

Students' Perceptions toward Using Classroom Debate to Develop Critical Thinking and Oral Communication Ability

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to make inquiries about students' perceptions on employing classroom debate to improve critical thinking and oral communication ability. Sixteen undergraduate students were randomly assigned to a group, and took part in debates for nine sessions throughout one whole semester. Part of the data was collected through a survey questionnaire including twenty one statements using 5-point Likert scale. Students were also provided with a number of open-ended questions to write down their perceptions about the classroom debate. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a number of volunteered participants. Overall, the students believed that the classroom debate was a constructive learning activity. The respondents believed that the debates helped improve their critical thinking skills and oral communication ability. In addition, as the students claimed, other benefits of the debates included mastering the course content, boosting confidence, overcoming the stage fright, and improving team work skills.

Keywords: classroom debate, critical thinking, oral communication, confidence

1. Introduction

Critical thinking skills and/or higher order thinking have received much attention from educationalists, researchers, employers, and mass media during these past several years. As a matter of fact, critical thinking skills have been recognized as essential skills for the growing workforce of the 21st century. There are more needs for staff and personnel that are equipped with advanced critical thinking skills, negotiation and problem solving skills as well as superior communicative competence (Gervey, Drout, & Wang, 2009; Halpern, 2004). Individuals with advanced critical thinking skills and strong communicative ability show behavioral dispositions that is welcomed and appreciated in both academic and vocational contexts (Mason, 2007; Rudd, 2007; Kosciulek & Wheaton, 2003). Training the future employees in the area of critical thinking and communication skills though is a controversial issue which is still very much open to question (Lord, 2008). Considering the increased attention to these skills and the greater need for them in the developing workforce, experts and scholars have started to look into various techniques and methods that might promote and develop critical thinking and oral communication skills in the classroom context (Halpern, 2003). Browne & Freeman (2000) believe that a lot of evaluative learning activities need to be incorporated in subjects which aim to practice critical thinking skills. It is suggested that bringing controversial issues into the classroom creates an environment of developmental tension that maintains reflection, rational judgment, and also necessitates considering various viewpoints. Studies show that debate is a helpful approach for developing and sustaining critical thinking skills as well as oral communication ability (Camp & Schnader, 2010; Paul & Elder, 2007; Ryan & College, 2006; Roy & Macchiette, 2005; Ng, Lan, & They, 2004). Getting ready to take part in debate also improve superior mastery of the material in promoting active learning. Debate preparation fosters the talent of articulating an argument in its important terms, acquire and utilize data and evidence to sustain a principle, categorize and communicate information in a comprehensible approach, and think about, assess and rebut contrasting arguments; these skills are in line with critical thinking skills (Rudd, 2007; Kosciulek & wheaton, 2003). Budesheim & Lundquist (1999) summarized and discussed the learning objectives of higher education system in three assumptions. First, they state that higher education must expose its students to different

perspectives and information; the kind of information and viewpoints that learners would have no access to in their usual experiences. Second, students need to be equipped with the capability of taking into consideration both sides of an issue through critical analysis of their thoughts and viewpoints. Finally, they argue that critical thinking skills are not usually available for students in the majority of higher education system, and therefore activities incorporating higher order thinking are required to infuse these skills. As a matter of fact, higher education success depends on the extent to which its students are guided and assisted to think independently and critically, and build up their opinions according to valid research studies, evidences, theories, and professional values and principles. It is essential for the graduates of higher education system to have the capability of forming independent perspectives based on evidences and professional values, and also the ability to appreciate a variety of viewpoints, so that they can work successfully with people who come from diverse backgrounds with different points of view. The present study argues that classroom debate has great potentials to meet the above-mentioned assumptions and goals of higher education. Therefore, the present study made use of classroom debate as a teaching/learning approach to help enhance students' critical thinking and oral communication skills. In-class debate was a new experience for the participants. Therefore, the study attempted to make inquiries about students' perceptions toward this approach. Specifically, it seeks answer to the following research questions:

1. How did the students find the classroom debate experience?
2. Did the students believe that classroom debate help them improve critical thinking skills and oral communication ability?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is a broad concept, and it has generated various definitions and terminologies by experts. As a matter of fact, finding a particular accepted definition is almost impossible, and this diversity of interpretations could sometimes create challenges for instructors when trying to introduce it to their classes (Rear, 2010). However, one of the most frequently referred to definitions is the one used by Ennis (1987) who defines critical thinking as "reasonable reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do" (p. 10). Norris (1985) in much the same vein defines critical thinking as deciding rationally what to or what not to believe. For Ennis and Norris, critical thinking is about being careful and reflective when making decisions to believe or do something. Gieve (1998), meanwhile, states that for students to think critically they must be able to "examine the reasons for their actions, their beliefs, and their knowledge claims, requiring them to defend themselves and question themselves, their peers, their teachers, experts, and authoritative texts" (p. 126). Other experts consider critical thinking to be about skepticism. McPeck (1981), for example, suggests that the essence of critical thinking is "the propensity and skill to engage in an activity with reflective skepticism" (p. 8). Similarly, Sofu (2004) believes that thinking critically is about doubting and starting to reconsider what we normally take for granted. Sofu (2004) sees critical thinkers as people who evaluate their habits to improve the way they do things. They are people who are open-minded and take different perspectives into consideration. Ennis (1985) presents a prominent framework which includes thirteen characteristics of individuals who benefits from critical thinking skills. Such people are more likely to be:

1. "Open minded,
2. Take or change position based on evidence,
3. Take the entire situation into account,
4. Seek information,
5. Seek precise information,
6. Deal in an orderly manner with parts of a complex whole,
7. Look for options,
8. Search for reasons,
9. Seeks a clear statement of the issue,
10. Keep the original problem in mind,
11. Use credible sources,
12. Stick to the point, and
13. Exhibit sensitivity to others' feelings and knowledge level" (p. 46).

2.2 Oral Communication Ability

Speaking can be defined as a communicative procedure focusing on meaning construction that engages in creating, obtaining and processing information (Burns & Joyce, 1997). Speaking ability though refers to verbal communication ability in a practical, functional and precise way using the target language. Speaking is an important skill and the main key to communication for both ESL/EFL learners and teachers. Even though oral skills or communicative competence have been granted a special place in the educational curriculum for English teaching in colleges and universities in the past years, the amount of time and effort dedicated to tasks and activities in which learners make use of speaking skills to interact with each other using the second/foreign language remains small in the whole class. As Liao (2009) states, it is commonly agreed that oral skills especially speaking is the one that the students would be evaluated most in real-life situations. Speaking plays a pivotal role in everyday interaction and most often the first impression and evaluation of an individual is based on the ability to speak fluently and understandably (Liao, 2009).

Furthermore, it is stated that speaking is the first means through which children starts to acquire a language. Speaking is also the major means for changes in a language and it includes a great portion of everyday involvement of almost all people with language activities (Rebecca, 2006). Liao (2009) believes that the main purpose of the ESL learners is mastering the speaking skill, as people carry the idea that learning English has something to do with oral skill. When an individual states some language learners are good in English, people will automatically suppose he or she must be able to speak English well. In addition, oral skill can be very helpful and useful in developing and improving the other skills. However, despite the importance and significance of speaking skill among students, especially ESL/EFL learners, findings of relevant studies express concerns regarding the speaking ability of students in general and ESL learners in particular (Kim, 2006; Cheng, Myles, & Curtis 2004; Morita, 2000; Ferris, 1998). Ferris (1998) studied ESL students' viewpoints at three different American tertiary institutes about the challenges the face in listening and speaking skills, and discovered that the learners were most anxious about oral presentations and whole classroom discussions, but the students reported that they experience little trouble with small-group discussions. Kim (2006) conducted a study in which she made an attempt to explore the perceptions of Asian international graduate students regarding academic speaking and listening skill levels in their university courses and the challenges they face in meeting these expectations. The results of Kim's (2006) survey also, in line with Ferris (1998), disclosed that learners were so much worried about classroom discussions and taking part in classroom debates. Lim (1994) made an attempt in a survey study to look into the oral skills of accuracy and fluency among Malaysian English teachers. The results of the study demonstrated that 84.1% of the participants who teaches school students at different levels, had the same opinion that their students were unable to use the target language for communicative purposes and they also indicated the weakest skill among the four main skills is speaking. In addition, the findings revealed that 73.3% of the participants identified speaking as the skill students get the least practice in and 50% also named speaking skill as the one in which students needed more practice. She also recognized some sort of classroom activities, which is believed to be the possible reason for low spoken English proficiency. Those practices include the extensive use of Bahasa Malaysia in teacher-talk, in peer interaction and the motor-perceptive nature of speaking activities such as reading aloud and drilling.

2.3 Classroom Debate

Protagoras of Abdera, the father of debate, is credited for implementing debates in an educational environment over 2400 years ago in Athens, Greece (Darby, 2007). Debate was first incorporated in American higher education in the 19th through 20th century, but did lose its popularity till 1980s as a teaching/learning instrument (Freeley, 2009; Redding, 2001). However, it became popular again in the United States and has been practiced over the last three decades. It has been providing a good educational experience for students in high schools and universities (Williams et al., 2001). Debates have been extended to students in all subject areas, regardless of the students' academic level. Mercadante (1988), an advocate of debate, claims that debate can and should be used in college classrooms to courses in nearly all disciplines to help students develop their critical thinking skills. "Perhaps one of the best ways we as instructors can help the minds of others to learn is to allow those minds to exercise their own powers through debate" (p. 1). Debate functions to develop skills in critical thinking, analyzing, synthesizing, and impromptu speaking.

Krieger (2005) states that, many students had obvious progress in their ability to express and defend ideas through practice in debate. Moreover, the students often quickly recognized the flaws in each other's arguments, and this ability is considered to be a component of critical thinking skills in which students are expected to evaluate and critically assess the information they receive. Nisbett (2003) states, "Debate is an important educational tool for learning analytic thinking skills and for forcing self-conscious reflection on the validity of

one's ideas (p. 210).” According to Facione & Facione (2008), analytic thinking skills and conscious reflection or monitoring one’s own opinions are components of critical thinking skills. In the traditional way of teaching, for instance using chalk and talk, the students stay passive and receive lectures from their instructors. This way, the learners are provided with little (if any) opportunities to play an active role in the learning process, express their opinions, and practice and/or develop their thinking skills. Through these types of educational systems, according to Paul (1990), learners only receive lower order learning which is associative, in which they are required to memorize the course content that eventually result in prejudices, misunderstanding, and confusion. Consequently, students would be discouraged and lose their motivation in learning and start to build up strategies for short term memorization and performance. Finally, learners’ thinking will be blocked seriously and they stop thinking about what they learn as a result of using these techniques. On the other hand, many experts and researchers (Moomala, Faizah, & Amiri, 2013; Doody & Condon, 2012; Yang & Rusli, 2012; Hall, 2011; Rear, 2010; Kennedy, 2009, 2007; Darby, 2007; Tumposky, 2004) agree that classroom debate is an approach which involves learners in the learning process, give them the chance to express themselves, develop the higher order thinking, prevent rote memorization and misunderstanding, motivate the learners, and assist them to stay away from prejudice, and make informed decisions and judgments based on valid sources of data.

Critical thinking skills are honed in all levels of the debate process (Scott, 2008). In preparing for rebuttals, the students are required to gather relevant evidence of support while thinking critically to put forth a strong argument. Students also needed to learn to use evidence to support their argument and viewpoints (Yang & Rusli, 2012; Munakata, 2010; Omelicheva, 2005). Doody & Condon (2012) states that debate helps learners employ critical thinking skills in which they try to define the problem, evaluate the reliability of resources, identify and challenge assumptions, recognize contradictions, and prioritize the relevance and importance of different points in the overall discussion. Besides, debates stimulate and promote higher order learning, such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation (Park et al., 2011; Galloway, 2007). In addition, more advantages of debates consist of the possibility that “debaters come to realize that positions other than their own have value, and that reasonable minds can disagree on controversial issues” (Galloway, 2007, p. 12).

Goodwin (2003) made an attempt to explore learners’ perceptions about classroom debate participation. The findings demonstrated that, while a few students reported distress and anxiety with the competitiveness feature of the debates, most of them reported that they felt quite happy with participating in debate exercises. Participants expressed that engaging in debate encouraged them to explore the content of the course deeply, exposed them to many different perspectives, and hence assisted them to connect broadly to the content of the course. In her study, Omelicheva (2007) found that classroom debate helped the learners get involved in the intellectual practices which illustrate critical thinking skills. The participants of the study also stated that classroom debate provided an opportunity for them to practice and promote their presentation and teamwork skills. Kennedy (2007) argues that classroom debate can get the students actively engaged in the process of learning and also place more responsibility of comprehension on them. In addition, the learners’ role will noticeably shifts to a more active approach rather than a passive one, and it helps the students to realize the value of learning as they participate and play a role in learning rather being lectured at and getting information passively. Freeley & Steinberg (2005) also states academic debates have been distinguished as one of the most helpful learning approaches and promoting critical thinking for over 2,000 years. Likewise, Combs & Bourne (1994) surveyed marketing students who experienced classroom debates before. The students reported that their oral communication skills have been significantly improved as a result of debate participation. Fisher et al. (2001) argues that participating in classroom debate strengthens learners’ capability to handle disagreements outside of classroom as well. Simonneaux (2001) reported that the only time he witnessed his students managed to change their positions and accept alternative viewpoint was only when they were involved in a debate or a role play.

All in all, research findings clearly indicate that classroom debate helps students develop critical thinking and oral communication skills among many other skills. Students learn to synthesize, analyze, and evaluate statements and arguments. Debate also promotes active leaning which allows students to participate in the learning process actively. It also helps students to build up their oral communication skills. Last but not least, findings also confirm that students reported to like the debating experience and identified it as a new and interesting approach.

3. Methodology

3.1 The Participants and the Debate Procedure

The participants of the study included 16 undergraduate students majoring in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) at the Faculty of Educational Studies, University Putra Malaysia (UPM). The procedures of

classroom debate were adopted from the British Parliamentary Debate. The debate consisted of two teams (Government and/or Opposition) on either side of the case. First, the students were randomly divided into the two teams. Then, one team was randomly assigned to represent the government and another to the opposition side. The government usually is in favor of the resolution, and the opposition is against the resolution. Afterwards, the first speaker of the government starts the debate by introducing and defining the debate topic (The motion), declaring their stance, and presenting their speech/statement/argument. Next, the first speaker from the opposition side starts his/her speech by rebutting the argument of the government's first speaker. Then he/she continues by declaring the motion again and presenting their stance and their argument. After that, the second speaker from the government takes turn and rebut the statements of the opposition's first speaker, reaffirms the teams' stance, and present his/her argument and speech. The debate continues in the same fashion until all the speakers from both sides present their cases. However, the final speakers from both sides make concluding statements and make the closures, in case they want to end the debate. But, if the time allows and the participants are still willing to continue, the procedure goes on. Furthermore, during the debate, all speakers and participants are expected to offer Points of Information (POIs) to their opponents, but never to a member of the same team. POIs are features of debate in which a member of the opposing team stands up and offers a brief point during the current speech to argue the speaker. The speaker can choose to accept or deny POIs, but they are usually encouraged to accept them. If the speaker chooses to accept the POI, he/she will be asked a question, or possibly be given a statement, that he/she must then respond to. Then the speaker continues with his/her speech. Students are always reminded to support their POIs and/or rebuttals by providing evidence.

In conducting the present study, first, the format and the rules of debate (as discussed above) were thoroughly explained to the participants. Then, they were provided with a debate topic (motion) and given enough time to get ready to take part in the first classroom debate. At the end of each session, the topic of the next debate was given to the students. Therefore, they had enough time to do research on the topic, find enough information, and get ready for the next round. The debate topics (motions) were selected based on the course contents (Teaching of Aural-Oral skills). The students were instructed to conduct research on both sides of the debate topic and find evidences, resources, and relevant data that can be used to support their statements. In fact, they had to do research on both sides, because they were assigned to the two teams (government and/or opposition) only before the debate started. However, it is worth mentioning that after students were randomly assigned into the two teams, they were granted 20 to 30 minutes before each debate started, so they could get organized and check their statements with their team members. The debate sessions were conducted once a week for a whole semester and, each debate took about one hour. In total, nine sessions of classroom debate were conducted throughout the study.

3.2 Data Collection

The data collection was done through both quantitative and qualitative approaches. A survey questionnaire, reflective papers, and interviews were employed to collect the required data. They will be discussed in the following sections.

3.3 Survey Questionnaire

A survey questionnaire, developed by the researcher, was administered at the end of the study to explore learners' feedback about their experience attending classroom debate. The instrument consisted of twenty one items with a 5-point Likert scale (Strongly Disagree=1 to Strongly Agree=5). The items of the questionnaire were developed according to the objectives of the study. They focused on learners' perceptions about the classroom debate experience; whether they liked it, how they found the experience, whether they believe it can develop critical thinking skills, and improve speaking ability, as well. In similar previous studies usually the participants are asked if they think, for example, debate improved their critical thinking skills. These types of questions are very general and the students might get confused, since critical thinking skills is a very broad term with many different definitions and attributes. Therefore, in this study, the items were developed according to the literature review of classroom debate and critical thinking elements. For instance, as discussed earlier in the literature review section, it is generally believed that critical thinkers are not biased, and they take different perspectives into consideration. Therefore, this feature was used in devising one of the items (No. 9). The item states that 'Debate reduces biases and promotes considering and understanding different perspectives'. The complete questionnaire will be presented in the results' section.

3.4 Reflective Papers

Students were asked to write reflective papers for a couple of times, at the beginning and at the end of the study. The purpose of these papers was to investigate and monitor students' perceptions and feedbacks to the classroom

debate experience. In this regard, an open ended questionnaire was developed by the researcher (including 8 questions) and distributed among the students to help them focus on relevant issues in their reflections. The questions focused on students' perceptions, feelings; whether they liked or disliked it, as well as weaknesses, benefits, advantages, and disadvantages of the classroom debate experience. One question also asked the respondents to discuss their suggestions or recommendations to improve the approach.

3.5 Interview

Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with a number of volunteered students at the end of the study. The purpose was to get more detailed description on their perceptions and reflections about the classroom debate. Interviews were, indeed, carried out as a way to triangulate the data and make the results more reliable and get a clearer picture of the issues under investigation. The interviews were conducted and audio-recorded by the researcher. Prior to every interview, the interviewee was briefly explained the objectives of the interview, the expected time it may last, and also the reason of using of the tape-recorder. They were also asked to grant the researcher the permission to use the recorder. Besides, the interviewees were told that their responses will be kept confidential.

4. Data Analysis and Results

The results of the survey questionnaire come first, and the students' responses to the reflective papers and interviews will be presented afterwards.

4.1 Quantitative Results

As mentioned before, the survey questionnaire consisted of twenty one statements using a five-point Likert scale (Strongly Disagree=1 to Strongly Agree=5). Table 1 below provides the statements and the mean scores to each of them.

Table 1. The survey questionnaire and the mean scores

	Questions	M
1	I found classroom debate a new and innovative way to teaching and learning.	4.13
2	I liked and enjoyed classroom debate and I found it interesting.	4.38
3	I will choose to participate in debate again, if it was available.	4.03
4	I like to teach and use classroom debate among my students.	4.00
5	In-class debate increases learning motivation and interest level on the subject matter.	4.06
6	Classroom debate enhances learning on the course content.	4.13
7	Classroom debate stimulates thinking on the subject matter.	4.08
8	Classroom debate promotes teamwork skills and group decision making.	4.31
9	Debate reduces biases and promotes considering and understanding different perspectives.	4.06
10	Debate helps students learn to use evidence and data to support their arguments and viewpoints.	4.13
11	Classroom debate helps learners realize that issues are not merely black and/or white.	4.13
12	Students learn to be open-minded and accept reasonable criticisms through classroom debate.	4.19
13	Students learn to question everything via classroom debate.	4.13
14	Students learn to take or change position based on evidence.	4.00
15	Classroom debate helps students learn to seek precise and credible information.	4.25
16	Debate helps students learn to take the entire situation into account.	4.20
17	Students learn to look for options and search for reasons via classroom debate.	4.19
18	Students learn to keep the original problem in mind, stick to the point, and provide clear statements.	4.18
19	Debate helps students learn to care and show sensitivity to others' feelings and knowledge level.	4.19
20	Debate improves oral communication and argumentation skills.	4.38
21	In-class debate helped me improve my speaking skill.	4.38
Total		4.16

According to the total mean score ($m=4.16$) of the whole survey questionnaire, students demonstrated a positive perception and outlook toward the classroom debate. Specifically, the results show that participants found the classroom debate as a new experience and innovative way to teaching and learning ($m=4.13$), enjoyed the debates and found the experience interesting ($m=4.38$), and choose to participate in debate again, if it was available ($m=4.03$). They also believed that in-class debate increases learning motivation and interest level on the subject matter ($m=4.06$), enhances learning on the course content ($m=4.13$), and stimulates thinking on the subject matter ($m=4.08$). Regarding critical thinking, students believed that classroom debate enhance and promote critical thinking skills. Specifically, statements nine till nineteen investigate respondents' points of view toward classroom debate in promoting and developing critical thinking skills. As table 1 shows, the respondents believed that debate reduces biases and promotes considering and understanding different perspectives ($m=4.06$), helps students learn to use evidence and data to support their arguments and viewpoints ($m=4.13$). Moreover, the results show that debate helps learners realize that issues are not merely black and/or white ($m=4.13$), and students learn to be open-minded and accept reasonable criticisms ($m=4.19$). In addition, regarding oral communication, participants believed that debate improves oral communication and argumentation skills, and actually helped them improve their speaking skill ($m=4.38$).

4.2 Qualitative Findings

Students' responses to open-ended questions in reflective papers are generally consistent with their responses to the survey questionnaire that was presented in the previous section. In other words, the students' reflective papers show that students found the classroom debate a helpful and interesting method, liked it, and enjoyed the activity. However, they stated that classroom debate was a new experience for them, and they had never participated in debate before. Therefore, the students all declared that they felt nervous at the beginning. A number of the students' comments are presented below.

"I felt scared in the beginning, as I don't have any exposure to debate before and I thought that it is going to be tough."

"At first, I was a little bit nervous hearing the word debate. I have never had any experience in debating. However, after going through the first debate, I had gained my confidence in speaking in front of others and expressing my views clearly."

The respondents also emphasized on the importance of classroom debate in reducing their stage fright. They stated that they were anxious and afraid of talking in front of other students. They mentioned that they did not have enough confidence to speak in public. The comments and statements show that after going through the classroom debates, the students gained confidence to talk freely without anxiety in front of others, and it helped them to improve their speaking skills. They also mentioned that the classroom debates helped them learn how to think quickly and critically, and provide spontaneous responses. Some of the respondents' statements are presented below.

"It reduces the level of my anxiety in speaking in front of the crowd. I guess, in order for one to have the confidence in speaking, they need to experience it."

"Debate really helps me to boost my confidence as it improves my speaking skills in front of others. It is important for me as a teacher in the future to be confident."

"I feel it is necessary to arrange this activity regularly so that the students can practice their communication and thinking skills. This activity helps me polish my skills in communication and critical thinking. It is a very good exposure for me in developing my speaking skills as well as to be a quick thinker."

"It somehow gives me more confidence to speak in public and also train myself to think out of the box. I think that this activity really sharpens my mind and I will have the ability to think critically and creatively within short amount of time."

In addition, students were asked to write about any issues, problems, weaknesses, and/or shortcomings that they noticed in the classroom debate approach, and also provide their recommendations to address those problems and shortcomings. They commented on the debate topics (Motions), and described some of the topics as *challenging*, *tough*, *biased*, *unfair*, *confusing*, and *uninteresting*. A number of students' statements regarding the debate topics were:

"What I really didn't like about this debate was the tough and challenging debate topics that were given to us. Some were easy but some were really hard to debate on."

“Some of the topics given are quite confusing and the points are quite hard to be found. I suggest that the topic of discussion should be more controversial, and more on current issues.”

“The thing that I did not like about it is sometimes the motion for debate is not fair. The motion for debate is clearly give only the main points to only one side and this make the other side having difficulties to search for the strong and good main points.”

“In my opinion, to improve the debate in classroom, we can choose an interesting topic that actually very familiar to the students. This can actually make more involvement from the students because the topic is familiar with them and they can generate more idea about the topic to debate.”

As mentioned, semi-structured interviews were also conducted face-to-face with a number of volunteered participants. First, the respondents were asked to describe their feelings and perceptions toward classroom debate. They described it as *interesting, helpful, interactive, useful, challenging, etc.*

“It was very interesting, useful and interactive and then something new to me, because I never participated in debate before, so I found it very helpful, and very interesting.”

“At first I was intimidated, but then as time go on, I sensed I like it and find it interesting. I really enjoyed debating, and that’s why every week I made sure to be prepared and participate in it.”

“I think debate is one of the best ways to give chances for students to express their ideas.”

Participants were also inquired about the part or aspect that they liked more in the classroom debate approach. According to the responses, rebuttals and POIs have been the favorite parts of the debate for the participants, since they get the chance to express their points of view or disagreements. They also stated that the group works, co-operations, and the interactions they had with their peers during the debate have been also very desirable to them.

“I really liked rebuttals...., because it’s the time you are given the chance to actually defend yourself, to defend yourself on whatever they just tell you, defend your point, challenge the opponent, show disagreement.”

“Well, I liked POIs. It was one of my favorite parts. Because, you know sometimes during the debate when the opponent said something contradictory, or unclear, the POIs give me the chance to make a statement on the spot or ask the opponent a question and challenge him on the spot and express myself.”

“The teamwork spirit, I feel like our team work, our cooperation is there, it’s so good, when you need to enhance the cooperation and interaction, debate is definitely the best choice.”

Besides, the interviewees were also asked to describe the part of the debate they did not like (if any) and found disturbing or uninteresting. They described a temporary feeling of tension they have experienced for the first few sessions. They stated that that they did not feel good to debate with their classmates, and they thought things could get personal. They felt a little uncomfortable when peers disagreed with them and criticized their viewpoints. They felt that their classmates in the opponent team felt the same way when they showed disagreement. However, they mentioned that the feelings slowly diminished after a few weeks.

“Well, at the beginning the thing that I disliked about debating is that we are debating with our own classmate, and when we are debating our own classmate, showing disagreement, rebating their points, things tend to become personal. I mean they might take it personal and get upset.”

“Actually, the thing that I did not like was that, I felt tense, a little uncomfortable when they rejected my points of view. However, after we debated for a few times I did not feel the same way, and I did not get uncomfortable anymore.”

“Talking about the benefits of debate, students believed that critical thinking, improved speaking skill, enhanced learning on the course content, and confidence to talk in front of others have been the important benefits among others. Some of interviewees’ responses can be reviewed below.”

“The students get improved in speaking skills and aural skills, and also they learn to think quickly, and critically. This debate actually cultivated my interest to speak more, actually I’m a person who does not speak much, but then due to this debate program I tend to speak more and tend to be more active and participate more.”

“I think debate enhances critical thinking and also learning on the course content, because all of our topics were related to our course, aural skills, so we tend to do more research about the topic before we talk, and be critical. It helps us to work together and bring people closer, because we work together in a group.”

“First of all the confidence level will be more, because it takes a lot of guts to stand in front and talk, and the other thing is that communication will be improved. It really improved my communication skills, because before

this I had the fear of people not understanding what I am saying, but through debate it helped me reduce my anxiety and this fear, it really helped me to improve my communication.”

Since critical thinking development through classroom debate was one of the objectives, the respondents' opinion on that issue was also investigated. They were specifically asked whether they believe that classroom debate can improve critical thinking skills, and whether they have noticed any differences in their own critical thinking skills due to this classroom debate experience. The respondents believed that critical thinking skills can be developed through classroom debate. They also stated that when they look back to the beginning of the study and make comparisons between now and then, they see differences, and they think their critical thinking is improved.

“Yes, it can promote critical thinking. Because, during the rebuttals and also POI stage, you need to think critically. Yes, there is improvement in my critical thinking, because at the very first session, I couldn't answer POIs, I couldn't mmm... I mean my thinking was kind of jammed and then after few sessions I tend to do thinking very fast, now I can rebut, I can give answer to POI, even I can accept POIs, criticism? Yes to some extent I can accept, disagreement yes, and I will try to change, in which way I can change myself and my way of thinking.”

“Yes, because being in this, there is so much input, because in debating we need to come up with critical rebuttals, we need to be knowledgeable, so yes it helps improve critical thinking skills. There is a difference, because when you look at the beginning, we were like lost cat, we did not know what to do.”

“I really think that it improved my critical thinking, because you know when you look at thing in a certain way and somebody stand up and say it in a very different way, so it makes you think. Oooo, it's a way to look at things in a different way or something simpler to what I've thought of myself. So, yes, it really helps you to think, it really helps you to accept ideas from others. Through debating I think I look at thing in a very mmm, in so many ways, from different perspectives.”

Finally, the respondents were inquired regarding any shortcomings or weaknesses that they might have noticed in the classroom debate method. The responses and comments were almost consistent with those of open-ended questions in the reflective papers. The students commented on the debate topics and believed that some of them were not interesting and difficult to debate. Moreover, they also stated that more time is needed before the debates started, so that the team members could get their points organized, and make sure they are consistent with each other.

“Maybe one of the things that should be improved is the selection of the topic, we can make it more interesting, and maybe we can ask the students to choose their own topic. It can motivate or demotivate the students.

“mmm...time, I mean before we prepare, the time to prepare our point is less, and not everyone will give commitments during the discussion, that is one of the shortcomings, they wouldn't be prepared.”

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The results of the present study indicate that students found classroom debate an innovative, interesting, constructive, and helpful approach to teaching and learning. The respondents also believed that participating in classroom debate helped them overcome the fear of talking before a crowd, boost their confidence to talk and express their opinions, improve their speaking ability, and enhance their critical thinking skills.

One of the outcomes of the study which has been highlighted by almost all the participants was that the debates helped the students lose the fear of talking in front of their classmates and boost their confidence to talk. As a result, they have been able to express their opinions freely, talk without anxiety, and practice their speaking and oral communication skills. The students believed that their speaking ability has been improved due to the classroom debate experience. As a matter of fact, the researcher believes that nervousness and/or the fear of talking in front of other people (stage fright) is debilitating, get in the way of learning, and also influences students' performances. Similarly, MacIntyre & Gardner (1991) also believe that “anxiety poses several problems for second/foreign language learners because it can interfere with the acquisition, retention, and production of the new language” (p. 86). These negative feelings put a barrier in front of students, block their way, and do not allow them to start talking. As these feelings are weakened or vanished, the students find it easier to talk, express their points of view, and participate actively in classroom discussions. In fact, a learner might have a good command in spoken English, but these barriers and affective factors stop them and will not allow them to function properly. The results of a study by MacIntyre & Gardner (1994) revealed that language anxiety makes it hard for learners to express their viewpoints, and they are more likely to underestimate their capabilities. Classroom debate, though, has the potential to help students overcome these obstacles and barriers;

reduce stage fright and boost confidence so the students can proceed with language learning in a more efficient manner. Actually, as shown in the present study, the classroom debate helped students overcome these barriers, feel more confident to talk using the target language, lose the anxiety and nervousness, and as a result improve speaking ability.

Participants in the present study also believed that classroom debate have been helpful in developing their critical thinking skills. They stated that they learned to think quickly and critically through classroom debates. The students believed that they learned to search for evidences and proofs to support their arguments, look for reasons, and see the issues from different angles and take multiple perspectives into consideration. As a matter of fact, these abilities are features and elements of critical thinking skills (Rudd, 2007; Kosciulek & wheaton, 2003). Previous studies also confirm that in-class debate can cultivate, promote, and develop critical thinking skills (Zare & Othman, 2013; Alasmari & Ahmed, 2013; Doody & Condon, 2012; Omelicheva, 2007; Kennedy, 2007). In addition, preparing for debates helped improve superior mastery of the course contents. The students added that the rebuttals and group work have been two favourite features of the classroom debate for them. They stated that rebuttals give them the chance to put across their opinions and disagree with a viewpoint. The fact is that most of the courses that the students attend are still lecture based in which the learners approach any tasks individually, and are not allowed to interact freely with peers. The students also do not have any chances to freely express their opinions, talk, speak up, and show disagreement. As a result, they appreciated it when they were granted the opportunity in the classroom debate to talk and express their viewpoints and work in a team with their peers.

A few shortcomings and weaknesses were also perceived by the students. These shortcomings that the students discussed can be taken into consideration by researchers and practitioners in future research or when utilizing classroom debate as a teaching tool. As reflected in open-ended questions (reflective papers) and interviews, students commented on the debate topics and believed that some of the topics were tough and uninteresting, and sometimes the topic was in favour of only one side of the issue, and they have not been able to find enough information on one other side. Therefore, the present study also argues that the topic can play a very important role on students' motivation to have a full participation in debate. Students would not fully participate in debate if the topic is not interesting and controversial enough. It is also helpful and a good idea to involve students in selecting a debate topic. As they take part in selecting the topic, they realize their opinions and suggestions have been valued and respected, so it is more likely that their participation and performance would be elevated significantly. Taking these steps into account for selecting the topic can make classroom debate more productive. Therefore, it is suggested that great attention and care must be paid to selection of the debate topics. Another issue that might influence the productivity of classroom debate and enhance the students' participation, as the students perceived, is the time for preparation. In other words, considering the time limitation of each session, it is suggested that enough time would be given to students prior to the commencement of debate. So, each team can get organized, make necessary arrangements, review their statements, and get ready for the classroom debate.

6. Implications

Classroom debate is an active method to teaching and learning which increases learning in various domains. For instance, it helps learners in mastering the course content, improving critical thinking, and oral communication skills. Specifically, debate helps learners to develop critical thinking by looking into arguments, getting involved in research, collecting information, conducting analysis, challenging assumptions, evaluating arguments, and illustrating interpersonal skills. It creates an atmosphere in which learners abandon their passive roles and start to be active participants in the learning process. Learners can use these abilities and skills in various situations. Likewise, classroom debate helps develop oral communication abilities, which are essential for accomplishment in nearly all professions. "Debating is the ultimate multi-task activity since it involves research, writing, speaking, listening, and teamwork" (Allison, 2002, p. 13). Therefore, participation in debate should not be limited to a particular group but an experience available to learners in nearly all classrooms at universities and colleges. Students participating in the present study stated that they were greatly fulfilled with the debate experience and felt that it enhanced their critical thinking skills, confidence level, speaking ability, and also decrease their stage fright. However, debate topic plays a significant role in drawing students' attention toward participation. Therefore, much attention must be paid to the topics, as all students also confirmed that the topic can influence students' participation and motivation. In addition, enough time need to be granted to students to get prepared. In conclusion, it can be stated that classroom debate is a constructive tool which can make great contributions to teaching and learning, if accurately practiced, appropriate and interesting topics are selected, and students are coached and instructed properly on the debate process.

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