

## **The Perception of First Year Non-Major English Students at Dong A University towards the Use of Debate in Improving English-Speaking Skill**

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**Abstract:** Speaking is considered a crucial skill in the process of acquiring English language proficiency, since it directly demonstrates a student's capacity to effectively employ English in communicative contexts. Various strategies can be employed to improve students' speaking proficiency. In this study, the researcher investigated the perception of first-year non-major English students at Dong A University, located in Da Nang city, Viet Nam, towards the integration of debate in their English language classroom. The study included a sample of seventy first-year non-major English students enrolled at Dong A University. The researcher employed three methods, including delivering questionnaires, conducting interviews, and engaging in observation, to carry out the study. The data collection process involved the researcher conducting observations of two instructional sessions within two distinct phases of a two-month English course specifically tailored for second-semester students in their initial year of study. A portion of the data was obtained through the distribution of a survey questionnaire, that asked participants to rate fifteen statements on a 5-point Likert scale. Furthermore, a series of unstructured interviews were carried out with a cohort of ten students who willingly volunteered to participate. In general, the majority of the students thought that the classroom debate served as a beneficial learning experience. The participants came to the conclusion that engaging in debates contributed to the enhancement of their cognitive abilities in critical thinking, as well as their proficiency in oral communication. Additionally, they acknowledged that participating in debates fostered the development of their skills in teamwork and collaboration.

**Keywords:** debate, critical thinking, oral communication, background knowledge, collaboration.

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

English has become the international language of commerce, science and technology, diplomacy, education, travel, and other fields. In the era of globalization, it is incredibly advantageous to speak a language spoken by billions of people around the world. Consequently, some organizations require their job applicants to have strong English communication skills, while some educational institutions set English as the primary requirement for applicants. However, a significant number of Vietnamese learners encounter considerable difficulties in acquiring proficiency in spoken English due to enormous disparities in the linguistic systems of the two languages. Based on the English Proficiency Index in the year 2022, it is seen that the English proficiency level of individuals in Vietnam is positioned at the 60th position among a total of 100 nations, indicating an average level of proficiency. Several scholars have identified various difficulties related to spoken communication. Ur (2000) highlighted four primary characteristics associated with the obstacles learners have in speaking. These qualities include inhibition, a dearth of ideas, limited engagement, and a tendency to rely on their native language. Inhibition is a psychological factor that poses a hindrance to students' ability to engage in verbal communication. Students often experience concerns over the impact of others' speech on them, the possibility of committing errors in the presence of their friends, receiving critical feedback, and appearing inept during verbal communication. It is well observed that they tend to engage in the cognitive process of thinking in their native language prior to translating their thoughts into the target language (Pathan, Aldersi, & Alsout, 2014; Keong, Ali, & Hameed, 2015). A study conducted by Thu Trang and Richard (2007) in Vietnam aimed to investigate the factors contributing to students' resistance towards English Language Learning. The study

identified two primary categories of issues that led to a decline in students' motivation to learn, namely internal attributions and external attributions. The internal attributions encompassed the students' attitudes towards English, their experiences of failure or lack of success, and occurrences that affected their self-esteem. On the other hand, the external attributions comprised factors connected to the teacher, the learning environment, and other external influences.

Due to difficulties in teaching English speaking skill to students, educational institutions around the globe are consistently striving to implement creative approaches to improve the English language proficiency of their students. Amidst the array of varied methodologies utilized, debate is recognized as a lively and engaging educational strategy within the realm of English as a second language instruction. The practice of debate not only enhances linguistic proficiency but also fosters the development of critical thinking, active engagement, and proficient communication. However, according to the researcher's review, the existing research on debate primarily concentrates on above-average English learners or English-majored students. This is based on the assumption of both teachers and students that only students with a high degree of English proficiency are eligible to participate in debates, while those with lower proficiency levels are often not taken into consideration. Moreover, research on this issue is not commonly undertaken in Da Nang city-a cosmopolitan city where English speaking skill is extremely important. Based on data provided by the Da Nang Department of Tourism, it is reported that during the initial quarter of the current year, the city experienced a 4.6% increase in visitor arrivals, amounting to around 1.4 million individuals. Notably, this figure includes a significant influx of foreign tourists, totaling around 392,000 individuals, which represents a substantial 62-fold rise compared to the same period in the previous year.

For the abovementioned reasons, this research embarks on an exploration of the perception of first-year non-major English students at Dong A University towards the use of debate as a means of improving their English-speaking skills. As a critical component of language education, understanding students' perceptions is paramount. It enables educators and institutions to tailor teaching methods to the unique needs and preferences of their learners, fostering more effective language acquisition.

This research is to investigate the perception of first-year non-major English students at Dong A University in Da Nang city, Vietnam towards the use of debate as an effective pedagogical approach to enhance their speaking proficiency. The overarching questions, which ought to be addressed as a prerequisite for this research, are as follows:

1. What are the perceived benefits of incorporating debate as a learning method for enhancing English-speaking proficiency among first-year non-major students at Dong A University?
2. What are the primary challenges and concerns that first-year non-major English students at Dong A university associate with the use of debate as a method for improving their English-speaking skills?
3. What suggestions and strategies do students offer for optimizing the use of debate as a pedagogical approach to enhance their English-speaking proficiency?

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Theoretical Framework - Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory**

Lev Vygotsky's theoretical framework posits that culture significantly influences the cognitive development of children, particularly in the domains of thinking and communication. He argues that an understanding of cognitive development necessitates an examination of the social environment in which it is set. He believed that social interaction plays a vital role in the cognitive growth process, namely in the cultivation of advanced cognitive capacities. According to Driscoll (2000), the social interactions that occur between a parent and their children or a teacher and students serve as the foundation for the behavior and cognitive processes in various settings. The manifestation of each function in a child's cultural development occurs in two distinct dimensions: the social level and the personal level. The stages referred to as the "interpsychological" and "intrapsychological" stages are identified by Vygotsky (1978). Guided participation, as described by Rogoff (1990), refers to the intentional collaborative engagement between a child and a supportive adult, wherein the child voluntarily cultivates cognitive skills and problem-solving capabilities. The process of internalizing or adopting socially shared experiences and their related impacts is facilitated by students engaging in collaborative projects, which in turn contributes to the acquisition of practical skills and knowledge (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996; Scott & Palincsar, 2013). The Vygotskian notion of cognitive development, characterized as the conversion of socially shared activities into internalized processes, or the process of enculturation, becomes evident through the mechanisms of directed involvement and internalization. According to Vygotsky, the process of learning serves to stimulate a range of internal developmental processes that are only activated when a child engages in interactions with individuals in their immediate surroundings, including their peers. While it is true that well-structured learning facilitates cognitive growth and initiates certain developmental processes that would not be possible without learning, it is important to note that learning should not be equated with development. Therefore, the acquisition of knowledge is an essential and all-encompassing

component of the development of culturally structured cognitive processes, particularly those that are unique to humans (Vygotsky, 1978).

According to the theory, active engagement is crucial for effective learning, as learners are encouraged to actively acquire new information and actively integrate it into their existing knowledge, rather than adopting a passive stance and just absorbing material without critical thought. The utilization of this particular form of pedagogy has experienced a notable surge in popularity within the realm of academia over the past few decades. A proficient teacher possesses the ability to discern a student's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and motivate them to transcend its boundaries. After the learner has achieved proficiency in the task through autonomous practice, the teacher progressively diminishes the level of assistance provided.

## **2.2. Debate as a Pedagogical Approach**

Debate, a longstanding practice observed throughout several societies globally, has garnered significant attention from researchers who have formulated their own distinct definitions. As stated by Harahap (1999), the term "debate" encompasses the act of structuring arguments in order to convince and engage audiences, with the objective of demonstrating the superiority of one's own arguments over those of the opposition. According to Sanonguthai (2013), debate may be described as a structured discourse where two opposing teams give arguments on a contemporary topic with the aim of persuading the audience that their respective perspectives are more advantageous than those of the opposing side. Rubiati (2010) presented empirical support for the assertions by delineating debate as an educational practice wherein students are required to articulate and uphold their respective perspectives on a certain subject matter. Similarly, Alasmari and Ahmed (2012) recognized that debate can be understood as a method of presenting arguments that use diverse logical thinking strategies to generate ideas aimed at persuading audiences and guiding them towards the resolution of the debated problem. Hence, drawing upon the aforementioned definitions, it can be inferred that a debate is an intellectual pursuit wherein two conflicting factions present and uphold their respective viewpoints through the use of compelling arguments before an audience and a panel of evaluators.

## **2.3. Benefits of Debate in Language Learning**

### **2.3.1. Improved Critical Thinking and Oral Communication Ability**

Participating in a debate serves as an effective method for fostering and sustaining skills in verbal communication and critical analysis since it places emphasis on a range of skills including understanding, analysis, interpretation, assessment, problem-solving, decision-making, and teamwork. Vygotsky (1978) claimed that engagement in debate serves as a kind of social interaction that enhances individuals' higher-order psychological functions and fosters the development of critical thinking abilities. Critical thinking is a cognitive process characterized by independent and disciplined thinking, enabling individuals to assume responsibility for their own thinking and establish suitable criteria and standards for rational, logical, and empathetic living (Paul, Elder & Bartell, 1997). The process entails the examination of a particular matter from multiple viewpoints, the critical evaluation of any underlying assumptions related to the matter, and the exploration of potential alternative solutions. In a similar vein, the practice of debate involves the process of delineating the matter at hand, assessing the trustworthiness and pertinence of the sources utilized, and discerning the various underlying presumptions inherent in the arguments presented. According to Krieger (2005), the utilization of debate within the educational setting encourages students to engage in critical thinking by expressing and defending their ideas. This process involves considering opposing arguments, identifying their weaknesses, analyzing provided information, assessing their credibility, and posing relevant questions.

The primary conclusion that can be derived is that engaging in debate helps the student's ability to critically analyze topics, while simultaneously providing an opportunity to challenge opponents and develop the skill of identifying potential weaknesses in their counterarguments. In the context of a debate, the ability to think and respond swiftly to inquiries and counterarguments is of paramount importance. This skill has the potential to assist students in strategically positioning themselves in many life circumstances, particularly when prompt decision-making is essential, and timing is critical.

### **2.3.2. Improved Teamwork and Collaboration**

Bartlett and Ferber (1998, as cited in Brownson, 2013) claim that classroom interactions between students and teachers exhibit more efficacy compared to traditional teaching approaches. Rowland (1993) posits that this particular mode of interaction is grounded on the principles of collaboration and the development of both individual and collective knowledge among teachers and students, as well as among students themselves, within an educational discourse framework (Walker & Warhurst, 2000). According to Paul (1992, 1994, as cited in Frijters et al., 2006), there exists a connection between critical thinking and discourse, as dialogue facilitates the exploration of other perspectives. The act of engaging in discussions is inherently connected to the development of collaborative learning abilities and critical thinking. Furthermore, the practice of articulating

concepts and expressing divergent perspectives in a structured debate framework fosters active participation among peers.

## **2.4. Challenges and Concerns in Using Debate as a Method**

### **2.4.1. Students' Background Knowledge**

Several studies have been conducted to examine the impact of prior knowledge on enhancing language acquisition in a broad sense, as well as the acquisition of specific language abilities and sub-skills. There is a consensus among specialists that schematic information plays a pivotal role in shaping the impact and influence of linguistic components, namely in the domain of understanding. According to Brown and Yule (1983), schemata can be defined as structured background knowledge that guides our anticipation or projection of elements in our comprehension of discourse. According to scholarly discourse, it is posited that individuals employ two fundamental rules when assimilating new knowledge in relation to their prior experiences. These principles are commonly referred to as the principle of analogy, which suggests that things will remain consistent with their previous state, and the concept of minimal change, which asserts that things will resemble their prior state to the greatest extent feasible. Gebhard (2000) posits that the correlation between our expectations and real-world experiences might be attributed to our background knowledge. The acquisition of this knowledge holds significant importance when contemplating the language processing difficulties experienced by students.

### **2.4.2. Students' Interest in Debate**

The level of students' engagement in debates and their ability to comprehend the subject matter are influenced by their own interests. Syafitri (2019) posits that interest is a favorable disposition that serves as a driving force for individuals to direct their attention towards stimuli that evoke their curiosity, resulting in a pleasurable engagement with the activity until its completion. Interest is a variable that has the potential to impact a student's academic performance. Individuals who exhibit a higher level of attention towards a particular subject matter tend to possess a corresponding level of interest in that subject matter. There exists a positive correlation between students' level of interest in learning materials and the amount of knowledge they acquire in a given subject. The engagement of students in the learning process is influenced by their personal interest. The study of Kayalar (2017) demonstrated that a keen interest in student learning had a positive impact on students' attention towards the learning process. Hence, the curiosity of students can be characterized as a crucial element within the educational process. Interest-based learning encompasses three significant dimensions, namely attention, purpose, and intensity. Hence, educators are required to offer instructional activities that engender student engagement and foster a genuine interest in the learning process, as this inclination towards learning significantly influences student academic achievements.

### **2.4.3. Students' Participation in Class**

One of the obstacles identified in this study pertained to the issue of student engagement during the implementation of the debate technique as a means of teaching speaking skills. In debates, participation is usually limited to about eight students, so excluding others from having an equal opportunity for engagement, since they were relegated to the role of passive listeners. This resulted in an inequitable distribution of opportunities among the students. According to Goodwin's (2003) research, students did not perceive the act of listening to other debate teams as an active or engaging activity. Goodwin (2003) proposed that individuals who were not actively engaged in the aforementioned debate should be afforded the opportunity to interrogate the proponents in light of the perspectives put out by the students.

### **2.4.4. Time Allocation**

The final challenge pertains to the distribution of time. This issue pertains to the temporal aspects of university schedules and the availability of classes. In a recent study conducted at Sao Do University in Vietnam, Phuong et al. (2021) found that the duration allocated for speaking activities in classroom settings significantly contributes to the limited proficiency in speaking skills among students at Sao Do University. According to the findings of Al-Hassaani and Qaid (2021), Yemeni English for a foreign language learners encountered challenges due to insufficient opportunities to engage in practical application within various authentic contexts. In the concluding section of the survey, the researchers inquired about the learners' perceptions of the adequacy of the allocated time for engaging in English discourse within the classroom setting. A total of twenty-seven learners, accounting for 45% of the sample, expressed strong agreement with the notion that the allocated time for English speaking activities in class was insufficient. Additionally, twenty-six learners, constituting 43.4% of the sample, indicated approval for this sentiment.

In brief, students encountered four primary concerns during the dialogues, including background knowledge, students' interest, participation, and time allotment. It is important to deliberate upon efficacious

resolutions in order to address the aforementioned challenges and facilitate the enhanced implementation of in-class dialogues.

## **2.5. Student Perspectives on Debate in Language Learning**

The attitudes of English as a Foreign Language students about the use of debate as a pedagogical approach for enhancing speaking abilities may exhibit variability. Individuals may perhaps have linguistic anxiousness or encounter difficulties in understanding and proficiently responding to their opponents. According to the findings of Zare and Othman (2015), throughout the process of gathering data on students' perspectives about debate technique, it was determined that certain themes were perceived as challenging and uninteresting. Additionally, it was observed that on occasion, the researchers exhibited a bias by favoring one side of the argument. The present study asserts that the subject matter can exert a substantial influence on students' inclination to engage actively in discourse. Insufficient compelling and contested subject matter may result in incomplete student engagement in the discourse. Incorporating student participation in the selection of debate topics is both advantageous and represents a novel approach. There is a higher likelihood that individuals will engage in more active participation and exhibit improved performance when they perceive that their ideas and proposals have been acknowledged and valued, particularly in the context of their involvement in topic selection.

The aforementioned research demonstrates that students perceive classroom debate as an innovative, engaging, constructive, and beneficial pedagogical method for facilitating teaching and learning. Furthermore, the participants expressed that participating in academic debate within the classroom setting facilitated the alleviation of their apprehension about public speaking, enhanced their confidence to express their opinions and perspectives, cultivated their oratory proficiency, and honed their capacity for analytical reasoning.

## **2.6. Strategies for Effective Implementation**

Several ways were proposed to enhance the implementation of discussion techniques in educational settings. In their concluding remarks, Zare, and Othman (2015) emphasized the importance of meticulously selecting debate themes, highlighting the need for careful consideration and attention in this aspect. Another suggestion pertained to the planning, execution, and evaluation of a discussion. It is imperative to furnish students with clear and precise instructions and recommendations that will aid them in effectively preparing for, conducting, and evaluating the debate prior to its commencement. This will aid learners in comprehending the aim and expectations of the exercise. As students perceived in the study of Zare and Othman in 2015, an adequate amount of time should be allocated to them before the initiation of the debate. This would allow each team to effectively coordinate their efforts, make essential preparations, thoroughly examine their arguments, and adequately prepare themselves for the upcoming classroom discussion. In the context of debating instruction, teachers play a crucial role in facilitating students' academic progress through fostering awareness. In order to facilitate a productive and intellectually stimulating discussion, it is imperative that students possess a comprehensive understanding of the topic at hand. Consequently, the teacher's endorsement will serve as the foundation for the concepts presented in the student's argument.

# **III. METHODOLOGY**

## **3.1. Research Design**

Within the domain of social sciences, the selection and implementation of research design significantly influences the technique employed and the subsequent comprehension of the research inquiries under investigation. The selection of a study design holds significant importance, particularly in the investigation of intricate phenomena that involve human participants, such as the views and experiences of students inside a particular educational setting. This study presents a Sequential Exploratory Design that integrates quantitative and qualitative research methodologies to thoroughly examine the perspectives of first-year non-major English students at Dong A University regarding the use of debate as an instructional approach to augment their English oral communication abilities.

## **3.2. Participants**

The participants of this study consist of first-year English students who are not majoring in English at Dong A University, located in Da Nang city, Vietnam. The sample population comprised of seventy first-year students who were currently enrolled in the Faculty of Primary Education and Information Technology. The proficiency level in English speaking of these students is classified as pre-intermediate.

## **3.3. Data Collection Methods**

The data gathering process was executed using three distinct methods, namely interviews, questionnaires, and observations. Throughout the duration of the two-month course, the researcher conducted observations in a

total of two lessons, specifically focusing on one introductory lesson and one final lesson. The observation checklist utilized in this study was adapted from the research conducted by Truong Trong Nhan et al. (2022), which examined the perception of students towards the use of debate in English lessons in Dong Nai Technology University, Vietnam. After that, 70 participants were asked to finish a questionnaire that includes fifteen closed-ended questions to evaluate the perceived benefits of incorporating debate as a pedagogical method to improve English-speaking skills. The students were given the web hyperlink to facilitate their access to the questionnaire. The questionnaire presents students with a concise explanation to provide a general understanding, deliberately excluding other sub-categories to avoid potential distractions and uncertainties. The questionnaire items utilized in this study were adapted from the research undertaken by Williamsbrown (2015) and Othman (2015), while also embracing the theoretical framework offered by Vygotsky. Lastly, the students were interviewed with a set of 3 questions aimed at assessing their attitudes towards the utilization of discussion as a means of evaluation.

### 3.4. Data Analysis Methods

The acquired data from questionnaire was subjected to statistical methods called Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), including the calculation of means, percentages, and tabulations. The qualitative data obtained from interviews and observations will be subjected to comprehensive analysis employing thematic analysis techniques. This methodology entails the identification of repeating themes, patterns, and nuanced insights within the responses provided by participants. The researchers will employ thematic analysis to derive meaning and importance from the qualitative data, so facilitating a comprehensive and contextual comprehension of students' perceptions.

## IV. FINDINGS

### 4.1. Perceived Benefits of Incorporating Debate into English Lessons to Enhance Students' Speaking Proficiency

The collected data of this research was based on the percentage of the students answer toward questionnaires given. The questionnaire consists of 15 items using a five-point Likert scale (Strongly Disagree=1, Disagree =2, Neutral =3, Agree =4, Strongly Agree=5). The questionnaire was spread to seventy respondents. Table 1 below provides the statements and the mean scores for each question in the questionnaire.

**Table 1. Perceived Benefits of Incorporating Debate into English Lessons to Enhance Students' Speaking Proficiency**

	M	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1. Debate technique is lots of fun.	3.26	2 (2.9%)	5 (7.1%)	36 (51.4%)	27 (38.6%)	0 (0%)
2. Debate encourages regular class participation.	3.26	0 (0%)	8 (11.4%)	36 (51.4%)	26 (37.1%)	0 (0%)
3. The debate technique is an effective and an innovative way to learn to speak English.	4.00	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	20 (28.6%)	30 (42.9%)	20 (28.6%)
4. Debate technique improves oral communication and argumentation skills.	3.61	0 (0%)	5 (7.1%)	19 (27.1%)	44 (62.9%)	2 (2.9%)
5. The debate technique improves listening note-taking skills and increased self-confidence.	3.83	0 (0%)	1 (1.4%)	20 (28.6%)	39 (55.7%)	10 (14.3%)
6. The debate technique enhances students' critical thinking skills.	4.03	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	24 (34.3%)	20 (28.6%)	26 (37.1%)
7. Classroom debate promotes teamwork skills and collaboration.	4.57	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	30 (42.9%)	40 (57.1%)
8. Classroom debate helps students gradually understand the problem-solving process.	4.13	0 (0%)	3 (4.3%)	8 (11.4%)	36 (51.4%)	23 (32.9%)
9. The debate technique helps students increase learning motivation.	3.71	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	20 (28.6%)	50 (71.4%)	0 (0%)
10. The debate technique helps students to cultivate quick and multi-dimensional logical thinking.	3.51	0 (0%)	8 (11.4%)	20 (28.6%)	40 (57.1%)	2 (2.9%)

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11. Students learn basic expressions through debates.	4.43	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	40 (57.1%)	30 (42.9%)
12. Through debates, students are provided with actual information.	3.71	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	30 (42.9%)	30 (42.9%)	10 (14.2%)
13. Classroom debate increases students' awareness of current events and global issues.	4.20	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	8 (11.4%)	40 (57.1%)	22 (31.4%)
14. Teachers should use the debate technique regularly in speaking class.	4.11	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	6 (8.6%)	50 (71.4%)	14 (20%)
15. Students can use the language they acquired in debates to give better responses in actual conversation.	4.14	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	10 (14.3%)	40 (57.1%)	20 (28.6%)

According to the total mean score (m=3.9) of the whole survey questionnaire, students demonstrated a positive perception and outlook towards the classroom debate. All the responses were divided into three main categories for analysis. These include students' positive reflections on the use of in-class debates, students' responses related to critical thinking and oral communication and students' responses related to teamwork and collaboration.

It is evident that 38.6% of the respondents who completed the questionnaire expressed agreement with the notion that debate technique is highly enjoyable. This percentage is notably lower when compared to the results obtained in the research conducted by Truong Trong Nhan et al. (2022), where around 80% of the participants indicated agreement or strong agreement with this statement. An equivalent proportion of participants held the belief that this strategy serves as a catalyst for fostering their consistent engagement in classroom activities and it serves as an efficacious and groundbreaking approach to acquiring proficiency in the English language. The influence on their learning motivation was significant, as evidenced by the agreement of nearly 75% of the participants. When questioned on the regular utilization of the debate style in speaking classes, a significant majority of 91.4% of participants expressed their concurrence. Regarding the advantages of fostering teamwork and collaboration in English lessons, a total of thirty students, constituting 42.9% of the sample, provided replies indicating agreement, and 57.1% of strongly agreed.

It can also be observed that the application of the debate technique resulted in a notable enhancement in oral communication and argumentation abilities. Specifically, out of the seventy participants who responded to the questionnaire, 46 students, accounting for 65% of the sample, expressed agreement with this assertion. Approximately 70% of participants demonstrated enhanced note-taking abilities as a result of being instructed to record the arguments presented by opposing teams during the discussion. A significant majority of students (65%) who participated in the questionnaire acknowledged a substantial improvement in their critical thinking abilities. This improvement may be attributed to the gradual comprehension of the problem-solving process by 84% of the students. Additionally, 60% of the participants stated that engaging in debates fostered the development of their rapid and multi-dimensional logical thinking skills. Furthermore, the respondents expressed their concurrence regarding the notion that they were furnished with factual information during the debates, as indicated by 57% of participants. Additionally, this approach significantly augmented their comprehension of contemporary affairs and worldwide matters, with 88% of respondents affirming this viewpoint. Based on the wealth of information acquired via engaging in debates with their peers, it is seen that around 85% of students exhibit an enhanced ability to provide more proficient responses during real-life conversational interactions.

In conjunction with the outcomes obtained from the questionnaire, classroom observation checklists are considered to be a valuable instrument for assessing student advancement. The researcher observed both the teacher' and the students' activities while the speaking through debate technique teaching and learning process was underway. The collected information from observation indicates the course has considerably boosted students' ability to convey their ideas and active participation. In the context of a debate, it is anticipated that students will engage in collaborative efforts rather than pursuing individual work. The last noteworthy aspect would be the input provided from one group to the others. Certain groups engaged in the process of envisioning and scrutinizing the perspectives held by the opposing group. They sought to document the supporting concepts put forward by the opposing group, thereby enhancing their ability to mount a more robust defense of their own beliefs.

In addition, the perceived benefits of incorporating debate into English classes were also illustrated in the interview when the students were asked "What do you find the most rewarding parts when debate is applied in your English classes?" There are two main benefits that ten students shared in the interview. First, they were given the chance to practice language items (vocabulary, grammar functions etc.). "I barely speak in my first year due to my low level of English" (18). First-year non-major English students mainly focus on reading and

listening skills. At Dong A University, there are not any subjects designed to improve students' writing skill. Meanwhile, there is one subject called Communication English from level 1 to level 4 which helps enhance students' speaking competence. However, the frequency of speaking activities seems to be not enough to affect students' speaking abilities. Another benefit of applying debate is to develop students' ability to speak fluently and interactively. A number of the students' comments are presented below.

*"We usually use Vietnamese with our classmates even in English lesson, but when the teacher asked us to debate, we had to use English all the time, which improve our fluency in speaking and the natural interaction among us"* (15).

*"At first, I was a little bit nervous hearing the word debate. I have never had any experience in debating early at school. However, after going through the first debate, I had gained my confidence in speaking in front of others and expressing my views clearly."* (17)

Data from questionnaire, interview and observation claimed some main benefits of incorporating debate into English lessons at Dong A University as follows:

- **Improved critical thinking:** The results of the study showed that students apply all related skills when taking part in a debate which are understanding the topic, analyzing the argument of the opposing team to defend their own ideas, interpreting their argument logically to persuade others and trying to solve the problems given by the teacher. The students' perception of the advantages of increased social connection during discussions is in line with Vygotsky's focus on the significance of social interaction in cognitive growth. It was discovered that engaging in group discussions and defending one's viewpoints contributes to a more efficient internalization of English-speaking skills. In a similar vein, Krieger (2005) reached the conclusion that the implementation of debate within English-language classrooms fosters a propensity among students to engage in critical expression and defense of their ideas. This inclination is demonstrated through the incorporation of several elements, including the consideration of opposing arguments and the identification of their weaknesses, the analytical examination of provided information and the assessment of its validity, and the utilization of questioning as a means of inquiry, among other factors. Hall (2011) and Darby (2007) supposed that debate can enhance learner motivation, facilitate the expression of ideas, and promote the development of higher-order thinking skills which replaced passive reception normally seen in many conventional classrooms.
- **Improved oral communication:** The findings of the study additionally suggested that students perceive classroom debate as a novel, engaging, productive, and beneficial teaching method for instruction and knowledge acquisition. The process of classifying, categorizing, organizing, and condensing are significantly enhanced by the preparation process essential in debate.
- **Improved teamwork skills:** It was observed that students reported a substantial enhancement in their abilities to work as a team and collaborate, a finding that aligns with earlier research. According to Rowland's (1993) study, the interaction observed during debates is characterized by the ideals of collaboration and the development of both individual and collective knowledge. This interaction takes place between the teacher and student, as well as among the students themselves, within the context of educational discussion. The findings are directly in line with findings of Barlett and Ferber (1998) and Rowland (1993) where the interactions taking place inside classrooms between teachers and students and between students and students witnessed a higher level of efficacy compared to conventional teaching methods.
- **Improved participation or engagement:** The results of the study also revealed that students saw debate as a pedagogical approach that functions within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), wherein they receive support and direction from both their peers and instructors. It was posited that active participation in discussions, facilitated by both peers and instructors, contributes to the enhancement of students' English-speaking proficiency. In relation to the cultural background, students have expressed their perception that engaging in debates provides them with a valuable opportunity to interact with the English language and culture. This statement is consistent with Vygotsky's concept that learning takes place within a cultural framework, and engaging in debates can offer students an opportunity to deeply engage with the English language and culture.

#### **4.2. Primary Challenges and Concerns of Students When Participating in Debates**

The researcher applied qualitative methods to investigate primary challenges and concerns faced by first-year non-major English students or answer the second research question, in which interview and observation are the tools used to help the researcher to gather all the useful information.

When questioned about the problems and concerns associated with the implementation of debate in English language teaching and learning in the interview, individual students offer varying responses. However, several recurring themes have been identified.



**Table 5. Students' Problems and Concerns When Participating in Debates**

<b>Themes generated</b>	<b>Specific problems</b>
<b>Personal problem</b>	Nervousness Lack of confidence Hesitation Anxiety Fear of criticism/ insult from the peer Fear of committing mistake
<b>Linguistic problem</b>	Problem in choosing an appropriate word Problem in fluency Problem in pronunciation Native language comes first in mind
<b>Environmental problems</b>	Teaching method Classroom interaction Institutional system

In response to the initial interview question “*What do you find the most challenging parts when participating debate activity in English lessons?*”, students participating in the interview expressed the difficulties they encountered when engaging in speaking classes that incorporate the debate technique. One primary challenge lies in the limited accessibility of vocabulary to articulate emotions. Individuals lack sufficient vocabulary to effectively communicate their intended message to others. This hindered their ability to present substantial evidence in support of their perspectives and counter the arguments put out by the other faction. The results of the study also indicated that students expressed apprehension regarding disparities in language proficiency among participants, which may impede the efficacy of communication during discussions. Meanwhile, the degree of adaptability in verbal communication in the English language may challenge them. According to student feedback, the hesitation in responding to ideas presented by the opposing group can be attributed to the cognitive process of initially formulating thoughts in their native language before translating them into English. Also, this phenomenon can be attributed to the limited and ineffective allocation of time dedicated to the improvement of students' speaking skills, both within the school environment and in their personal study habits. A significant percentage of individuals who participated in the interview expressed concerns over their pronunciation. Despite having completed a pronunciation course during the initial semester of their first academic year, individuals continue to encounter significant challenges in their oral communication skills. When students articulate lengthy sentences that are not comprehensible to others, their self-assurance diminishes, leading to a sense of discouragement that hinders their willingness to participate in subsequent conversational exchanges. These findings are in accordance with findings reported by Sri et al. (2018), Goodwin (2003) and Temple (1997) who concluded that debate limited participation to only debaters and dominant students inside the debating group. Phuong et al. (2021); Hassaani and Qaid (2021) also confirmed that duration allocated for speaking activities in classroom settings was attributed to low English efficiency among students.

Observations confirmed students' concerns that they mentioned in the interview. Specifically, the remaining members of the class merely assumed the role of passive observers during the argument, diligently recording their observations. According to Vygotsky's theoretical framework, the presence of more competent peers is crucial for optimal learning outcomes. However, it is important to acknowledge that substantial disparities in language proficiency between individuals may be a potential obstacle in this interactive process.

Lastly, the fear of speaking English publicly among students were attributed to various psychological issues, which include the fear of making mistakes, the fear of being misunderstood, and the fear of making grammatical errors. Various factors such as shyness, nervousness, lack of confidence, and motivation impeded students' active engagement in English class discussions. Students' hesitation is further exacerbated by feelings of embarrassment regarding pronunciation and the challenges they face in expressing themselves as proficiently as they would in their native language. The students brought attention to cultural barriers or misunderstandings that they experienced throughout the course of the debates, underscoring the significance of cultural context in the process of learning. Vygotsky's theory emphasizes the influence of cultural variables on cognitive development, and these considerations are consistent with this viewpoint.

In summary, teachers and educators must take into account some primary concerns to better apply the debate technique to English classrooms. These are students' personal problems, their English proficiency, and the environment in which the debate technique is incorporated.

#### **4.3. Suggestions and Strategies to Optimize the Use of Debate as a Pedagogical Approach to Enhance English-speaking Proficiency**

The last research question “*What suggestions and strategies do students offer for optimizing the use of debate as a pedagogical approach to enhance their English-speaking proficiency?*” was answered by using data gained from the third interview question. This question in the interview tried to investigate students’ suggestions and proposed strategies so that the debate technique can be better applied in English classrooms. When being asked “*In your opinion, what should teachers do to optimizing the use of debate as a pedagogical approach to enhance English-speaking proficiency?*”, students listed some suggestions that they think can help them have a better participation in debating activities. According to Interviewee 2, they need more time to prepare for the debate. First-year non-major English students at Dong A university have quite low levels of English, so the preparation stage is an extremely crucial factor which decides the effectiveness of the technique. In this stage, they can prepare ideas, vocabulary, and separate ways to defend their viewpoints. The result demonstrated match the proposed solution in the study of Zare and Othman (2015) since they suggested that adequate time should be given to prepare the debate topic prior to the debate.

Some students shared the same opinion that they would like to receive support prior and during their debates and detailed feedback about their performance from teachers for later improvement. They expressed the belief that in the absence of appropriate supervision, engaging in discussions can present significant difficulties. This sentiment aligns with Vygotsky's notion of scaffolding, which posits that learners necessitate support in order to successfully complete tasks within their zone of proximal development (ZPD). One further proposal put up by students entailed the implementation of scaffolding strategies, including the provision of instructional instructions, exemplar debates, and peer evaluations, in order to facilitate their learning process during debate activities. These tactics are in accordance with Vygotsky's notion of scaffolding, which serves as a method to assist learners within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

The topic of the debate directly impacts the interests of students in English lessons. “*In my opinion, to improve the debate in classroom, the teacher should choose an interesting topic that is actually very familiar to us so that we can get more involved in the debates and generate more ideas about the topic to debate.*” (I10). They come from different faculties with distinct majors, so they want the topic to be related to what they are learning and what they will do in the future. This means the topic of debate should have more practical values to the debaters. Zare and Othman (2015) emphasized the importance of choosing appropriate debating topics for students since it directly affects students’ interests in classrooms. In addition, students provided recommendations pertaining to the promotion of cultural awareness and inclusivity during discussion sessions. This observation is consistent with Vygotsky's emphasis on the cultural context, as students advocated for ways that recognize and honor the varied cultural origins during their arguments. Discussions frequently centered on current, culturally significant subjects. Therefore, it is plausible that students may perceive their language acquisition process as encompassing not only linguistic proficiency, but also an enhanced cultural competence and a deeper understanding of contemporary events and global matters. Through active participation in debates, students are more likely to encounter and acquire a broader spectrum of terminology compared to a conventional classroom environment.

#### **4.4. Conclusion**

Overall, the findings of the study are in accordance with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory since it places significant emphasis on the influence of social interaction and cultural background on the processes of cognitive growth and learning.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

### **5.1. Conclusion**

Based on the aforementioned data, it can be inferred that the utilization of debate has contributed to the improvement of students' oral communication skills. By employing this approach in the context of a speaking class, the student experienced an enhancement in self-confidence and exhibited increased levels of engagement and critical thinking. Moreover, it is worth noting that students at lower proficiency levels often exhibit limited involvement in oral communication activities. In light of this, employing the debate technique as an instructional approach can effectively stimulate their active participation and foster their willingness to articulate their viewpoints. In spite of the anticipated advantages associated with incorporating debate into speaking sessions, it is imperative for teachers and educators to give due consideration to the obstacles and concerns expressed by students at Dong A University regarding the use of debate as a means of enhancing their English-speaking proficiency. The concerns encompass a range of issues, including personal, linguistic, and environmental problems. The students provided recommendations pertaining to the teacher's instructional techniques, the selection of debate topics, and improved preparation for each debate, all of which have the potential to enhance the efficacy of school debates. Given the unanimous consensus among students on the influential role of

subjects on student engagement and motivation, it is imperative to allocate significant attention to the selection of topics. Furthermore, it is imperative that students are provided with an adequate amount of time to adequately prepare.

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