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## Research Article

### Empowering Speaking Skill through Debate: The Case of Afghan EFL Learners at Herat University

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#### ABSTRACT

Using a quantitative approach, this study investigated the impacts of debate on students' speaking skills in English-language classes at the English Department, Herat University, Afghanistan. The study participants were 44 sophomore students (28 girls and 16 boys). To understand participants' speaking levels, researchers had a pre-test followed by a six-week treatment of having debates in the speaking class. For measuring the impacts of debate, a speaking post-test was taken. To investigate the impacts of debate on students' speaking skills the researchers created an online questionnaire form and the link was shared with students in speaking classes. The questionnaire enriched this study with essential information after the treatment. The data were analyzed through SPSS 25. A paired sample t-test was used to measure the degree to which students' speaking skills developed throughout the six-week debate program, and students' responses to the online questionnaire were analyzed by calculating the percentage of each item. The results of the present study indicate that debate had a positive impact and enhanced students' speaking skills. The participants also reflected that debate had improved their critical thinking, helped them practice new language skills and arguments, developed collaboration, and decreased their speaking anxiety while having fun.

**Keywords:** *critical thinking, debate, EFL, speaking anxiety, speaking skill*

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#### Introduction

The most fundamental form of communicating with other people is speaking. By speaking, people can deliver their opinions and ideas. Language is spoken, and the first goal of learning a language is speaking. Speaking is the

fundamental aspect of learning a language because most people learn a language for communication. Khosravani et al. (2014) asserts that speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing and receiving and processing information. According

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to Nainggolan (2017), in the speaking process, firstly, the speaker will receive the information, and then the brain processes the information automatically; finally, the speaker gets the stimulation to produce the language. In EFL classes, students learn a language for communication and have the ability to speak. To enhance this process, teachers employ a variety of strategies to transfer learning knowledge and develop students' skills. Consistent with several studies on speaking, debate is one of the most successful strategies for improving students' speaking skills and having a significant impact on learning. According to El Majidi et al. (2018), debate offers several advantages for students. They are: improving students' communication skills, developing their critical thinking, and helping students know how to question themselves in the face of defeat. Moreover, Afri et al. (2021) believe that debate is an effective method of speaking that encourages students to participate in group work and improves their communication skills.

Nainggolan, M, P (2017) claims that to teach English-speaking skills, teachers find many techniques to make the process of learning it easier. One of them is the debate, an effective and modern technique in teaching speaking skills. Also, it enables the students to share their ideas in a group and learn from each other. Moreover, Musfirah (2017) states that the debate method is an active learning process that can motivate students to feel effortless in learning and speaking English.

According to Nainggolan (2017), many students have difficulty in speaking and conveying their messages even though they have good vocabulary knowledge. The factors that make speaking complex are pronunciation structure, the sounds, and the differences between the student's native language and the target language. Nainggolan (2017) states that in speaking courses, most students stop speaking because they do not know how to say words in English or have other personal deficiencies. Some students attempt to use dictionaries to determine the meanings of the terms, but others choose not to and have no motivation or stimuli. According to Afri et al. (2021), to have a good conversation with others, students should master their speaking skills. Mostly,

students in the English department at Herat University get complications in speaking, and the problem is little chance to practice English speaking, being shy, and lacking self-confidence.

On the other hand, Afri et al. (2021) state that this problem can be solved by giving students time and chances to practice speaking in or out of class. It is the most fundamental issue that most students are not eager to participate in speaking courses, especially in large classes like Afghanistan. According to Khan et al. (2021), although many students have the vocabulary and grammatical structures in their minds, they have difficulty speaking English. In addition, Iman J. N. (2017) states that debate is a learning method applicable to improving students' speaking skills and critical thinking. Many methods have been used to teach and learn to speak English at Herat University; in the past, there were traditional tools such as video or cassette players, and nowadays, one of the modern ways to learn speaking skills is debate. So, to increase students' speaking skills, the debate is suggested as a current method of growing speaking skills.

According to previous literature, there is no study on the students' perceptions of debate and how they find this speaking technique; as a result, this paper aims to fill the gap in the body of literature and shed light on how Afghan EFL learners perceive debate to enhance their speaking skills. This quantitative research aims to explain whether using debate improves Afghan students' speaking skills and what their perceptions are towards it by answering the following research question:

1. To what degree does debate impact students' speaking skills in English-speaking courses?

For the current study, it is hypothesized that:

H<sub>0</sub>: Debates do not help develop the speaking skills of Afghan EFL learners.

H<sub>1</sub>: Debates help in developing the speaking skills of Afghan EFL learners.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In developing the speaking skills of EFL learners, it is contributory to include various activities to keep students engaged and motivated to continue improving their speaking and

communication skills. Debate is considered one of the most common and efficient speaking tools practiced across EFL contexts (Firman-syah & Vegian, 2019). Language learning motivation theory (Oxford & Shearin, 1994) suggest that motivation is considered one of the main success factors in developing speaking skills. Moreover, it is believed that motivation determines the extent to which language learners participate in the learning process. On the other hand, when learners are unmotivated, they are not sufficiently involved, which results in lack of potential development of second language speaking skills.

Moreover, the interaction hypothesis also provides a foundation for claiming the potential efficacy of debate in developing L2 acquisition (Long 1996, 2018). According to the interaction hypothesis, interaction tasks such as conversations establish the ground for the negotiation of meaning among language learners. As debate involves multiple meaningful layers of interaction that are fueled in a competitive environment, it helps learners notice the language gaps and stay motivated to continue talking about the topic of discussion.

## Literature Review

### *Speaking Teaching Methods*

"Speaking is the most important skill among all the four language skills to communicate well in this global world," Rao, P, S (2019). In teaching speaking, teachers must be capable of using an appropriate method. Gatbonton & Segalowitz (2005) states some strategies for teaching speaking skills. They are dialogue, storytelling, role-play, and debate.

1) Dialogue: in dialogue, students are enabled to exercise speech, pronunciation, intonation, and pressure. Therefore, by this technique, students become more skillful in speaking English.

2) Storytelling: storytelling is an effective technique in teaching speaking. In this activity, students share a story they heard from anyone. This technique teaches students how to summarize and make their own stories.

3) Role-play: in a role-play, there are different social contexts and different social roles. Students play in groups, and the teacher offers

which role they may be and what they assume to feel.

4) Debate: one of the effective methods of teaching speaking is the debate method. In a debate, students have the opportunity to speak more. The debate method is an excellent method of speaking. Nevertheless, the topic of the debate is vital, and without a great topic, it will likely be useless. Therefore, English teachers should select an interesting and arguable topic.

### *What is Debate?*

According to Afri et al. (2021), "a debate is a speaking situation in which opposing points of view are presented and argued." The learners' role is to share their opinions and defend them against opposite ideas. Moreover, Afri et al. (2021) states that debate is an effective speaking method that encourages students to participate in group work and improve their communication skills. According to Jagger (2013), the debate is an appropriate activity for intermediate learners. It allows them to take up issue positions and argue about the issue. It is also stated by Jagger (2013) that in a debate, students learn to be respectful, tolerant, and empathetic. Likewise, Ramlan et al. (2016), and Cinganotto (2019) believe that debate is a technique that encourages students to challenge one another and motivates them to convince the opposing side; it promotes a positive competitive pedagogy, which benefits language acquisition in many ways including having negotiations, practicing former language and new sentence structures and vocabulary.

According to Zare & Othman (2015), the debate promotes students' critical thinking and oral communication skills. And also, the study shows that debate is an active learning process that increases students' self-confidence and encourages them to participate in the class. In addition, Kalanzadeh et al. (2013) mentioned that self-esteem could affect students' learning, and it helps students to acquire a second language. Moreover, Gurler (2015) has found a relationship between self-confidence and speaking skills. He states that if teachers increase students' self-confidence, it causes improving speaking skills, and also, the level of self-confidence significantly impacts speaking skills.

El Majidi et al. (2018) state that the debate benefits students. It improves students' communication skills, develops their critical thinking, and it helps them know how to question in the face of defeat. Moreover, they become capable of defending a complex issue. According to Iman, J. N. (2017), One of the most thrilling activities for college students is the debate. Students who become skilled debaters will learn how to do research or defend their presentation from various inquiries. A skilled debater can gather information, formulate arguments, and bolster those arguments. In addition, other studies (Zare & Othman, 2015, Al-Mahrooqi & Tabakow, 2015, El Majidi, De Graaff & Janssen, 2018) report that debate technique improved students' speaking skills by increasing their motivation to speak. Other researchers, such as Lustigova (2011), and O'Mahoney (2015), claim that debate can improve language skills, including vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation.

### ***Debate and critical thinking, verbal communication, and collaborating learning***

Speaking is a procedure in which the speaker focuses on building construction and processing information (Hughes and Reed, 2016). However, it refers to verbal communication capacity in a practical, functional, and precise manner with the target language. Speaking is an analytical ability and the master key in communication for the students and teachers of ESL/EFL. Liao (2009) agrees that oral skills, mainly speaking, is the only necessary skill that students must be evaluated more in actual-lifestyles situations. Speaking plays a crucial role in everyday interaction, and, mostly, an individual's first impression and evaluation are based on the ability to speak fluently and understandably (Liao, 2009).

According to Afri et al. (2021), "Debate in speaking class aims to improve students' critical thinking and communication skill." He believes debate is valuable for teaching critical thinking and improving students' communication skills. Moreover, El Majidi et al. (2018) claim that debate improves students' critical thinking because they must analyze a problem critically and find a solution. And also, he states that the debate improves students'

communication skills. Debaters spend hours with their group members and learn how to communicate with them. Brown (2015) states that the debate makes students consider other people's perspectives, so critical thinking is linked to debate. Moreover, debate enables students to give alternative solutions to a topic, regardless of seeking the correct answer (Yang and Rusli, 2012).

Malone & Michael (2018) state that "classroom debates are commonly classified as a type of collaborative learning, although some refer to it as a cooperative learning exercise." classroom debate involves students working in a team and taking responsibility for the learning process. He states that Meta-analyses have shown that group learning techniques can improve students' discipline. Laal & Ghodsi (2012) state that debates are linked to collaborative learning skills since students learn to work in a team and collaborate.

### ***Debate on pronunciation and vocabulary***

Richa (2011) states that the debate is an excellent activity that improves students' speaking in English. By using debate in speaking class, students will lose the fear of speaking in the class. Moreover, he states that the debate technique improves the students' pronunciation, vocabulary, and fluency because they will have the chance to practice it more.

Malloy et al. (2020) state that students have problems speaking English with others because they lack vocabulary building in their minds. They do not have opportunities to get friends as partners to practice speaking with them. Moreover, Malloy et al. (2020) suggest debating techniques to increase students' speaking skills. Based on Gatbonton & Segalowitz (2005), there are five factors in speaking: grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, and comprehension.

Furthermore, Malloy et al. (2020) state that second language learners must master vocabulary because vocabulary is the most important item that helps students speak a foreign language. And also, Malloy et al. (2020) found that the average of the students with high vocabulary is higher than the average of students with low vocabulary. He states that vocabulary has a significant effect on students' speaking skills.

And there is expressive interaction between vocabulary and debate in students speaking skills.

## Methods

### Research design

This study used the quantitative method (one-group pretest-posttest design), an appropriate way to gather data and provide the required information and evidence about this issue. The present study used a quantitative approach during the data collection and analysis. An online questionnaire (Appendix I) was used to find the students' perceptions of debate in speaking classes. The quantitative method is involved numbers and statistics (Creswell, J.W. & Creswell, J.D, 2017). Moreover, before six weeks of treatment, the researchers took a pre-test, and after the treatment, a post-test was used to measure the degree to which the speaking skills of the learners improved after using debate in speaking classes.

This quantitative study tries to find the effects of the debate on students' speaking skills. This action research was conducted to measure the interventions made in the process of EFL students speaking skills development through

debate. The researchers have chosen this type of research for a couple of reasons: first, the information they were expecting participants to provide would only be gathered by this method. Second, the large sample size makes the results more reliable and generalized (Rahman 2020). On the other hand, using statistical data in the quantitative approach reduces the researcher's time. The method by which researchers collected the data was simple random sampling. There were 20 questions in this questionnaire, and researchers shared these questionnaires with sophomore students. Then, the students' responses were calculated, and the data was analyzed.

### Participants

The study participants were students of speaking classes at the English department faculty of Literature and Humanities, Herat University. The participants of this study were 44 students, and all received the informed consent form. The participants' age ranged between 21 and 25 years old. It is mentionable that participants have been selected randomly from sophomore classes.

Table 1. Demographic Results of the Participants of the Study

Participants	44 Undergraduate Students
Major	English language and literature Department
Setting	English Department, Faculty of Literature and Humanities, Herat University, Afghanistan.
Gender	16 males 28 Females
Age	21-25 years old
Mother tongue	Mostly Dari and Pashto languages

### Research instruments

To examine the efficiency of debates, participants of the study were given a pre-test and a post-test to measure the impact of the debate on the learners' speaking skills. The learners' speaking proficiency was measured through a rubric adapted from TOEFL iBT independent speaking rubric; it assessed the general description, delivery, language use, comprehensibility, and topic development. For each criterion, the rubric provided a 1 to 4 score; thus,

the total score for the speaking test (both pre-test and post-test) was 20 points.

The researchers prepared a list of topics for the speaking pre-test and post-test. Participants of the study were asked to choose from the list, they were given preparation time, and at the end, they were given one minute to speak about the topic. The topics ranged from personal experiences to their opinion about general, everyday issues. Two raters scored each participant; the inter-rater reliability

suggested a high correlation between the raters' scores as  $r=.78$ .

To further enrich this study with valuable data, an online questionnaire was also utilized at the end of the six-week intervention to record the learners' perception of debates as a tool to improve the speaking skills of Afghan EFL learners. Students responded to the questions with options that ranged from 1 to 5 (1 stands for strongly disagree and 5 stands for strongly agree).

### Data collection and data analysis

The data collection procedure was approved and observed by the Faculty of Languages and Literature Deanship at the research site (Herat University). Students took a pre-test at the beginning of the study, then a six-weeks debate program was implemented in the speaking classes. At the end of the intervention, participants of the study were again tested through a post-test to compare the results with

the pre-test. Furthermore, researchers have also opted for an online questionnaire. The questionnaire consists of 20 questions; each has five options (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree). The questionnaire was administered to 44 participants. All the collected data were analyzed through the SPSS software program.

### Results and Findings

The data from pre-test and post-tests were statistically analyzed. A paired sample t-test was used to measure the degree to which students' speaking skills developed throughout the six-weeks debate program. Additionally, students' responses to the online questionnaire were analyzed via a mathematical method (percentage). The data were collected through online questionnaires, and these questionnaires were distributed among 44 participants. The following tables present the descriptive test results for the pre-test and post-tests:

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics Results for Pre-test and Post-test

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pre-test & posttest	72.5	44	13.31	2.008
		87.7	44	10.31	1.555

A paired sample t-test was used to measure the difference between the pre-test and post-test results to compare the results of the pre-

test to the post-test. The following table presents the results of the paired sample t-test:

Table 3: Paired Sample t-test Results for Pre-test and Post-test

Pair*	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. deviation	Std. error mean	95% confidence interval of differences				
				Lower	upper			
Pretest & Post-test	-15.2	9.27	1.39	-18.047	-12.408	-10.9	43	.000

Results indicated a statistically significant difference between pre-test ( $M = 72.5$ ,  $SD = 13.31$ ) and post-test ( $M = 87.73$ ,  $SD = 10.31$ ),  $t(43) = -10.9$ ,  $p = .000$  at the significance level  $\alpha = 0.05$ . Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected since the study participants demonstrated a significant difference after the intervention.

Furthermore, an online questionnaire was utilized to understand the learners' perceptions of debate as an instrument to develop the speaking skills of EFL learners. The following table presents the percentage, mean, and standard deviation of the results of the online questionnaire.

Table 4. Results of the Online Debate Questionnaire

No	Statements	Mean	Std
1	I found classroom debate a new method of learning speaking skills.	4.45	0.92
2	I enjoyed participating in classroom debates, and I found it exciting.	4.18	0.76
3	Debates help me in thinking critically about the topic in discussion.	4.34	0.71
4	Classroom debate decreases my speaking anxiety.	4.48	0.63
5	In-class debates increase my motivation in speaking class.	4.57	0.55
6	Debate develops collaborative learning skills.	4.48	0.55
7	In-class debates, students learn to be open-minded and accept different perspectives.	4.41	0.62
8	In classroom debate, students learn to ask more questions about everything.	4.39	0.81
9	Debate increases students' self-confidence and decreases the level of stress.	4.43	0.82
10	Debate improves oral communication and critical thinking skills.	4.57	0.50
11	Debates can be a waste of time as it takes a long time to prepare.	4.50	0.55
12	Debate promotes considering and understanding different phrases in speaking.	4.34	0.53
13	Debate enhances learning English language better.	4.61	0.49
14	The use of debates is effective because it improves my pronunciation in speaking.	4.41	0.89
15	Classroom debate promotes learning on the course content.	4.30	0.59
16	In classroom debate, students learn more vocabulary and can use them in speaking.	4.50	0.50
17	The use of debates is effective because I can express my ideas freely.	4.68	0.64
18	Debate increases students' argument skills.	4.68	0.47
19	Students learn to research the issue and find reasons to support their arguments.	4.36	0.49
20	Debates help in practicing the authentic language.	4.52	0.49

The data in the table suggest students positively perceive using debates to develop their speaking skills. The mean for question 10, 13, 17, 18, and 20 were higher than 4.5, which indicates the degree to which learners find debate effective for developing their speaking skills. Students strongly agreed that debate increases their argument skills. They learn to express their thoughts and ideas, practice authentic language, and practice the course content more effectively. Furthermore, students believe debates help them in promoting their critical thinking skills. They also indicated that debates help them control their anxiety and stress levels. However, students were skeptical about whether debate helps them develop their pronunciation or if this speaking technique helps them learn new phrases.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study presented the effects of debate on students' speaking skills at the English Department, Herat University, Afghanistan. The description of the data collected through pre and post-test shows that the speaking skill of the participants improved after the six-week intervention. The mean score of the pre-test was 72.5, and the mean score for the post-test was 87.73. According to Iman, J N. (2017), the debate is one of the most exciting activities for college students. Students enjoy it when they have the opportunity in the debate to speak and share their thoughts and viewpoints with their friends. All the study participants agree to apply debate sessions in their speaking courses because they believe it is an interesting method and enjoy doing it.

Moreover, the present study results show that debate is useful in developing the students' critical thinking abilities; almost 85% of the participants agreed that speaking technique progressed their critical thinking skills. El Majidi et al. (2018) state that debate improves students' critical thinking because they must analyze a problem critically and find a solution. The results of the study show that debate helps students overcome speaking anxiety in class. In addition, the researchers believe that the tension and concern of speaking in front of the class influence students' performances. These abysmal feelings do not allow students to start speaking and participate actively in discussions, but classroom debate can help students overcome barriers and obstacles, feel more confident speaking in class and reduce learners' anxiety and tension. The participants of this research report that debate teaches them how to accept or reject another person's opinion and learn better argument skills. These findings are aligned with Ramlan, F, A, et al. (2016), who believe that debate is a technique that encourages students to challenge one another and motivates them to convince the opposing side.

Furthermore, based on the results of this study, the debate would be a useful method for refining students' speaking skills. If teachers want to get the most benefits from their speaking classes, debate can enhance students' motivation to speak in the target language, which has been proven in previous studies by Zare & Othman (2015), Al-Mahrooqi & Tabakow (2015), El Majidi, De Graaff & Janssen (2018). Afri et al. (2021) state that debate is an effective method of speaking that encourages students to participate in group work and improves their communication skills. Participants of this paper also reported that in a speaking class where debate is used, they can communicate without anxiety since they work in a team along with their classmates and friends; as a result, the collaboration among the members decreases their stress and motivates them to take part in the speaking activity. The study's findings affirm the interaction hypothesis, which asserts that in order to develop the speaking skill of L2 learners, it is essential to include

interactive activities to keep students engaged and motivated (Long, 2018).

In addition, most courses are lecture-based and do not allow students to interact freely with their classmates. However, debate enables students to give alternative solutions to a topic, regardless of seeking the correct answer (Yang & Rusli, 2012). In most universities, students do not have any opportunities to share their opinions, communicate, speak up, and show disagreement. The participants of the current study showed that through debate, they could not only share their ideas freely but also practice what they knew about the structure of English language, including vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. Moreover, the participants reflected that in a debate, they have to search for evidence and proof to assist and support their arguments, look for reasons, note the troubles and take multiple perspectives into attention; more than half of the study participants had this idea that debating provided the chance for research and finding reasons.

This study shows the impact of the debate on students' speaking skills and the students' perspectives toward having the debate in speaking courses. All participants in this study had positive attitudes toward having debates in their speaking courses. The study offers using the debate to teachers to teach speaking skills in EFL/ESL classes. Additionally, the study provides evidence for the teachers to create pleasure and an exciting situation as much as possible to motivate students to speak the target language. The debate can inspire college students to practice and improve their speaking ability, especially in large classes. This approach has reinforced the learners in executing implementing English language. Students have many opportunities to train, speak and actively participate in the speaking classes. However, because of not having more participants in this study, future studies are suggested to include more participants to have more subtle results. The small number of participants in the study limits the number of perspectives on the topic. Besides, the current study only examined the students' experience having the debate in their speaking courses, and the teachers' opinions were missing. Teachers' perspectives



about teaching speaking English through debate, how they manage and design it, and its effects on students' speaking skill is also important to report. English teachers who deal with large classes can use the debate to engage their students in speaking classes. Through debate, not only can they help students overcome their stress and speaking anxiety, but also teachers can motivate their learners to speak more freely. It is worth mentioning that the teacher should select a stimulating topic base on students' interests. Finally, teachers, by classroom debate can improve their learners' speaking skills, critical thinking, oral communication, and self-confidence in a speaking class.

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