

Debate to Cultivate Critical Thinking and Communication Skills

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ABSTRACT

The parliamentary debate has been a significant trend globally and is conducted to get well-arranged arguments in many circumstances. The mushrooming debating contests around the globe have shown that this activity positively impacts learners' skills, i.e., critical thinking and communication skills. Geared qualitatively, this article investigates how parliamentary debate can cultivate critical thinking and communication skills. The data were collected via semi-structured observation and interviews in an English debating club at a private Islamic high school involving 6 participants and two coaches. The findings revealed that debate offers several distinct features to improve students' two skills, as mentioned above, significantly.

Keywords: Critical Thinking, Parliamentary Debate, Speaking

INTRODUCTION

The rapid and massive development in world competition has demanded immediate adjustment in national education (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Serdyukov, 2017). The Ministry of National Education has encouraged coaches and students to implement innovative instruction to equip the youth with the four required skills (4 C's) in the 21st century. They include critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity. Thinking critically and being problem-solving-oriented in learning stimulates students to use logical reasoning to understand and make decisions on complex problems and plan and analyze a problem (Bangun & Praghlapati, 2021; Dalyan, 2022; Fischer et al., 2012; Papathanasiou et al., 2014). With this provision, students can solve problems in their environment independently and in groups.

Furthermore, creativity and innovation skills trigger students to develop, implement, and convey new ideas to others and have an open and responsive attitude to new issues and different perspectives. The third aspect, communication skills, includes understanding, managing, and creating an effective communication interaction process orally, by writing, and through multimedia (Hossain, 2015; Thompson, 2020). In addition, students need to equip themselves with mastery of foreign languages in order to be able to communicate effectively across countries. Without a qualified *lingua franca*, the competitiveness of individuals in the international competition arena cannot be realized. The last is the ability to collaborate. In global competition, members must

adapt to the work environment according to the job description, have high productivity in several fields of work in teams, respect differences of opinion, and have an empathetic attitude.

One popular method to help students master some of the skills is debate. It is a form of communication with argumentation and refutation. The debate starts over an issue called 'motion', which usually begins with THBT (this house believes that), THW (This house would), or THR (This house regrets). Motions are usually based on the occurring phenomenon that stimulates controversy among people. The positive and negative teams must provide a 'theme line' to outline their speakers' proof.

Considering those aspects, MBI Amanatul Ummah intensively conducts extracurricular programs to shape the skills, including the English Debate Club. The debating club conducts regular weekly practice with its members using the Asian Parliamentary System (APS). Among other systems, APS is chosen because of its distinct features. APS requires each speaker to serve different roles with a positive and opposing team. The first positive speaker illustrates the background of the issue, asserts the urgency of debating, and elaborates on the first positive argument.

Meanwhile, the first negative speaker points out the clash between the two teams, rebut the positive's argument, and delivers the first opposing argument. Responding to the negative rebuttal, the second positive member answers rebuttals the opposing case and asserts the second positive argument. Following that is the second negative speaker, who also does the same as the previous speaker. The third speaker summarizes each team case and compares it to show which team is in the upper hand. Finally, each reply speaker gives biased adjudication of what happened during the debate. In the APS, Points of Interruption (PoI) are allowed to give from the second to the fifth minutes when the 1st, second, and third speakers deliver their case.

Just like other debate systems, e.g., British, American, and Australasian parliamentary systems, APS offers a high level of 'thinking-on-your-feet' activity and communication drill to learners who are proven to boost their critical thinking significantly (Chikeleze et al., 2018; Fuad et al., 2018; Nurakhir et al., 2020; Handayani, 2016) and communication skill (Afri et al., 2021; Chikeleze et al., 2018; Hewa Hassan & Jwan Shkak, 2020; Syamdianita & Maharia, 2020). Students are taught to analyze factual issues, offer solutions, weigh the level of significance or priority, and assert some argumentation against their opponents during the debate. In line with Koran, (2015), students prepare arguments in favor or against various propositions in a formal debate. They, here, are to be able to persuade as well. "Persuading an audience means that debaters must explain both why their arguments are right, as well as why their opponent's arguments are wrong" (De'Cruz, 2003). Those actions, somehow, are not simple activities. The sophisticated thinking process does not rise automatically. It truly needs training and a system to make their thinking critical.

Debate effectively improves oral communication skills (Nurakhir et al., 2020; Zare & Othman, 2015). The debate is about proficiency, fluency, expressions, and manners to persuade listeners strongly. Newbies who are shy and afraid to speak are expected to drill their oral performance repeatedly to deal with negative feelings. The motivation to

gain winning and look convincing in front of the public often metacognitively help students to perform well during debating session. Research has quantitatively proven that debate can significantly improve learners' critical thinking and communication skills. However, very few are concerned about how qualitative debate can contribute to such a positive impact. Therefore, the present study will reveal how parliamentary debate can cultivate critical thinking and communication skills.

RESEARCH METHOD

A case study was carried out in this research to explore how debate boosts students' critical thinking and communication skills. A qualitative approach was used to understand what, how, and why debate can positively impact. Through qualitative research, empirical knowledge of learners and coaches can then be excessively revealed as the findings of this study.

Several techniques were used to collect data, including semi-structured interviews, observation, and document studies. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data on how critical thinking and communication skills can be cultivated in analyzing some cases, a detailed description of each resourceful information on the mechanism of improving both skills. The collected data were analyzed through interpretive analysis processes. The interview transcripts were supplemented with data obtained from the records at observation. The transcripts were checked to ensure that all the required data had been recorded. The participants' data transcripts were then returned to validate what they said. Interview and observation data were coded and categorized by the specified category, then analyzed argumentatively.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This section will present the study results, answering the research question. The question is how debate can cultivate critical thinking and communication skills.

"Ok, guys. It is a perfect moment to have you gather here again ... We go on directly to the motion of the day ... This house believes that developing countries should adopt economic development policies that heavily disincentivize urbanization. I want boys to be a positive team while girls become an opposing team. Please discuss your cases in 30 minutes. Brainstorming starts now!" (Data 1)

"You all know? What is a developing country? Which countries are the examples? What is the meaning of developing country? What about economic level?" (Data 2)

The coaches directly engage the students to brainstorm a motion from this excerpt. The coach gave some questions to stimulate their insights. The students are invited to speak and respond by stating their own genuine opinion toward the questions given by the coaches. In the end, hopefully, the students can define the motion well. The coach intended to broaden their view to install some concepts to convey. This is how brainstorming works, stimulating discussion among students before debating starts.

After thirty minutes, the students performed a debate under the mentioned motion. Afterward, both coaches give verbal adjudication to all speakers by their

teamwork and individual performance. The teacher emphasized that the first speakers must give a definition, a background, and goals based on their points of view from any sources. Besides, the first speakers have to introduce his/her stakeholders or teammates whose different contents of speech to deliver. The introduction is to avoid overlapping argumentation in a team during the battle so that **justification** will be clear enough. Each team member has a specific role in carrying out the APS system. Role understanding of the speaker in a debate will maximize the potency of a team and its speakers to perform their duties.

Further, the researcher found that the debate system constrains the students from speaking creatively and confidently because they may not allow uttering the same arguments as others. They further must try finding various factual data reasons to expose. Those are to strengthen his/her team's existence in front of adjudicators. Hence, in this part, this finding shows how the debate system drives the students as speakers to have a reasonable frame of thinking before speaking to be recognized by the men they are talking to or persuading.

Furthermore, both coaches reminded that the second speaker is forbidden to provide the same talks or similar arguments as the first. They must talk about different arguments from another point of view. This rule is called **team split**, the distribution of arguments among the first, second, and third speakers. One speaker cannot take all the arguments because every team member has his/her job. Then the third speaker has another job as well. They have to repeat their own teams' justification. Each of them is requested to bring the first and the second speakers' talks, yet they convey the contents in their own words, ways, and styles. So, restarting the team's justification emphasizes that they are reasoning the issue or motion being debated. In inconvenience, a third affirmative or positive team speaker must reaffirm the affirmative's theme line and rebut all the remaining points of the opposing case. At the same time, a third speaker of the opposing team must reaffirm the negative theme line and rebut all the remaining points of the affirmative team's case. Since debate is a complex skill, it requires a long duration of training. (Data 7)

Nevertheless, the students are still enthusiastic enough to listen and follow the guidance of their debate coaches in the class. They are also quite cooperative in doing whatever their coaches demand of them. They are encouraged to practice again and again. When the researcher observed the class, half of the participants were beginners. They are from ten grade, and they still need to know more information and patent rules of the APS, so their coaches explain the APS system before getting them to practice the debate. He or she explains widely what and how the Asian Parliamentary Debate should be. The coaches often elaborate on the debate and its mechanism in detail. The teacher regularly explains to the students in meetings before having students exercise debating in class the mechanism, rules, and case building, including team split.

Meanwhile, students also admitted that debate is attractive, especially to those with a strong will. It is essential to inform others that debate is not as complicated as they think. Debate gives students more about speaking and developing a critical mind. So, indeed it has many benefits for the student's English communication skills.

"Well. When the first time I came to the debate class, it was not comfortable because I am afraid of being speechless when I am performing in front of my friends." (Data 12)

"I feel comfortable in debate class because the first time, debate class teaches ask to think more open-minded." (Data 16)

The debate is fascinating. Yeah, you will feel under pressure the first time, but ... it is okay. At first, I feel shy and confident talking in public. (Data 20)

The testimonies above constitute a common reason most teen students feel reluctant and afraid to actively engage in speaking activities since they do not want to be embarrassed when making mistakes, especially those with low English speaking skills. They also felt unconfident and stuck due to impressive performance. Because speaking in front of many mates and a teacher while arguing lines of reasoning is not easy, it needs more practice. "Students are often reluctant to speak because they are shy and are not predisposed to expressing themselves ... there is a worry about speaking badly and therefore losing face in front of their classmates" (Harmer, 2005).

However, naturally, in the debate class, some of the students are pretty brave and confident to speak out about specific topics in front of their friends, although, in the researcher's view, the students also realize that their skills still need to be practiced more and more. At the same time, the others seem ashamed. From this finding, joining the program, in the beginning, requires the students or participants to have sufficient language skills especially speaking proficiency is not true since most of them still have the inadequate capacity to speak. The teacher, as below, states this.

"We never require the student is anything, but we always remind them "be seriously joining this program" because in debate there is no guarantee for being developed without seriousness." (Data 22)

Finally, the teacher's confession concludes that eagerness and enthusiasm are essential to improving their English speaking skills.

Critical thinking is one of the main objectives of debate because it requires students to analyze facts and synthesize and evaluate arguments for problem-solving. It implies that debaters are supposed to be updated on newsworthy items. Having this capacity, students also need appropriate communication skills to convey.

"..., it is essential to know that defining motion in the debate is not only to describe the motion in general but also how it is to be clarified. The students are led to serve the actual context of life. What the reality is. ... so characterize and contextualize the motion into the reality. " (Data 25)

Moreover, coaches often give them tips and strategies to be critical during the debate in several ways.

"I usually ask them to see from "a helicopter's point of view". Watching things from above will allow us to analyze what is happening and how to stop worse things from happening." (Data 27)

Discussion

After narrating the data in the previous part, the researcher can explain that debate has specific steps to enhance learners' critical thinking and communication skills. Firstly, **motions** as the main topic in every meeting always cover controversial issues which ignite people to have different perspectives. Further, the change of motion in every meeting also encourages students to enlarge their knowledge because a new thing will assist students in knowing more. In addition, a new motion debated in every meeting hopefully can add students' vocabulary to their memories, especially for unfamiliar words, because the more words they master, are better. It is in line with (Brown & Lee 2015) that who suggest trying at all times to appeal to student's interest, to what is of genuine relevance to them, and ultimately to continue their language learning journey. The researcher wants to spark students' interest in speaking in this explanation.

Secondly, the coaches asked their students to **contextualize** the motion. It is a way how students are allowed to initiate brainstorming. However, in this part, a teacher leads students to the point debated to avoid misconceptions. A teacher must ask questions to lead students to understand the topic or motion. It is also relevant to Brown and Lee (2015) that part of oral communication competence is initiating conversation, nominating topics, asking questions, and changing the subject.

Further, those abilities are applied in the APS, like initiating conversation. It was told previously that students debating begin to state assertions or claims to respond to by oppositions; then, they are engaged in questioning-answering one another. Teaching speaking to make students have good communication skills is achieved because speaking is about pronunciation or articulation and is also essential. Patel & Jain (2008) assert that the primary functions of language are communication, self-expression, and thinking.

Further, others must know that when asking their students to define a motion, a teacher also explains each speaker's job. In the APS, it is essential for debaters because they have to work together in a team and recognize how to build, support, and limit their argumentation based on the time given. Those are well-known as **team split** and **theme line**. The students must be collaborative and solid to strengthen the two rules. Besides, because they are three-on-three debates, they also have to reply to their opposition, so interaction happens actively. It correlates with Debbie and Christine (2007), who states that debate is collaborative and interactive. It is also a creative process where speakers are almost always in the position of formulating. What they are saying is due to their listeners or a result.

Thus, based on the data and facts, it can be summarized that students' speaking skills are taught through applying the APS even though minor aspects like pronunciation are not stressed. It is caused by this intention to create independence in the students, like making dialogues or debating among them. Moreover, in leading them through APS, the students are trained to be active, cooperative, and responsive to answering or replying to questions from others. The debate coaches also consider the spectrum of learners' needs, from the language-based focus on accuracy to the message-based focus on interaction, meaning, and fluency. So, it is logical if the teachers focus on their students' communication rather than others "because consequently learners often evaluate their success in language learning as well as the effectiveness of their English course based on how much they feel they have improved in their spoken language proficiency" (Richard, 2008).

Furthermore, the data prove that the students are more trained to speak and think of an updated motion in APS. Then, the activities in the APS often make some students hard to follow, so not many students survive and like to join the debate program. In the theory of teaching

speaking principles, this phenomenon is called appropriate complexity, namely about materials and teaching methods. It correlates with students' interest or mood in learning. Students' mood in learning is often influenced by the material and teaching method. As the teacher confession, "debating is not preferred by many because it requires high proficiency in English and logic. Not many students like them.". On the other side, the students also admit, "When the first time I came to the debate class, it was not comfortable because I am afraid of being speechless when I am performing in front of my friends." Therefore, it is a must for a speaking teacher to select the best topics to discuss or to debate because those topics can either encourage or dampen students' motivation to learn. Besides, a debate teacher must build a positive atmosphere to create students' trust that the APS system is not complete to practice. It is told by (Brown & Lee, 2015) that as you design and carry out techniques, put yourself into your learners' shoes, ascertaining that complexity of the task is appropriate for your learners' proficiency level.

Later, the debate is allocated time to prepare case-building to facilitate students' readiness to practice. In the case of a building, the students discuss and exchange information for some minutes by questioning each other. This initiation always happens in every meeting. It correlates to (Brown & Lee's, 2015) statement that part of oral communication competence is initiating conversations, nominating topics, asking questions, controlling conversations, and changing the subject. Then, in the case of a building, the coaches also treat students' problems in speaking. The coaches let their students discuss a motion freely. Mistakes or errors made are not matter because the purpose of the coaches in this chance is to decrease students' confidence and anxieties. So, they are not afraid of making mistakes and will always keep their mind open to speaking. For some incidental cases, the coaches give corrections or assistance, such as urgent and appropriate feedback. This kind of teaching is in line with the previous statement that it is essential that you take advantage of your knowledge of the L2 to inject the kinds of feedback that are appropriate for the moment and that will help students notice elements of language that need work.

The last step in applying the APS is evaluating the students' performances. The coaches listened to the students' (speaking) performances when the students practiced debating. After the students practiced their debating, the coaches ended their teaching by commenting on students' faults and incorrectness. The coaches never interrupt or stop in the middle of the debate practice, although some mistakes occur.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Debating, which involves a series of complex aspects, i.e., motion, arguments, rebuttal, PoI, and adjudication, has promoted students' critical thinking skills in a particular period. Since it involves high-order thinking skills, such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, students have been trained to cultivate critical thinking and problem-solving.

Thus, overall, through the Asian Parliamentary Debate, the students' speaking skills are treated and facilitated well. The APS encourages students to be active, creative, reliable, and confident. It is active because each team member has to speak, defend their own team's justification, and rebut their rivals' arguments. Then, the students are creative because their coaches require them to speak in different scopes or views, although they are in one team, and they are asked to look for references to add their knowledge dealing with the motion or topic they are debating. Again, it is reliable because they are habituated to speak and argue based on facts and data. Lastly, they become confident because they are accustomed to speaking in front of the public. They are educated and trained to be public speakers who persuade others through their performances. Even though the minor aspects of linguistics, like pronunciation and

phonology, are not stressed, this kind of teaching does not overcome the problems of speaking stress, rhythm, and intonation. It occurs since the intention of the debate is not really to train those aspects but to create independence of the students in speaking and communication, like making dialogues, discussions, or conversations in the form of lobbying or politicization. It can be intelligent media or even a solution to facilitate the speaking ability of some with good speaking ability. However, it can be a trap for those with weak speaking skills, especially for beginners, because they may feel complicated by the complexity, such as unfamiliar motions and its system.

However, its complexity still needs consideration because the APS system may become an obstacle to succeeding the teaching speaking. Besides, the coaches' experience is also significantly affected; mastering the APS system is better for teaching. So, it is essential to see and consider all aspects, especially for the two matters above, because it becomes hard for average speaking skills, mainly for beginners.

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