in debates, you have to back up what you say with facts or examples, which has made me a more critical thinker." This focus on evidence and reasoning was a key outcome of the debate exercises, aligning with the goal of the conversation course to foster analytical skills.

4.3 Challenges for Weaker Students

While many students found debate activities beneficial, those with lower levels of English proficiency faced unique challenges. These challenges primarily involved difficulties in articulating their ideas quickly and responding to counterarguments in real time. Students who struggled with vocabulary or grammar reported feeling disadvantaged during debates because they felt that their language limitations prevented them from fully expressing their thoughts.

Participant E described her experience as follows: "Sometimes I knew what I wanted to say, but I couldn't find the right words in English. It was frustrating because I felt like I couldn't compete with the students who spoke better English." This difficulty in keeping up with the pace of debates was a common issue among students from public schools, who generally had less exposure to English compared to their peers from private schools.

However, some students noted that while debates were challenging, the pressure to keep up also served as a motivation to improve. Participant H reflected, "Even though it was hard, I think it pushed me to learn more vocabulary and practice speaking. I wanted to keep up with the others, so I tried harder." This finding suggests that although debate can be challenging for weaker students, it also has the potential to motivate them to engage more deeply with language learning.

4.4 Influence of Prior Educational Background

The interviews revealed that students' educational backgrounds influenced their experiences with debates. Those who came from private schools, where interactive teaching methods are more common, generally felt more comfortable with the debate format. In contrast, students from public schools, where teaching methods are often more traditional, found it more challenging to adapt.

Participant J, a student from a private school, observed, "I was used to this kind of activity in high school, so debating in class wasn't new to me. I think it's a great way to learn." Conversely, Participant K, who attended a public school, noted, "We didn't do debates in my old school, so it was difficult at first. It felt very different from how we usually learned English." This contrast highlights the role that prior exposure to interactive teaching methods plays in shaping students' readiness for debate-based learning.

Despite these differences, many students, regardless of their background, recognized debate's value in improving their English communication skills. Participant L mentioned, "Even though it was new for me, I think debate helped me speak better English and understand other people's opinions." This suggests that while initial experiences may differ, students from diverse educational backgrounds can realize debate strategies' long-term benefits.

4.5 Students' Suggestions for Improvement

The final theme involved students' suggestions for improving debate strategies' implementation in the conversation course. Many participants appreciated the debates but suggested that more support could be provided for students with weaker English skills, such as pre-debate vocabulary sessions or more preparation time. These suggestions reflect the need for adjustments that could make debate activities more inclusive and accessible for all students, regardless of their initial language proficiency.

Participant M recommended, "Maybe if we had a session to go over difficult words before the debate, it would be easier for everyone to participate." This suggestion indicates that students recognized the value of having additional linguistic support to better understand the vocabulary and concepts they would encounter during debates. Such pre-debate sessions could help build the confidence of students who might otherwise struggle with the language demands of the activity.

Participant N echoed this idea, suggesting that smaller preparatory debates could help students gain confidence before participating in more formal debates. She explained, "It would have been helpful to start with smaller group debates before the whole class. That way, we could practice and not feel so nervous in front of everyone." This recommendation highlights the importance of a scaffolded approach, where students gradually build their debate skills in less intimidating settings before taking on larger challenges.

Participants also proposed changes to debates' structure and timing to allow for more thorough preparation. For example, Participant O suggested, "If we had more time to prepare, especially for those of us who take longer to organize our ideas in English, I think the debates would be more enjoyable and less stressful." This emphasizes the need to adjust debate activities' pacing to accommodate students who require additional time to process and organize their thoughts in English.

Another common suggestion involved feedback sessions' incorporation after each debate. Participants believed that receiving constructive feedback from both their instructor and peers would help them understand their strengths and areas for improvement. Participant P mentioned, "I think it would be good if we could have a feedback session after the debate to know what we did well and what we could improve on. It would make the experience more useful." This suggestion points to a desire for more reflective learning opportunities, where students can evaluate their performance and develop strategies for future debates.

Overall, these suggestions indicated that while students found debate to be a valuable learning tool, they also recognized areas where the process could be refined to better meet their needs. Implementing such changes could enhance debate strategies' effectiveness, making them a more inclusive and supportive component of the conversation course. Students' recommendations suggest that with thoughtful adjustments, debate activities could become even more impactful in fostering language proficiency, critical thinking, and confidence in a diverse classroom setting.

5. Summary of Results

The analysis of interview data reveals several key themes regarding the use of debate strategies in a first-year conversation course for EFL students. The findings indicate that debate can significantly enhance students' confidence in public speaking, improve their critical thinking skills, and provide a dynamic learning experience. However, the

findings also highlight challenges, particularly for students with lower levels of English proficiency, and emphasize the importance of considering students' educational backgrounds when implementing debate strategies.

Moreover, the suggestions for improvement provided by the participants underline the value of tailoring debate activities to better support students with varying language abilities. Incorporating preparatory sessions and feedback opportunities and providing a more gradual introduction to debate activities could help ensure that all students benefit. These insights provide a foundation for refining the use of debate strategies in language education and highlight the potential for debates to play a transformative role in EFL instruction.

The results of the study contribute to providing a deeper understanding of how debate can serve as an effective pedagogical tool in EFL settings, particularly in contexts like Kuwait, where students come from diverse schooling backgrounds. By addressing first-year students' specific needs and experiences, this research offers valuable recommendations for enhancing debate-based learning in language courses.

6. Discussion

The results of the paper align with much of the existing literature on debate's benefits in EFL classrooms, especially its role in enhancing communication skills and fostering critical thinking. For example, the increase in students' confidence in public speaking supports Fauzan's (2016) findings, which showed that debate activities encourage students to overcome their speaking anxieties. Additionally, the finding that debate improves critical thinking is consistent with that of Krieger (2005), who emphasized that debates require students to engage with evidence, evaluate different perspectives, and articulate well-reasoned arguments.

However, the study also reveals some challenges that have been less emphasized in previous research. While earlier studies often focused on debate's positive aspects, such as increased student engagement and participation (Alasmari & Ahmed, 2012), the current study identified specific difficulties students with lower English proficiency face. These students' struggles in keeping up with the pace of debates highlight a gap in the literature that calls for a more nuanced understanding of how debate can be adapted to support all learners, not just those with advanced language skills. This gap suggests the need for further exploration into how debates can be modified to better serve students with diverse proficiency levels.

The current study reinforces the notion that debate is a valuable pedagogical tool for developing communication skills and critical thinking in EFL settings. Participants reported that debate activities encouraged them to speak more confidently and articulate their thoughts more clearly. This outcome is aligned with CLT principles, which emphasize learning language through active use and interaction (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). By requiring students to prepare arguments, anticipate counterarguments, and respond in real time, debates help them practice and internalize effective communication's key aspects.

In addition to improving communication skills, debate's ability to enhance critical thinking is evident from students' reflections on their analytical processes. Many students noted that they became more adept at evaluating various viewpoints' strengths and weaknesses. This aligns with Kennedy's (2007) observation that debate challenges students to move beyond surface-level understanding and engage in deeper analysis. The development of these skills is crucial for academic success and broader cognitive growth, particularly in contexts where students are being prepared for professional and leadership roles.

The study shows that language proficiency plays a critical role in how effectively students can engage in debate activities. Students with higher levels of English fluency, particularly those from private schools, reported feeling more comfortable with the debate format and found it easier to participate in debates. This finding is consistent with that of Alharbi and Surur (2019), who noted that students with a stronger foundation in English tend to adapt more quickly to interactive teaching methods.

Conversely, students with lower proficiency faced challenges in articulating their ideas and responding promptly during debates. This aligns with Saidaxmadovna's (2024) finding that language barriers can inhibit students' active participation in debate activities. However, the present study also suggests that even though weaker students found debates challenging, the pressure to keep up served as a motivation for them to improve their language skills. This highlights debate's dual role as both a challenge to and an incentive for language learning. With appropriate support, even less proficient students can benefit from this approach.

Motivation is a key factor influencing students' participation in debate activities. The study finds that students who were motivated by a desire to improve their English or by a competitive spirit were more likely to engage actively in debates. This observation supports Astuti, Suryani, and Kurniati's (2022) finding about the role of intrinsic motivation in encouraging student participation in EFL contexts.

However, the study also reveals that students with lower motivation levels, particularly those who feel intimidated by their more fluent peers, are less likely to participate actively in debates. This underscores the need for creating an inclusive classroom environment where all students feel encouraged to participate, regardless of their language proficiency. Although debate can naturally foster engagement, educators need to be mindful of varying levels of motivation and provide additional support or encouragement where needed.

The findings of this paper have significant implications for EFL instruction, particularly in the context of conversation courses. Debate's positive impact on students' speaking skills and critical thinking suggests that incorporating debate into language curricula can make classes more interactive and student centered. This is particularly important in settings like Kuwait, where traditional teaching methods often dominate and there is a need for more dynamic approaches to language education.

The challenges identified among weaker students indicate that EFL instructors should consider using scaffolding strategies, such as providing vocabulary sessions or structuring debates to include smaller preparatory rounds. Such adjustments would help ensure that all students, regardless of their proficiency level, can benefit from the cognitive and linguistic opportunities that debate provides. Teachers can thus create a more balanced environment that accommodates diverse learner needs while maintaining debate-based learning's benefits.

The insights gained from the paper can inform future curriculum design at the College of Basic Education in Kuwait and similar institutions. Given the positive feedback from students about how debate improved their language skills and engagement, integrating debate strategies into the core curriculum could enhance conversation courses' effectiveness. The emphasis on providing preparatory support and feedback mechanisms could be formalized in course design, ensuring that debate activities are accessible to all students.

Additionally, this paper highlights the potential benefits of adapting the curriculum to include debates that address culturally relevant topics, helping students connect language learning with real-world issues. This could further increase students' motivation to participate and provide them with a deeper understanding of how language functions in diverse social and cultural contexts. Such an approach would improve language proficiency and prepare students for more active participation in global conversations.

7. Conclusion

In the paper, the authors investigated debate strategies' impact on the effectiveness of a first-year conversation course for female students at the College of Basic Education in Kuwait. The findings demonstrated that debate strategies significantly enhance students' confidence in public speaking and critical thinking skills. By requiring students to articulate arguments, evaluate evidence, and respond to counterarguments, debates provide an interactive platform for developing essential language and cognitive abilities. The results also highlighted challenges, particularly for students with lower English proficiency, who often struggled to express themselves or keep up with more fluent peers.

Students' feedback underscored the need for supportive structures, such as preparatory sessions and feedback mechanisms, to make debate activities more accessible and inclusive. Despite these challenges, the overall findings affirmed debate's potential as a transformative tool in EFL instruction, particularly when adapted to meet learners' diverse needs. The authors provides valuable insights into how debates can foster active engagement, promote critical thinking, and enhance language proficiency in conversation courses.

8. Limitations

The study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the small sample size of 27 students, all enrolled in a single conversation course, limits the findings' generalizability to a broader population. The focus on female students further narrows the study's scope because it excludes the experiences of male students and those in mixed-gender classrooms, which may present different dynamics. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data through interviews introduces the possibility of bias because participants can frame their responses in ways they believe are favorable to the researcher. Finally, the study's cross-sectional nature captures a snapshot of students' experiences at a single point in time without exploring long-term outcomes or changes in their skills.

9. Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should address the paper's limitations and explore additional dimensions of the topic. Including a larger, more diverse sample of students encompassing both genders and multiple academic disciplines would provide a more comprehensive understanding of debate strategies' impact. Comparative studies examining debate-based learning alongside other interactive methods, such as role-playing or group discussions, could shed light on the relative effectiveness of different approaches.

Longitudinal studies tracking students' progress over several semesters or years could also offer valuable insights into debate's sustained impact on language development, critical thinking, and classroom engagement. Additionally, investigating how cultural and contextual factors influence debate strategies' outcomes in different educational settings, particularly across regions, would enrich the existing body of knowledge.

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