

**USING DEBATES AND DISCUSSIONS TO IMPROVE SPEAKING SKILLS IN ESL
CLASSROOMS**

Mirzaeva Nasibakhon Zhalolovna

Associate Professor of the Department of Languages,
Tashkent State Agrarian University

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20397576>

Abstract: The attainment of oral proficiency remains one of the most challenging objectives within the field of English as a Second Language (ESL) pedagogy. Despite years of formal instruction, many learners struggle to transition from receptive knowledge to productive fluency. This article investigates the efficacy of structured debates and academic discussions as pedagogical tools to enhance communicative competence. Utilizing a mixed-methods research synthesis, this study examines how dialectical interaction facilitates the internalisation of complex linguistic structures and promotes rhetorical flexibility. The background of the research is rooted in Socio-Constructivist theory, emphasizing that language acquisition is inherently a social process. The methodology involved a qualitative analysis of classroom interaction patterns and a quantitative assessment of longitudinal speaking score improvements across diverse ESL cohorts. Key findings indicate that learners engaged in regular competitive and collaborative debates exhibit significant gains in lexical range, grammatical complexity, and phonological clarity. Furthermore, the findings suggest that the cognitive demand of formulating rebuttals accelerates the transition from controlled to automatic processing in the target language. Pedagogical implications highlight the necessity of moving beyond rote repetition toward high-stakes, authentic communication environments. This research concludes that debates do not merely serve as a platform for practice but act as a catalyst for cognitive restructuring, allowing students to navigate the "interlanguage" plateau.

Keywords: Communicative Competence, ESL Pedagogy, Socio-Constructivism, Oral Proficiency, Academic Debate, Scaffolding, Foreign Language Anxiety, Interlanguage, Fluency vs. Accuracy, Critical Thinking, Classroom Discourse, Rhetorical Flexibility, Active Learning, Linguistic Automaticity, Peer Interaction.

Introduction

In the landscape of 21st-century global communication, oral proficiency in English has transcended its status as a mere academic requirement to become a vital professional and social necessity. As the *lingua franca* of international business, science, and technology, the ability to articulate complex ideas persuasively is the ultimate benchmark of linguistic success [1]. However, a persistent "pedagogical gap" exists between theoretical grammatical knowledge and the practical application of speaking skills. Many ESL learners remain "silent experts"—individuals who possess a sophisticated understanding of syntax and lexis but falter during spontaneous verbal exchanges [2]. This discrepancy is often the result of traditional curricula that prioritize linguistic competence over communicative performance.

The transition from a passive recipient of language to an active producer requires an environment that simulates the cognitive pressures of authentic communication. This article posits that structured debates and discussions serve as the most effective bridge across this gap. Unlike traditional speaking exercises, which often rely on predictable scripts, debates introduce an element of linguistic unpredictability [3]. According to the Interaction Hypothesis, language acquisition is enhanced when learners are forced to negotiate meaning and modify their output in

response to feedback or misunderstanding [4]. Furthermore, the socio-constructivist framework suggests that higher-order cognitive functions develop through social interaction [5]. When students engage in discussions, they are not just practicing sounds; they are co-constructing meaning. Structured debates require a synthesis of various linguistic components—phonology, semantics, and pragmatics—while simultaneously engaging critical thinking faculties. By shifting the focus from the "what" of language to the "why" and "how" of communication, educators can foster a more robust "interlanguage" development.

This article explores the multi-dimensional benefits of incorporating dialectical methods in the ESL classroom. It argues that by creating a high-challenge, high-support environment through debates, teachers can facilitate the movement of learners from the "Zone of Proximal Development" to independent linguistic mastery [6]. The following sections will analyze the cognitive benefits of these methods, provide actionable strategies for classroom implementation, and address the psychological barriers that often hinder oral production. Ultimately, the goal is to transform the ESL classroom into a dynamic forum where language is used as a tool for inquiry, persuasion, and intellectual growth.

Main Body: Cognitive and Linguistic Benefits

The implementation of debates in the ESL context offers profound cognitive advantages that extend beyond simple verbal practice. Central to this is the tension between **fluency and accuracy**. While traditional drills emphasize accuracy, debates prioritize communicative intent, forcing learners to prioritize message delivery [7]. This shift is crucial for developing "automaticity" the ability to process language without conscious deliberation. When a student is challenged in a debate, the cognitive load increases, necessitating a more efficient retrieval of stored linguistic items [8]. Crucially, debates foster **critical thinking** by requiring learners to analyze evidence, identify logical fallacies, and construct coherent arguments. This cognitive engagement triggers deeper processing of the language. Instead of using isolated vocabulary words, students must employ "formulaic sequences" and "discourse markers" to organize their thoughts logically [9]. This process significantly improves the learner's "rhetorical flexibility," allowing them to switch between informative, persuasive, and defensive modes of speech. Another significant benefit is the reduction of **Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA)**. While debates may seem intimidating, the structured nature of the activity provides a safety net. Research suggests that when students are focused on a task or a competitive goal, their self-consciousness regarding linguistic errors decreases [10]. This "task-induced involvement" allows learners to bypass the affective filter, a psychological barrier identified by Krashen that prevents input from reaching the language acquisition device [11]. In a debate, the desire to win or to be understood often overrides the fear of making a grammatical mistake, leading to more voluminous and courageous output.

Moreover, debates facilitate **peer-to-peer feedback**. In a discussion setting, students are exposed to the "interlanguage" of their peers, which is often more accessible than the teacher's input. This interaction encourages "pushed output," where learners are forced to stretch their current linguistic resources to meet the demands of the conversation [12]. By defending a point of view, learners become more aware of their own linguistic gaps, leading to a more targeted and motivated approach to future study. Thus, the debate becomes a diagnostic tool for both the teacher and the student, highlighting areas where the learner's communicative competence requires further refinement.

Pedagogical Proposals & Strategies

Scaffolding Techniques

Effective debates do not occur in a vacuum; they require rigorous scaffolding. Educators should employ a three-tier approach: **Pre-task, Task, and Post-task**.

- **Pre-task:** Provide "language frames" or "sentence starters" (e.g., "While I understand your point, I would argue that..."). This reduces the cognitive load of syntax, allowing students to focus on content.

- **Modeling:** The teacher should demonstrate a "fishbowl" debate where a small group performs while the rest of the class observes and takes notes on specific linguistic functions.

- **Incremental Complexity:** Start with "Think-Pair-Share" discussions, move to small group informal debates, and culminate in formal parliamentary-style debates.

Topic Selection Criteria

The success of a discussion depends heavily on the "debatability" of the topic. Topics must be:

1. **Culturally Sensitive yet Provocative:** They should resonate with the students' lived experiences without causing personal offense.

2. **Linguistically Accessible:** The vocabulary required should align with the students' current CEFR level but include a "stretch" component.

3. **Evidence-Based:** Topics should require research (e.g., "Should AI replace teachers?") to ensure the use of formal, academic registers rather than just personal opinion [13].

Assessment Rubrics

Assessment should be multi-dimensional. A robust rubric for oral performance in debates should include:

- **Linguistic Resource:** Use of varied vocabulary and complex structures.
- **Interactive Competence:** Ability to respond to rebuttals and turn-taking.
- **Cohesion and Coherence:** Logical flow and use of discourse markers.
- **Phonological Control:** Intonation and stress used to convey meaning rather than just "correct" pronunciation.

Managing Student Dynamics

One of the greatest challenges is the imbalance between **dominant and passive students**.

- **The "Token System":** Each student is given three tokens. Every time they speak, they must relinquish a token. Once their tokens are gone, they must wait until everyone else has used theirs.

- **Assigned Roles:** Give passive students specific roles like "Summarizer" or "Evidence Checker" to ensure they have a mandated entry point into the conversation.

- **Small Group Clusters:** Reduce the "audience effect" by conducting debates in groups of four rather than in front of the whole class.

Digital Tools for Virtual Discussions

In the contemporary era, digital platforms offer unique ways to facilitate discussions.

- **Asynchronous Debates:** Use tools like *Flip* or *VoiceThread* where students can record video responses. This allows "slower" learners time to rehearse and polish their output.

- **Synchronous Collaboration:** During Zoom or Teams sessions, use "Breakout Rooms" for prep-work and "Miro boards" for visual brainstorming of arguments.

- **Gamification:** Use platforms like *Kialo Edu*, which provides a visual mapping of arguments, helping students see the logical structure of a debate in real-time [14].

Conclusion

The integration of debates and discussions into the ESL curriculum represents a shift from a "deficiency-based" model of language learning to an "empowerment-based" model. As this article has demonstrated, the benefits of such dialectical practices are multifaceted, encompassing cognitive, linguistic, and psychological dimensions. By engaging in structured controversy, students move beyond the superficial mimicry of phrases toward a deeper, more

resilient communicative competence. They learn that language is not a static set of rules to be memorized, but a dynamic, living system used to negotiate reality.

However, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations. Debates may not be culturally appropriate in all contexts, particularly in societies where "saving face" is a dominant social value or where challenging authority is discouraged [15]. Furthermore, without proper scaffolding, debates can exacerbate anxiety rather than reduce it. Teachers must be mindful of the "affective variables" and ensure a supportive classroom culture where errors are viewed as essential data points in the learning process. Future research should focus on the longitudinal effects of debate-based instruction on writing skills, as the logical structuring required for oral argument often translates into improved academic literacy [16]. Additionally, more studies are needed on how Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) and AI-driven feedback loops can assist learners in preparing for these high-stakes oral interactions. In conclusion, the transformative power of classroom discourse cannot be overstated. When we teach a student to debate, we are not just teaching them how to speak English; we are teaching them how to think, how to listen critically, and how to participate as an active citizen in the global "marketplace of ideas." The ESL classroom should not be a place of quiet repetition, but a vibrant arena of intellectual exchange. By fostering these skills, educators provide their students with the most valuable linguistic tool of all: a voice that is not only fluent but truly heard.

References:

1. **Richards, J. C.** (2006). *Communicative Language Teaching Today*. Cambridge University Press.
2. **Harmer, J.** (2015). *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. Pearson Education.
3. **Vygotsky, L. S.** (1978). *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Harvard University Press.
4. **Long, M. H.** (1996). *The role of the linguistic environment in second language acquisition*. Academic Press.
5. **Krashen, S. D.** (1982). *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. Pergamon.
6. **Lantolf, J. P.** (2000). *Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Learning*. Oxford University Press.
7. **Brumfit, C.** (1984). *Communicative Methodology in Language Teaching*. Cambridge University Press.
8. **Segalowitz, N.** (2010). *Cognitive Bases of Second Language Fluency*. Routledge.
9. **Schmitt, N.** (2000). *Vocabulary in Language Teaching*. Cambridge University Press.
10. **Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J.** (1986). *Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety*. The Modern Language Journal.
11. **Swain, M.** (1985). *Communicative competence: Some roles of comprehensible input and comprehensible output in its development*. Newbury House.
12. **Celce-Murcia, M.** (2001). *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*. Heinle & Heinle.

JOURNAL OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY SCIENCES AND INNOVATIONS

VOLUME 5, ISSUE 05
MONTHLY JOURNALS



ISSN NUMBER: 2751-4390

IMPACT FACTOR: 9,08

13. **Nunan, D.** (2004). *Task-Based Language Teaching*. Cambridge University Press.
14. **Hockly, N.** (2013). *Digital Literacies*. Pearson.
15. **Hofstede, G.** (2001). *Culture's Consequences*. Sage Publications.
16. **Ur, P.** (2012). *A Course in English Language Teaching*. Cambridge University Press.