

Improving EFL Students' Speaking Skills Through Debating Techniques

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ABSTRACT

Language is an elemental tool in society through which effective communication can be achieved. Throughout history, English has remained one of the most influential languages across the world. Thus, it is used as the language of instruction in a number of universities in Jordan; among these is the German Jordanian University (GJU). In recent years, debate has been found to be an effective method for improving speaking skills among English as a foreign language (EFL) students. Little attention has been paid by researchers to developing speaking skills by using debate as a teaching strategy in the Arab countries. This paper presents a study carried out using a sample of 27 students enrolled in a first semester, foreign -language English course, over four months during the 2019/20 academic year and was administrated by the School of Basic Sciences and Humanities. The results indicated statistically significant differences between the pre and post-tests, and an improvement in EFL students' speaking abilities after attending debating sessions over an extended period of time. The results of the study, regardless of limitations, indicate that debate may be an effective strategy to foster language speaking skills. The results of the study may be valuable for further studies and investigations in this field.

Keywords: debate, speaking skills, English as a Foreign Language, higher education, language learning

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Background of the study

Language generally refers to a medium of communication in which signs and sounds are used to represent objects, actions, and ideas. Language represents the foundation through which people can initiate meaningful interactions in society. Further, language can be expressed via writing, speaking and/or physical gestures. The introduction of writing and print media has, in the recent past, enhanced the development of language across the world. Consequently, people have both expressed and acted upon the desire to learn a second language in order to interact freely with others regardless of their origin. Moreover, the development of language has enabled people to carry out scientific research, which has not only facilitated innovation but also facilitated the acquiring of specific knowledge in ways that were not possible for our ancestors (Boyd, 2007). Currently, there are a record of about 5000 different languages across the globe (Bellon, 2000). Political entities such as the vast Roman and Persian Empires were all united by a universal language. A

language can also serve as a mark of identity and culture, whereby people can categorize themselves into a specific group based on their language. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that language is an elemental part of society through which people can achieve meaningful interaction and establish relations .

Since the 20th century, English has remained one of the most widely used languages in the world. Today, English is used as an international language that unites millions of people across the globe (Clyne & Sharifian, 2008). Currently, there are over 113 countries that speak English as a second language. Approximately 90% of the world's population uses English as either a second language or as a foreign language. The events of the 20th century profoundly established the foundation of this phenomenon. Initially, English was only spoken as a primary language in the United Kingdom; being home to the highest number of English-speaking people prior to the 20th century. In some parts of the world, such as the United States, English was thus adopted as the native

language. Likewise, English is widely used as the national language in other parts of the world such as Australia and some parts of Europe, but considered a second language in other areas such as Asia and Africa, except for some parts of Asia and Africa where it is the primary means of communications.

Over the years, it has been proven that the mechanisms of learning a new language are closely related to the mechanisms of adopting a new culture. Thus, learning a new language is always an immersive task that requires a considerable amount of time and effort. Over the years, various strategies have been adopted in an attempt to teach students English as a second language. Exposing students to English literature, teaching, and writing has always been the conventional method to help EFL students learn English (Varela, 2012). Other methods such as increased social interactions with English speaking students have also proved to be an essential method through which EFL students have enhanced their English communication abilities. However, debate techniques have, over the years, provided an excellent method via which EFL students have been able to improve both their writing and speaking skills in English (El-Sayed & Siddiek, 2013). Teaching speaking may pose a challenge for English language instructors as well as their EFL students due to the use of English as the sole medium of communication. This makes it difficult to effectively run an English classroom. The aim is for students to master English to an almost native speaker's level in ordinary communication. As such, debating may be one of the most effective techniques used to enhance communication amongst students. Most debates generally involve a formal discussion where two or more individuals with opposing views on a specific topic of interest in an effort to persuade the audience to take a similar stand.

In an academic setting, students have a number of elective courses from which they carry out debating sessions. Debate techniques refer to the different debating methods and styles adopted by two groups with opposing positions on a specific topic in an effort to convince the audience. Usually, debate

techniques are characterized by a high degree of mental preparedness, exceptional listening abilities, articulation, eloquence confidence, and overall language mastery. Debating techniques expose EFL students to better methods for improving their speaking abilities (Fauzan, 2017). As students present and defend their positions during debates, they significantly enhance their communication, critical thinking, and argumentation skills, improving, in turn, their speaking skills. Based on these claims, this paper primarily focuses on presenting a quantitative study to determine the impact of using debating techniques on improving English-speaking skills among EFL students (Kamali & Fahim, 2011). The data used in this study was collected from an EFL course (*English 201*) at the German Jordanian University (GJU); students are required to complete six levels of English foundation courses throughout their university years. These courses are offered by the School of Basic Sciences and Humanities. The study sample population comprised 27 EFL students enrolled over the course of four months in *English 201* during their first semester in the 2019/20 academic year. The primary aim of the study was to establish whether debate should be integrated into the *English 201* course as a teaching method for EFL students.

Jordan has always been one of several countries where the English language is given considerable attention as a result of globalization. The English language is always in demand for almost all aspects of life including education, work and communication in general. Further, it is used in most academic institutions as the primary means of instruction. With an increasing number of students in Jordan learning English as a foreign language, teachers have endeavored to establish multiple ways to improve the students' writing and speaking in English. However, there is still a majority of students struggling to use English as a foreign language. This can be understandable considering the fact that the students are not completely exposed to an English speaking environment outside the classroom, and even when they are exposed to English inside the classroom, there are

other factors that can limit students' ability to practice the language beginning with the high number of students inside the classroom to other factors such as grammatical rules that can sometimes require hours. As such, using debates have, in recent years, been identified as an effective method for improving EFL students' speaking skills; especially since the concept of debate doesn't start and end inside the classroom. Although debating is a collaborative concept that mandates students of the same team to work together, it also requires individual effort on the part of each student outside the classroom as well. Since each student will need to research the topic of debate thoroughly and find proof to back up the claims made, tremendous effort will be put into that with hours of language practice as the students will have to formulate ideas using the English language. Even students who are reluctant to speak in normal settings will be forced to articulate their findings with their team members to share with their classmates and teachers later on. With this being said, there is an increased belief that integrating debates into the *English 201* course will significantly improve students' English-speaking skills.

research questions

- i. What is the role of debating in enhancing language learning and communication skills in EFL classrooms?
- ii. How can teachers use debate as a tool for addressing both teaching and learning challenges among the EFL students?
- iii. What is the effect of small group intensive debating sessions on improving students Oral test scores when taking the pre test scores compared to the post test scores ?

Scope of the study

The study was carried out in a formal classroom setting at the GJU over a four-month period during which 48 debate sessions were conducted. A sample population of 27 EFL students enrolled in

English 201 during their first semester in the 2019/20 academic year was used. The GJU is located in the heart of the Asian continent, and a significant number of its students do not speak English as a foreign language. The University has a total of five thousand students who are currently enrolled in different faculties.

literature review

According to Sharifian (2008), debating as a learning tool originated in the ancient Greek world. Used as a component of democracy, debates were widely held in Greek society, after which, citizens voted to arrive at a solution regarding controversial issues. In ancient Greece, people would meet in the market square to discuss matters impacting the society. According to Zare & Othman (2015), debates allowed people in ancient Greek society to be courageous and to protect the community. Clyne and Sharifian (2008) hold that the 18th century was a turning point for debating as a tool for enhancing the affairs of the community. During the early stages of the 18th century, debating societies started emerging in London. It was not long before the practice was adopted as a prominent fixture of national life (Thale, 1997). Since then, debating has grown and spread across many societies, and is used in a variety of spaces from recreational to political. In the recent past, debating has been used in the United States as an academic tool with which students are given the opportunity to shape their language skills in general and speaking skills in particular.

Higher learning institutions have also adopted the concept of debates as a tool for both learning as well enhancing the well-being of society. Most universities and colleges across the world have, over the years, held debating sessions and competitions as a way of creating awareness regarding social issues such as disease awareness and world peace (Sharifian, 2008). In the United States, most universities use debates as a tool for improving speaking skills among the many students who learn English as a foreign language (EFL). Based on the nature of American society, the country has a significantly high population of people who do not speak English as second

language. Over the years, most communities in the United States have remained conservative in their culture, a factor that has made it hard for them to adopt English as a second language. Moreover, the number of international students streaming into the country has been on the rise in the last few decades (Fauzan, 2017). However, in recent years, there has been a rapid demographic change among English speaking people across the world. Scholarly debates show that most of the people in the world will shift from speaking English as a second language in preference to other different languages. According to (Bellon, 2000), such a phenomenon will see a drop from the current 337 million people who speak English as a second language to around 233 in 2050. The apparent drop will mean that there will be more EFL students than today. According to Cowie and Carruthers (1996), multiple studies have been conducted in recent years to determine the effectiveness of using debates to enhance the speaking skills of EFL students. Moreover, previous research on students' perceptions on debating has been quite motivating. The majority of students in Goodwin's (2003) study were shown to be confident in participating in debates that improved their English-speaking skills.

The spread of English in Jordan was facilitated by the British colonization in the 20th century; colonies were also built in other Arab countries. However, most Arab communities have, since ancient times, remained extremely conservative with regards to their culture. Thus, it was not easy for the English language to make its way through. As a result, most countries in the Arab World resort to English only when necessary. These factors have led to an increased demand for the teaching of English as a foreign language in the majority of higher learning institutions in most Arab countries (Adams & Newton, 2009).

Over the years, most institutions across all levels have been offering English as a foreign language classes to their students. In most universities across the Arab World, English is a compulsory course. As a former British colony, Jordan has also adopted the practice of teaching English in its institutions of

higher learning. According to Dudley-Evans and St John (1998), educational developments across the world in the recent past have greatly affected the teaching of English in many institutions of higher learning in Asia. Consequently, there has been an increased demand for a universal language that can facilitate smooth interactions of people across the world. The invention of the internet has transformed the world into a small village where people can communicate with one another irrespective of their location. And with English as the lingua franca of the internet, learning English has become inevitable.

Research methodology

The section describes the various ways in which the study was undertaken. Data were collected and analyzed in order to reach at a specific conclusion about the study. The focus here will be on the following sub-sections: structure of debates, study area and population, sampling procedures, data collection instruments and procedures, pre-testing, and data analysis.

structure of debates

The researcher used simple debate topics such as current controversial issues in Jordan related to certain laws and regulations. These topics allowed the students to speak smoothly, freely, and spontaneously and also to practice overcoming the obstacle of translating complex thoughts from Arabic into English. According to Lustigova (2011), when teaching debate to intermediate classes, it is best to start with the straightforward process where students formulate their own opinions while being introduced to a number of language structures, grammar issues, and new vocabulary.

According to Vargo (2012) there are five types of debate: four-corner, role-play, fishbowl, think-pair-share, and meeting house. The researcher used two of these in conducting the research.

- 1- Role-play: This type of debate helps to avoid dualistic debate models by assigning students roles where they need to argue on behalf of different characters in a situation.

- 2- Fishbowl: This type of debate involves grouping chairs in a circle pattern. Chairs are placed inside a circle for teams. Other chairs can also be added for the audience. An empty chair can also be added to bolster attention among those outside the fishbowl, allowing someone from the outside to enter the fishbowl for the purpose of making an argument.

The researcher developed various simple debate topics and assigned these topics to the groups. Ample time was allocated beforehand for the participants to prepare the arguments and collect supporting data to present during the debates. The researcher provided the students with handouts of debate techniques, which included arguments with gaps that the students were required to complete as initial practice and preparation.

Targeted population

The study explicitly targeted the EFL freshman students at the GJU during the 2019/20 academic year as a result of the researcher's general view that the current English courses could be improved through debate techniques designed to enhance the groups' learning abilities as well as their speaking skills. Moreover, previous studies have shown that debating techniques can significantly improve English-speaking skills among the targeted group (Tsang, 1997).

The study excluded all students not taking *English 201*, as well as the students whose first language was English.

sampling procedure

In selecting the sample population, a judgmental and purposeful sampling technique was used. 27 EFL students enrolled in *English 201* were selected based on their English-speaking skills. The sample population was made up of the students with the lowest abilities in spoken English (Tsang, 1997). The method was highly preferable since it gave each member of the targeted population an equal opportunity to participate in the study (Tsang, 1997). All the EFL students taking *English 201* in their first semester for the 2019/20 academic year

were allowed to participate. However, only a total of 27 participants out of 78 students were selected to represent the total population. The sample of the study consisted of 27 students from three programs as follows:

- 15 students (55.6% of the sample) were from the regular program.
- 2 students (7.4% of the sample) were from the International program.
- 10 students (37.0% of the sample) were from the Foreign Certificates-Parallel.

data collection method

Multiple methods were employed in collecting data from the respondents. Interactive processes including interviews between the researcher and the respondents were used. Additionally, a questionnaire with both structured and unstructured questions was used. During data collection, both primary and secondary methods were used. Primary data collection was mainly done through directly administering questionnaires to all 27 participants, as well as carrying out face to face interviews with all the participants. Secondary data was mainly collected through the analysis of prior literature and similar studies that had been carried out in the past. Moreover, observations regarding teaching and learning processes made by the students were also used as a source of primary data. A descriptive statistical methodology was used in the processing of the collected data. Our method was elemental with regards to describing the success of the teaching-learning processes (Tsang, 1997).

use of questionnaire

Towards the end of all debating sessions and before the post test, the 27 participants in the study were provided with a questionnaire required to be answered based on the respondents' experiences during debating sessions. The questionnaire consisted of twenty paragraphs on a Likert Scale.

interview schedule

Interview schedules for the 27 respondents were organized towards the end of all debating sessions and before the post test. The interviews were

carried out by three of the course instructors who engaged the respondents in answering a series of questions regarding their speaking skills prior to and after the debates. The interview questions focused on the students' perspective on the success of the debate technique as a tool to improve their speaking skills. The questions also focused specifically on the students' experiences of debate as a learning strategy. Only English was used during the interviews. The information sought included the different debating techniques necessary for language mastery, the relevance of debates in enhancing communication, and the correlation between debates and language improvement. The interviewers then wrote down all the responses which were later pooled for further analysis. The information sought in this case pertained to grammatical improvement, sentence structure, and confidence levels among the participants (Aclan & Aziz, 2015).

testing

To determine the overall degree of improvement in speaking among the students, an achievement oral test (post test) was used. The oral test was found to be the most appropriate test, and all participants were allowed to engage in a well-programmed conversation. Students' improvement was assessed based on three main elements: mastery of vocabulary, language fluency, and comprehension (Masri & Najjar, 2014).

Since the achievement post test aimed at testing oral achievement of GJU students, the GJU curriculum for teaching English language was considered. Six topics were selected from the activity topics. These included: 1- Friendship differences between generations and family influence. 2- the economy in your country and new business ideas 3- Predictions, the future and technological solutions 4- planning a staycation and ideas for an unusual hotel 5- traditional rules of behaviour, food and eating habits 6- ambitions, wishes and strong feelings. To add some spontaneity to their speaking performance, the students were asked random questions prepared by the examiners about the chosen topic. Thus, the six topics selected were of relatively equal level, and

all tests were audio recorded upon participants' consent.

Once an icebreaker activity was conducted as an introduction to the exam, identifications were checked, and students were given instructions about the exam structure. The goal was to make the conversation as natural as possible encouraging emotionally colored extended responses rather than plain answers to the questions.

The testing process consisted also of a test conducted prior to adopting the debate technique. The pretest was of the same level of difficulty of the posttest and used the same topics. Then a paired *t*-test was used to test the differences in the mean scores. One evaluator was responsible for the grading process in the two tests using an analytic rubric, with no control group due to the limited number of participants. All the students' scores were combined, and a mean score was recorded, and used to determine the success of debate techniques in improving EFL students' English speaking skills.

test criteria

Many University instructors face difficulties in evaluating oral tests in the classroom instruction especially in countries where English language is a foreign language and also where English language courses are compulsory. These difficulties frequently existed in testing speaking implementation (Luoma, 2004)

A test Rubric is a scoring tool that consists of specific basic features and is used to evaluate the students' work (McNamara, 2000). Many rating rubrics of speaking have been utilized by instructors to evaluate their students' oral tests. In general, these rubrics are divided into types, holistic and analytic. The holistic rubric leads the evaluator to score the overall components of communicative competences without considering another component of language production separately. The analytic rubric on the other hand, requires the evaluator to score the components of language production separately (Nitko, 2001).

In this research, an analytic rubric was used. According to Nitko (2001) analytic rubrics are usually preferred when the focus is on the response to an interaction. The rubric used in this research included four components of speaking, namely; content, accuracy, comprehension, and fluency.

ethics

Prior to conducting the study, ethics approval was obtained from both; the Dean of the School of Basic Sciences and Humanities and the head of the English department. A written consent was also sought from each participant.

**Data analysis
the questionnaire**

A descriptive analysis was performed for the measurement items using the most common tests namely mean and standard deviation. The mean provides the estimate of the central tendency of the distribution and it indicates the performance of the process, thus it enables the study to predict subsequent data points. While, the standard deviation measures how the data are concentrated around the mean; the smaller the standard deviation

means that the values of the dataset are close to the mean, conversely, the large standard deviation means that the values are farther away from the mean.

The obtained results showed the third item stated “Regular practices of conversation improve the fluency, pronunciation and vocabulary” had the highest mean score with a value of 4.73 and standard deviation 0.603. This result indicates the importance of regular practice to develop the language skills related to the fluency, pronunciation and vocabulary. On the other hand, the least mean was for the statement of “It has replaced the traditional classroom methods with a more communicative learning pattern” had the lowest mean score with a value of 2.73 and standard deviation 1.25 respectively. This result indicates the preference of the sample with the traditional teaching methods rather the communicative one. Figure 1 shows the answers of the respondents towards the identified items provided in the questionnaire and the extent they agree or disagree with those items.

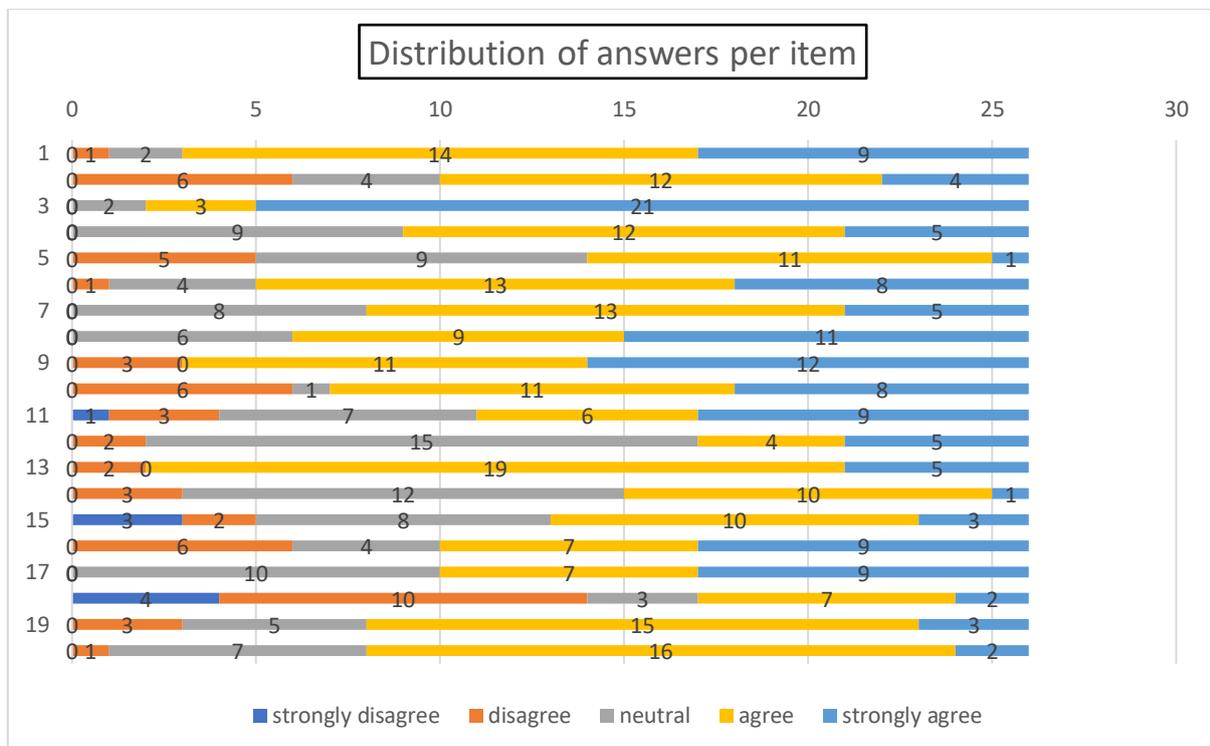
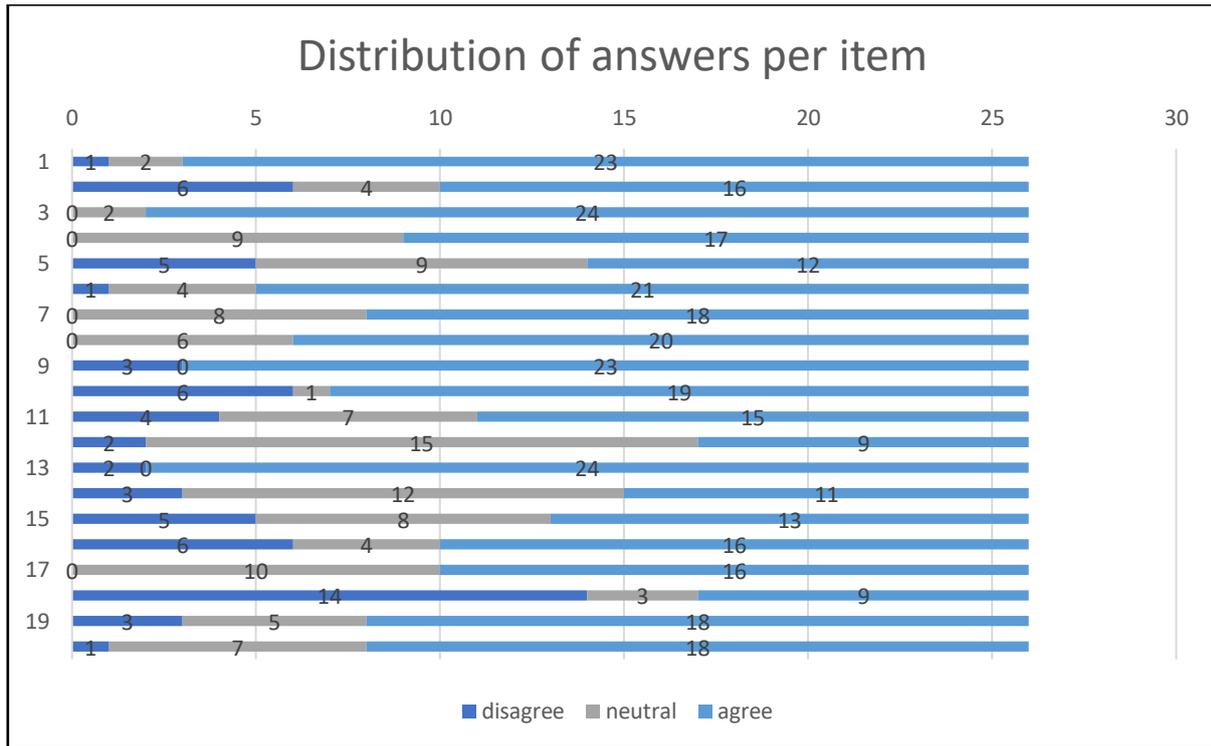


Figure 1 distribution of the answers per items

On other side, the researcher has categorized the same study instrument with three categories namely disagree, neutral and agree, the results from the respondents showed the item of “It has replaced the traditional classroom methods with a more communicative learning pattern” had the lowest mean score with a negative value of -0.192 and standard deviation 0.938 respectively. While the highest mean score with a value of 0.846 and

standard deviation 0.543 of the statement that worded “The debate enhances the social features through interaction with others”. This result indicates the role of debates in developing the social feature of the student by mutual interaction with each other. Figure 2 shows the answers of the respondents towards the identified items provided in the questionnaire and the extent they agree, neutral or disagree with these items.



pre and post tests

Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviation of the students’ grades for the two tests. The table shows that the average score in the pretest was (52.69), while the average score in the posttest was (71.68).

Table 1. Mean scores for the grades of each test

Test	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pre-test	52.69	9.02052
Post-test	71.68	11.944

To identify the existence of any significant improvement in the test’s score, a paired *t*-test was used. The results of this test are illustrated in Table 2. The table shows that the difference in the score between the pre and post-tests was (19.00) grades. The table also shows that this difference is statistically significant, and it is not equal to zero (*P*-value= 0.000). In other words, there was a noticeable improvement in students’ test scores from pre o post-debate.

Table 2. Paired *t*-test results.

Test	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	P-value
				Lower	Upper			

Post-Pre	19.00	7.7777	1.495	15.92	22.06	12.69	26	.000
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discussion

The results of this study show that debate techniques significantly improved English-speaking skills as well as communication skills among EFL students; hence, debates are significant in the English classroom. According to Casil-Batang and Malenab-Temporal (2018), debate exposes students to four primary learning skills which are fundamental for improving spoken language skills. These are: listening, speaking, writing, and reading. Moreover, the process enhances confidence levels among the students (Efrizal, 2012). At the beginning of the study, most of the participants were reluctant in expressing their opinions due to their inability to generate grammatically correct statements. However, as the students participated in 48 debating sessions, there was a drastic change in their attitude towards speaking. There was a significant improvement in their listening skills and they showed confidence when defending their positions during the debating sessions.

The primary limitation of this study was that only 27 students were used as a sample population and the study was carried out without a control group. Although the number might be small compared to the total population of the University, but it may very well indicate a dire need for further research with a larger subject population using a controlled test.

According to Dunlosky, Rawson, Marsh, Nathan, and Willingham (2013) “the impact of debate techniques on students’ speaking skills is measured according to their abilities to carry out speaking conversations through an interactive process of constructing meaning through the production, reception, and processing of information” (Carlo et al., 2004). During the study, the students’ abilities to engage in conversations were used as an elemental tool for determining their average improvement score.

According to Masri and Najri (2014), debate techniques are fundamental in improving

vocabulary mastery among EFL students. The author’s claim was affirmed towards the end of the study; all 27 students improved their English language. According to Aclan and Aziz (2015), debates provide a perfect platform on which students can learn more on a given subject, as well as improving listening and communication skills which are essential for vocabulary development. Further, the results from the study revealed that debate techniques profoundly enhanced the students’ word-usage and statement-structuring (Carlo et al., 2004). Given that most of the students taking the *English 201* course had a different first language; most of them were profoundly affected by their native language accent, which significantly affected their abilities to speak English. However, by the end of this study, the situation slightly improved, and some of the participants were able to speak English with a better accent and were further noted to make fewer errors than they had at the beginning of the study.

The tremendous improvement in language fluency showed how effective debate techniques could be if used as a teaching technique in the EFL classroom (Carlo et al., 2004).

Studying the interviews on the students, it was obvious that the students were aware of all changes in behavior and speaking skills towards the end of the academic semester. Moreover, the interviews answers showed the students were aware of their ability to manage the class in teams, energy and enthusiasm during debate sessions, their role in debating and presenting arguments with clarity and appropriate volume, and confidence to freely express opinions during the debate. Through observation during the interviews, the researcher was able to monitor the teaching/learning process and closely observe the class atmosphere and the changes that occurred. “Avoidance strategy” was noted by the researcher during the first couple of sessions. Most of the students abandoned the attempts to debate in the midst of struggles to perfect sentence construction. In the next few

sessions, the students were more relaxed, and an atmosphere of friendly competition and interactive activities was formed.

In general, the students showed an overall positive reaction to the use of debates in class, especially their ability to express themselves fluently. However, their perspectives on the use of debate techniques varied. While twenty-five out of twenty-seven students agreed that the debate technique was an effective tool in improving speaking, twenty-three agreed that debate benefited them in developing not only speaking skills but also class communication skills and collaborative interaction. The other four students focused on the positive impact debate had on their personal communication skills.

Conclusion

The primary goal for carrying out this study was to establish whether or not debate techniques should be adopted as a teaching tool for the *English 201* course for the EFL students taking it in their first semester of the 2019/20 academic year at the GJU. The decision was to be made based on how effective these debate techniques were in improving English speaking skills for the 27 EFL students participating in the study.

Based on the outlined findings and the given objectives of the study, the following conclusions were drawn.

- i. Debate techniques profoundly improve English speaking skills among EFL students.
- ii. The use of debate techniques as a teaching technique for EFL students can aid English teaching at the GJU.

recommendations

Two recommendations were drawn from the results of the study.

To ensure that all the EFL students in the university improve their English-Speaking skills, the University should introduce debating as a teaching technique for all the *English 201* classes. Current and future students should be able to practice language through debates. Furthermore, additional support using debates in general should be

provided for students who lack confidence to aid them in delivering clearer communication throughout their academic as well as professional life.

To ensure improved English-speaking skills in the future, all the EFL students should be enrolled in various debating clubs in their early stages of schooling.

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