

# Think, Speak, Challenge: Debate as a Catalyst for Critical Thinking in EFL Classroom

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## Abstract

*This study investigates the impact of debate-based learning on the development of critical thinking, argumentative skills, student engagement, and metacognitive growth among university students in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. Motivated by the increasing demand for higher-order thinking skills in global education, this research addresses the gap in empirical studies integrating structured debate into English language instruction in class of Debate class in Universitas Muhammadiyah Semarang. Employing a descriptive qualitative method, the study involved 35 intermediate-level EFL students enrolled in a debate class at a Universitas Muhammadiyah Semarang. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring they had prior experience with basic argumentation tasks and were willing to engage in structured debate activities. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire covering aspects of argumentation, engagement, reflective thinking, and learning autonomy. Descriptive statistical analysis was used to interpret the results. The findings indicate that debate activities significantly enhanced students' argumentative abilities, with 78% showing improvement in logical argument structure and 73% in evidence-based reasoning. Engagement levels were also high, with 82% reporting active behavioral participation and 75% expressing emotional motivation. In terms of metacognitive growth, 74% of students reported improved self-evaluation, while 71% became more aware of their own thinking processes. Additionally, debate encouraged reflective revision of ideas and transfer of critical thinking strategies across learning contexts. These results suggest that debate is a powerful pedagogical tool to foster active learning, critical reflection, and learner autonomy in EFL classrooms. The study contributes to the current literature by providing empirical support for integrating debate as a method to enhance both linguistic and cognitive dimensions of language education. Further research is recommended to explore longitudinal effects and implementation across disciplines.*

**Keywords:** Think, Speak, Challenge, Debate, EFL Classroom

## 1. INTRODUCTION

One of indicators of modern era is the demanding of soft skills required by young generation such as 4 Cs skills. It is essential skills which consist of Critical Thinking, Creativity, Collaboration, and Communication.

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These skills assist learners to be great students and prepare students to be ready to welcome and compete each other in workplaces in the future. In speaking class, the four skills are interconnected each other. Erdogan (2019) explains that communication and critical thinking skills help students to evaluate information, synthesize it, and produce rational decision to take action. By having high critical thinking, it enables students to have interaction. In addition, when someone is speaking, he/she should understand things he/she wants to say in order to enable them to explain something in detail using their own understanding. In fact, someone who have high critical thinking can speak anything without hesitation and it will surely affect the fluency aspect that is usually concerned as fluent speaker. Critical thinking has become one of the core competencies that students must possess, especially in 21st-century education. According to UNESCO and the World Economic Forum, possessing critical thinking is very prominent because it serves as the top skills needed in today's digital and globalized era. However, the reality in the field shows that many higher education students, especially in Indonesia, still struggle to develop and apply critical thinking skills actively and sustainably—both in academic settings and real-life contexts. All of the skills in English, both productive and receptive, require critical thinking skills to comprehend. Pollard (2008) states that speaking requires sufficient exposure to English. In fact, in many English classes' situation, the atmosphere of English is not well-formed.

This issue is exacerbated by learning approaches that remain predominantly teacher-centered and rote-based, rather than emphasizing analysis and meaningful understanding. In many English language classrooms, for instance, instruction still focuses heavily on technical linguistic aspects such as grammar and vocabulary, while critical thinking is largely overlooked. As a result, students tend to be passive, hesitant to ask questions, and often struggle to construct logical and structured arguments.

Numerous studies have been conducted to foster critical thinking through active learning methods. According to Paul & Elder (2014), debate is an effective strategy that encourages learners to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information critically. Research by Alasmari & Ahmed (2013) also indicates that the use of debate in English language teaching significantly enhances students' analytical abilities, argumentation skills, and logical reasoning. In the Southeast Asian context, a study by Nguyen (2020) in Vietnam demonstrated that debate helps students build self-confidence and develop reflective thinking abilities. The problems identified in the class of debate in English Education of Universitas Muhammadiyah Semarang. They have difficulties in creating good argumentation due to the low level of critical thinking.

Nevertheless, studies on the integration of critical thinking and debate within English language teaching in Indonesia remain limited, particularly in non-linguistic or interdisciplinary programs. Most existing research is still descriptive in nature and has yet to explore experimental or empirical approaches that assess the effectiveness of debate as a learning strategy in enhancing critical thinking within the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context. Furthermore, few studies holistically link critical thinking with oral communication performance. The urgency of this research lies in the growing need to reform English language instruction to make it more contextual, relevant, and responsive to global challenges. By integrating debate as a teaching strategy, students are expected to not only develop communicative competence in English but also acquire sharp, logical, and ethical critical thinking skills. This is crucial for producing graduates who are not only linguistically proficient but also intellectually agile and globally minded.

Current pedagogical trends increasingly emphasize the importance of active, student-centered learning in fostering higher-order thinking skills. Debate, as an interactive and intellectually stimulating activity, aligns well with modern educational paradigms such as constructivism and inquiry-based learning. While some institutions have begun to adopt debate-based instruction, there is still a lack of structured implementation and comprehensive assessment frameworks that integrate both language proficiency and critical thinking development. This research is grounded in Bloom's revised taxonomy and the Socratic approach to questioning, which prioritize analytical reasoning, evaluation, and argument construction. Debate offers a practical platform for students to demonstrate these cognitive processes in real-time. Theoretical contributions from educational psychology and applied linguistics also support the view that structured oral argumentation promotes deeper engagement and knowledge retention.

The novelty of this research lies in its attempt to empirically explore how debate activities support the development of argumentation skills in English and to identify effective instructional strategies for integrating debate into English language teaching. Unlike prior studies that focused solely on either language development or critical thinking in isolation, this study proposes an integrated framework that assesses both dimensions concurrently through debate performance. Conducted in an Indonesian university, this study seeks to capture both student and teacher perspectives regarding the use of debate in English classrooms. It also aims to explore the challenges, perceptions, and pedagogical outcomes of implementing debate-based instruction in a culturally and linguistically diverse learning environment. This study aims to analyze how debate supports the development of argumentation in English and explore effective strategies for integrating debate into English language instruction to promote active learning, engagement, and reflective thinking.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Several researches about critical thinking and language proficiency have been conducted. English proficiency is related to the ability of critical thinking. Sanavi and Tarigath (2014) conducted quasi-experimental research that investigate the impact of training critical thinking abilities on the speaking competency. The study employed experimental and the control group to get the meaning. Then, the result indicated that teaching critical thinking has significant positive impact to speaking proficiency of EFL learners. In line with previous study, Nikoopour, Amini Farsani, and Nasiri (2011) discovered a link between Iranian language learning methodologies and their cognitive style. This favorable relationship could be a replication of many earlier research on the impact of critical thinking on language learners' ultimate success in the difficult process of foreign language learning.

Alagozlu (2007) examined critical thinking of students in Turkey as well as students' perspective. The result of the study indicated that students instead of practicing critical thinking before give reasoning skill, students tend to memorize everything they have read instead. In addition, she thought this situation is in line with the traditional system of education that focus more on the cognitive or gaining knowledge without considering about critical thinking in doing so. The study then proposed a recommendation that critical thinking should be owned by students in the teaching and learning process. In addition, Malmir and Shoorcheh (2012) conducted study about the impact of critical thinking on learners' oral performance in Iran. The study indicated that critical thinking had a significant impact on enhancing learners' oral performance. Furthermore, the study also showed that critical-thinking strategies

assisted students to be more engaged in the teaching learning process by listening to lecturers and friends' and finally produce the utterance.

Debate has been proved as an educational strategy that enhance critical thinking skills (Huber, 2006). In line with the opinion, Freely (2009) stated that debate is the process of inquiry, giving judgement of a proposition. Debate can be also be implemented as the form of the activity to develop students critical thinking and communication skill (Snider, 2006). Dealing with the current issue that happen in the world, students are expected to view with their perspective by expressing their argumentation. In the academic context, Nisbett (2003) states that debate might be assigned as the media to sharpen the analytical thinking.

The development of critical thinking has become one of the primary goals in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL). According to Ennis (1993), critical thinking involves the ability to analyze, evaluate, and draw logical and reflective conclusions from information. In the context of language learning, this skill is essential as it enables students not only to comprehend texts literally but also to interpret meaning, evaluate arguments, and express opinions rationally. This aligns with the view of Paul & Elder (2008), who emphasize that language instruction should not only focus on linguistic structures but also on cultivating higher-order thinking skills.

Debate has long been recognized as an effective pedagogical strategy for promoting critical thinking in language classrooms. Kennedy (2007) argues that debate compels students to consider multiple perspectives, construct logical arguments, and respond to opposing views in a structured manner. A study by Zare and Othman (2013) found that EFL students who actively participated in debate activities showed significant improvements in critical thinking abilities and speaking confidence. Debates also create a dynamic learning environment in which students are encouraged to think actively, listen attentively, and respond quickly and relevantly.

In addition to fostering critical thinking, debate supports the development of English language skills, particularly in speaking, listening, and contextual grammar. Research by Alasmari & Ahmed (2013) demonstrates that participation in debates promotes the use of academic vocabulary, accurate grammar, and more natural intonation and expression. Thus, debate can serve as an ideal medium for integrating language skill development with critical thinking enhancement.

Nevertheless, the implementation of debate in EFL classrooms requires careful planning and adequate teacher training. Several studies (e.g., Fahim & Rahimi, 2009) note that without proper guidance, debate sessions can devolve into shallow discussions with limited educational value. Therefore, structured approaches—such as academic debates or Oxford-style debates—can help maximize the pedagogical potential of this method. With appropriate instructional design, debate not only enhances language competence but also shapes learners into critical thinkers capable of engaging in rational and ethical argumentation.

### 3. METHODS

This study employed a **descriptive qualitative research design** to explore how debate activities support the development of argumentation skills in English and to identify effective instructional strategies for integrating debate into English language

teaching. This approach was chosen to provide in-depth insights into students' experiences, perceptions, and behaviors in a natural classroom setting. The research focused on observing patterns of interaction, language use, and critical engagement during debate activities. The participants consisted of **35 intermediate-level EFL students** enrolled in a debate class at a Universitas Muhammadiyah Semarang. Participants were selected through **purposive sampling**, ensuring they had prior experience with basic argumentation tasks and were willing to engage in structured debate activities. Additionally, the English instructor of the class participated as a supporting informant to provide insights into pedagogical strategies and classroom dynamics. Data were collected through **questionnaires**.

The study was conducted over a **six-week period** during the regular academic semester. Each week, students engaged in a 90-minute debate session integrated into the speaking class. Debate topics were aligned with students' interests and course themes, such as education, technology, culture, and environment. The instructor used structured formats (e.g., British Parliamentary) to ensure balance and clarity in argumentation. After each session, students submitted their reflective journals, and observations were documented by the researcher. Interviews were conducted in the final week and audio-recorded with participants' consent.

The collected data were analyzed using **thematic analysis**. All observation notes, journal entries, and interview transcripts were coded and categorized into emerging themes related to (1) development of argumentation in English, (2) student engagement and active learning, and (3) reflective thinking. To ensure trustworthiness, **triangulation** of data sources (observations, journals, interviews) was applied, and member-checking was conducted with selected participants to confirm the interpretation of key themes.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study, organized around three key themes that emerged from the classroom observations, student reflective journals, and interviews: (1) development of argumentation, (2) student engagement and active learning through debate, and (3) the role of reflection in enhancing critical thinking. Each theme is discussed in relation to relevant literature.

### 4.1 Development of Argumentation

The data revealed that debate activities significantly supported students' ability to construct, express, and defend arguments in English. Through repeated engagement in structured debates, students showed improvement in organizing their thoughts, using transitional language, and employing persuasive strategies such as evidence, examples, and rhetorical questions. Many students initially relied on simple, direct statements but gradually began to use more complex argument structures such as cause-effect reasoning and counterarguments.

One student reflected:

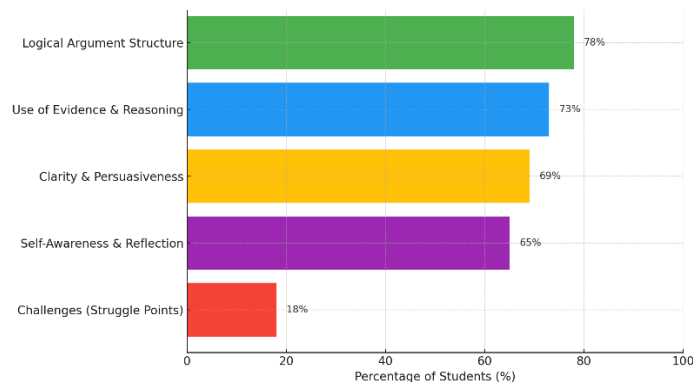
*"At first I just said my opinion, but after a few debates, I started thinking about how to support it with examples or facts."*

This finding aligns with Zare and Othman (2013), who argue that debate helps students internalize academic discourse structures and strengthens their ability to



express abstract ideas in a second language. Moreover, students demonstrated increased confidence in using English in real-time, suggesting that debate functions not only as a critical thinking tool but also as a communicative language practice.

**Figure 1**  
Development of Argumentative Skills



Based on the result of the questionnaire revealed significant insight to the development of the students' argumentation skills using debate in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. The analysis focused on three major dimension such as: (1) students' ability to construct logical arguments, (2) the use of evidence and reasoning, and (3) improvements in verbal expression and persuasion.

A majority of respondents (78%) agreed or strongly agreed that participation in debate activities helped them structure their arguments more logically. Students reported a better understanding of how to present claims supported by reasoning and avoid fallacies such as circular arguments or unsupported generalizations. This suggests that the debate framework encouraged cognitive discipline in organizing ideas sequentially. Meanwhile, Approximately 73% of students indicated that they became more aware of the importance of using credible evidence to support their claims. They also reported being more critical of their own reasoning and that of others. The qualitative responses further highlighted that students learned to differentiate between opinion and fact, and became more selective in choosing relevant data or examples. This aligns with the principles of critical thinking as defined by Paul and Elder (2014), where evaluation of evidence is a central component.

In addition, the questionnaire showed that 69% of students experienced improvements in their verbal expression and persuasive strategies. They learned to use rhetorical questions, hedging, and tone modulation to strengthen their arguments. Several open-ended responses emphasized that through repeated debate practice, students gained confidence in speaking fluently and with purpose, which contributed to more convincing delivery. Interestingly, 65% of respondents noted that engaging in debate helped them reflect on how their arguments were perceived by others. This

metacognitive development is crucial for argumentative skill, as it fosters the ability to anticipate counterarguments and adjust discourse accordingly. The peer feedback component also played a role in highlighting areas for improvement.

Despite the progress, some students (around 18%) still struggled with finding appropriate vocabulary or articulating complex ideas under time pressure. Others mentioned difficulty in maintaining logical consistency throughout an argument. This highlights the need for continuous scaffolding, vocabulary support, and explicit instruction in argument structures

#### 4.2 Student Engagement and Active Learning

Observation data and student reflections consistently showed that debate fostered a high level of **engagement**. Students actively prepared their arguments, collaborated in teams, and responded attentively to opposing views. Unlike traditional class discussions, debates generated a strong sense of purpose and competition, which motivated students to be more prepared and involved. The instructor noted:

*"Even the quieter students showed more willingness to speak when they had a role and responsibility in the debate team."*

This supports the findings of Kennedy (2007) and Alasmari & Ahmed (2013), who emphasized that debate encourages active learning by creating an interactive environment where learners are intellectually and emotionally invested. Additionally, the variety of debate formats (e.g., British Parliamentary Debate, Australasian Debate) helped accommodate different learning preferences and maintain student interest throughout the sessions.

The questionnaire responses provide meaningful insights into students' levels of engagement and their participation in active learning processes, especially in the context of debate-based instruction in English language classrooms. The analysis focuses on four key dimensions: (1) behavioral engagement, (2) emotional engagement, (3) cognitive involvement, and (4) learner autonomy.

#### 1. Behavioral Engagement

According to the data, 82% of students agreed or strongly agreed that debate activities encouraged them to actively participate in classroom tasks. They reported increased attentiveness, more frequent contributions during discussions, and a higher rate of task completion. This indicates that the debate structure, which requires preparation and team collaboration, motivates students to be behaviorally involved.

#### 2. Emotional Engagement

Around 75% of respondents indicated that they felt more motivated, interested, and challenged when participating in debate-based lessons compared to conventional lecture-based sessions. Open-ended comments suggest that the competitive yet collaborative nature of debate made the classroom more dynamic and enjoyable,

reducing feelings of boredom and passivity. This highlights debate's potential to enhance emotional investment in the learning process.

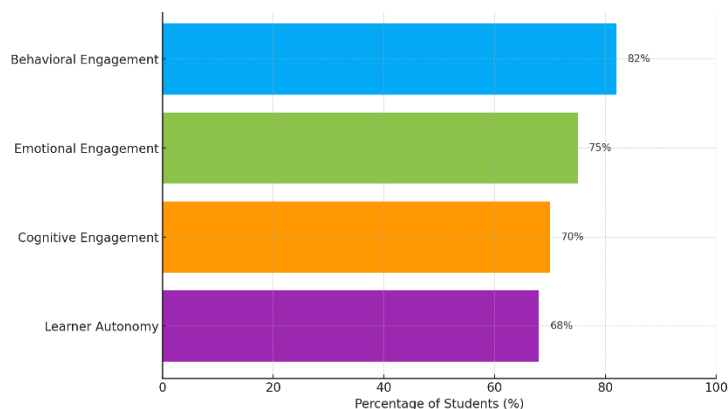
### 3. Cognitive Engagement and Critical Reflection

Approximately 70% of students claimed that debate required them to think more deeply about the content, structure their ideas carefully, and evaluate opposing viewpoints. This form of engagement goes beyond surface-level understanding, indicating that students were cognitively involved in analyzing, synthesizing, and constructing meaning-core elements of active learning.

### 4. Learner Autonomy and Responsibility

A total of 68% of students reported feeling a greater sense of responsibility for their own learning. Debate activities encouraged them to prepare independently, conduct research, and contribute meaningfully to group success.

**Figure 2**  
Student Engagement and Active Learning

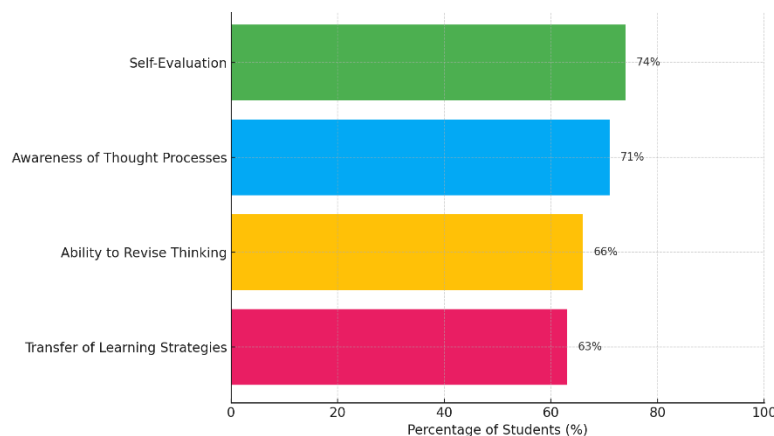


### 4.3 Reflective Thinking and Metacognitive Growth

A notable outcome of the reflective journals and interviews was the development of **metacognitive awareness**. Many students reported that preparing for and participating in debates required them to think critically not only about the topic but also about the strategies they used to persuade and respond. This reflection contributed to a deeper understanding of how arguments are built and how language influences meaning.

**Figure 3**  
Reflective Thinking and Metacognitive Growth





The questionnaire responses offer valuable insights into students' development of reflective thinking and metacognitive awareness—two essential components for effective lifelong learning, especially in a language education context involving critical and argumentative tasks such as debate. The analysis is organized into four dimensions: (1) self-evaluation, (2) awareness of thought processes, (3) ability to revise thinking, and (4) transfer of strategies as written in the chart above.

A substantial proportion of students (74%) reported that they became more aware of their own strengths and weaknesses in constructing arguments and delivering ideas. Through structured peer and self-assessments during debate sessions, students reflected more deeply on the quality of their reasoning, language usage, and delivery style. This marks an important shift from passive knowledge reception to active self-monitoring. While, around 71% of students agreed that the process of preparing for and participating in debates helped them become more conscious of how they think, reason, and organize ideas. Students noted that they began planning more deliberately, breaking down complex topics, and questioning their own assumptions. This aligns with key indicators of metacognitive growth as defined in educational psychology literature. In addition, roughly 66% of respondents indicated that feedback and opposition arguments during debates pushed them to reconsider and restructure their viewpoints. The practice of adjusting perspectives based on evidence and reasoning indicates that students were not only thinking but also rethinking—a key marker of higher-level reflective processes.

Finally, a total of 63% of students claimed that the thinking strategies they developed through debate, such as argument mapping, self-questioning, and critical note-taking were applicable to other subjects and learning contexts. This suggests that students were able to transfer their metacognitive strategies beyond English classes, signaling robust growth in learning autonomy and strategy regulation.

One journal entry stated:

*"I realized I didn't just learn English—I learned how to think and explain better. I started to notice the strengths and weaknesses in arguments, including my own."*

This observation echoes the work of Paul & Elder (2008), who argued that reflection is essential for the development of critical thinking. When students reflect

on their reasoning processes and communicative strategies, they become more intentional and effective thinkers and speakers.

The findings suggest that debate serves as a powerful tool for supporting argumentation development in English, especially when integrated through structured formats and guided reflection. It also promotes student-centered learning by increasing engagement, encouraging peer interaction, and creating meaningful opportunities for language use. Furthermore, the incorporation of reflective practices helps students internalize critical thinking processes, making their learning more conscious and transferable.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study highlights that integrating debate activities in English language instruction effectively supports the development of students' argumentation skills. Through structured debate formats, students not only enhance their ability to construct and articulate logical arguments in English but also gain confidence in using the language for real-time communication. Debate fosters active learning by increasing student engagement, encouraging collaboration, and creating a dynamic classroom environment where learners are motivated to participate.

Moreover, the inclusion of reflective practices alongside debate promotes deeper critical thinking and metacognitive awareness, enabling students to evaluate their reasoning and communicative strategies consciously. These findings suggest that debate, when thoughtfully implemented, can serve as a multifaceted pedagogical tool that bridges language skills development and higher-order thinking.

For English language educators, this study underscores the importance of incorporating debate with clear structures and guided reflection to maximize its benefits. Future research could explore long-term impacts of debate on language proficiency and critical thinking across different learner populations and educational contexts.

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