

How Debates Improve Communication Skills in Business: EFL Students' Perspectives

Ahlam Said Al-Rawahi

Senior Instructor, Sultan Qaboos University

Abstract— There is a growing need for English language students to practice the essential skills of communication inside and outside the EFL classroom, precisely business students who are demanded to master communication skills by the end of their university study years. There is a gap in recent research on the topic of the cognitive and affective communication benefits of debates in business EFL classes which this paper is trying to fill. For the purpose of examining business EFL students' perspectives on the effectiveness of using debates in developing their communication skills, a survey instrument was designed to collect data. The survey was sent by email. 40 students filled in the survey and participation was voluntary. The survey was conducted within Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) context. The results showed promising advantages of this pedagogical tool and gave insight into the underlying communicative potential that can go unnoticed in the day-to-day teaching and learning routine, such as critical thinking skills, negotiation and creativity.

Keywords— debates, EFL, communication skills, business, university

I. INTRODUCTION

There is a growing need for English language students to practice the essential skills of communication inside and outside the EFL classroom, precisely business students who are demanded to master communication skills by the end of their university study years. To prepare EFL business students for the competitive nature of the business world while maintaining an ethical attitude (Iman, 2017), EFL teachers are required to be creative in designing learning experiences that not only enrich the students' knowledge but also sharpen their linguistic and communicative skills (Alasmarin & Ahmed, 2013).

Mubaraq (2016) states that the main goal of speaking is communication. According to the ideas of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), the ability to communicate effectively is called "communicative competence." This means that language learners should be able to interact with others and understand each other, rather than just memorize conversations or do grammar tests. CLT emphasizes that language is about sharing meaning and that it should involve teamwork in understanding each other. It requires skills not just in grammar, but also in using language in a practical way. This can be greatly accomplished through a highly communicative classroom activity which is debates.

Debates can not only improve the linguistic and communicative competence of the students, but also build self-confidence along the way (Delemare & Lipsham, 2024). In a world suffering from mental health problems and emotional turmoil, debates foster growth

and self-expression by having students take a stance and defend it logically and scientifically. It takes them on a journey initiated by a struggle to articulate their opinions and/or confidently bring forth their arguments to being competent and assertive in the end.

There is a gap in recent research on the topic of the cognitive and affective benefits of debates in business EFL classes which this paper is trying to fill. A survey was distributed to gain perspective on students' perceptions of those benefits. The research questions that this paper tries to answer are:

1. What cognitive communication skills do business EFL students believe debates have fostered in them?
2. From their perspective, what affective aspects have debates nurtured in those students?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. History

Debates first took place in ancient Greece and India where famous philosophers such as Socrates challenged the common assumptions the society held at that time (Hilborn, 2022). The debates between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas in 1858 inspired modern political debating, which is now practiced in election cycles globally. Interestingly, the victory of John Kennedy against his opponent was due to his charisma and personality which emphasized the power of body language and emotional intelligence in influencing the audience (Hilborn, 2022).

B. Definition

Debates can be defined as formal tools to problematize the educational process where students must get creative at defending their stance in the argument following firm regulations within a specific time frame (Khidirova & Nashirova, 2021).

This requires the students to be able to organize their thoughts and behave in a timely yet respectful manner to the counter opinions. Normally, a debate requires to form 2 teams of opposing stances, a judge (normally the teacher) and a timekeeper (normally the teacher as well).

C. Debates as a Pedagogical Tool

Debates are pedagogical tools that can enhance the main 4 skills of the English language, namely Speaking, Listening, Writing and Reading (Khidirova & Nashirova, 2021; Cinganotto, 2019).

These 4 skills are the backbone of any communication process students encounter in their lives. Evidence suggests that debates boost students' fluency, vocabulary and grammar, i.e. the better the vocabulary and grammar, the more fluent the student (Cinganotto, 2019).

Add to that, debating has special significance in sharpening critical thinking skills which are required to analyse the problem at hand, process different perspectives on the given subject and evaluate arguments while formulating new, strong counterarguments backed with scientific evidence (Zare & Othman, 2013).

Add to that, research highlights the fact that communication skills, namely verbalizing ideas accurately and listening actively, is enhanced while creating a lively classroom atmosphere where student engagement is increased.

To make debates a fruitful activity, students need to fulfil two important ethical factors in any debate to keep it smooth and effective. According to Jagger (2013) & Lustigova (2011), control and respect are two important moral elements of any debate.

Controlling what one should say and not say while maintaining a respectful tone is crucial to fostering a sense of moral responsibility in the students which is critical for a world that is craving for tolerance and peace (Sakalli et. al., 2021).

The flipside of debates in EFL classes is that students experience anxiety and reluctance while debating due to it being a more advanced form of public speaking (Alasmari & Ahmed, 2013).

Fear of making mistakes in pronunciation and vocabulary can discourage students from effectively participating in debates. Another challenge is students' inadequate research and planning skills performed within a limited period of time.

From a teacher's perspective, maintaining a positive and respectful ambience in the classroom during the debate can be difficult and assessing the student performance while giving constructive feedback can prove to be challenging (Alasmari & Ahmed, 2013; Lan & Lam, 2020). In addition, teachers often experience challenges such as limited class time and students' lack of motivation in exhibiting their speaking skills (Lan & Lam, 2020).

III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

For the purpose of examining business EFL students' perspectives on the effectiveness of using debates in developing their cognitive and affective communication skills, a survey instrument was designed to collect data.

The survey consisted of 16 questions using the 5-point Likert scale examining the level of agreement (Strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree and strongly disagree). It contained 2 main sections, namely students' demographics, and cognitive and affective communicative skills developed by debates.

The survey was sent by email to around 80 students and participation was voluntary. The survey was conducted within Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) context. 40 students filled in the survey, 45% of which were female students while 55% were males. 50% of the participants were freshmen and sophomore students, while 45% of them were in their 3rd and 4th year at university.

Only 5% of the participants were in their senior year. All students completed the LANC1070, English for Business 1, in the last couple of years.

They all performed the 3 debates assigned in the course about Globalization, Taxes and Social Media. They were all informed of the security of the information they provided and that it would be anonymously used for research purposes only.

IV. RESULTS

A. Cognitive Communication Skills

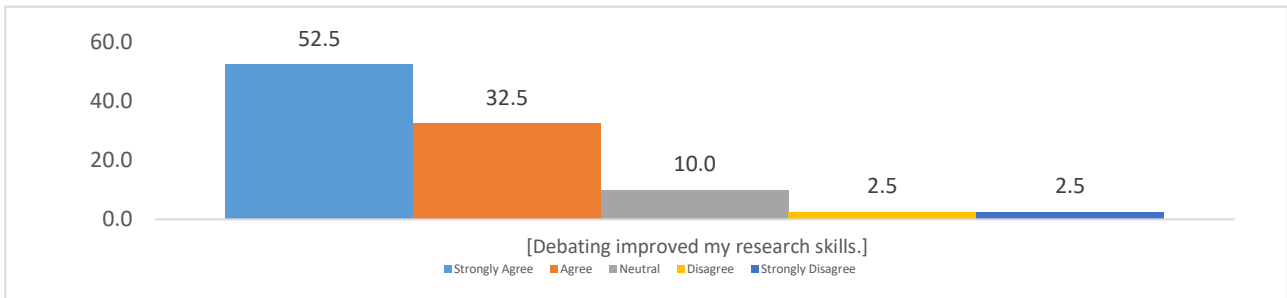


Figure 1. Chart of Survey Results (Research Skills)

The majority of the participants (85%) believed that engaging in debates in the classroom improved their research skills which is critical in the planning stage where students are required to formulate a solid argument backed up with scientific evidence, such as statistics.

Almost the same percentage of participants (82.5%) agreed that debates increased their knowledge of the vocabulary related to the topic at hand and allowed them to expand their bank of words which is critical in communicating ideas and sharing perspectives on any given issue.

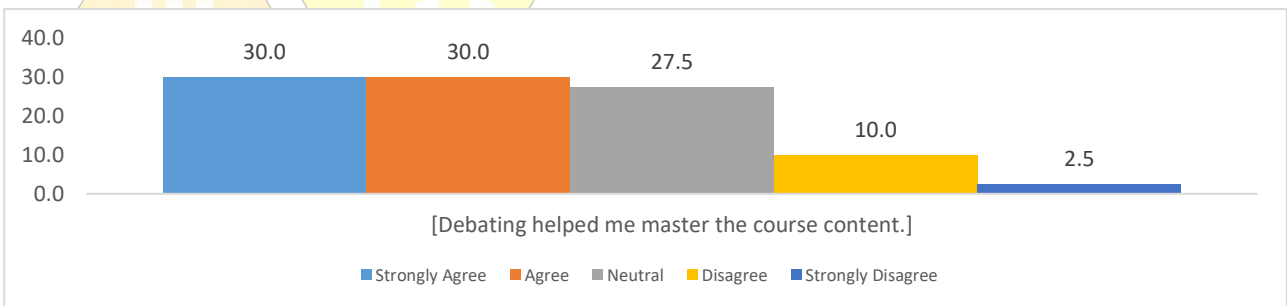


Figure 2. Chart of Survey Results (Mastering Course Content)

When asked if they thought that debates helped them in mastering the course content, more than half the participants agreed with the statement (60%) while

26.5% remained neutral. Debates alone can have an advantage in understanding the course materials but might not help students master it as such.

B. Affective Communication Skills

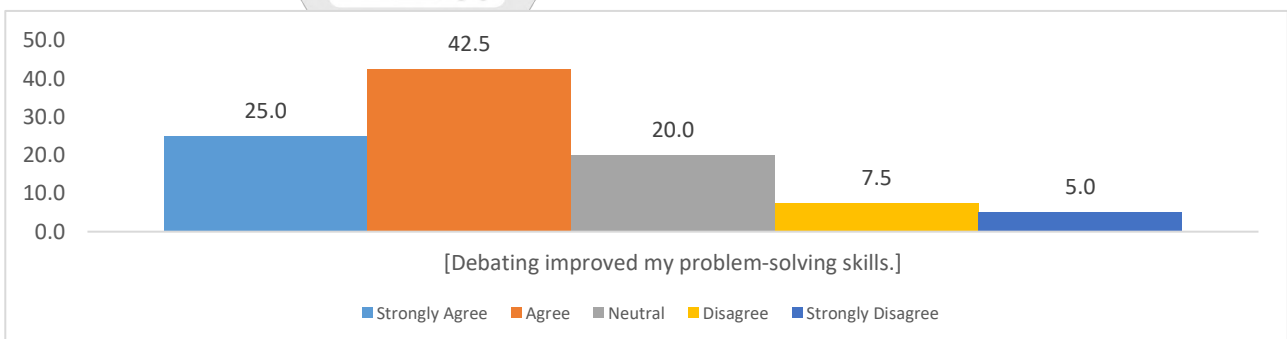


Figure 3. Chart of Survey Results (Problem Solving)

Moving to the affective communication skills or what are called soft skills, participants confirmed that debates helped them in improving their problem-solving and critical thinking skills, 67.5% and 80% respectively.

Interestingly, more participants reflected enhancement in critical thinking than problem-solving skills as debates do not necessarily reflect reaching a solution for the discussed problem as much as thinking critically and

deeply about it. Most of the participants agreed that debates did not only increase their tolerance of each other's different and opposite perspectives but also sharpened their skills in relation to collaboration and teamwork, 77.5% & 72.5% respectively. It is worth mentioning that planning for the debate and performing the debate relies heavily on coordinating roles, searching for information that is distinct for each member in the group and taking turns while debating. The rebuttal part requires the opposite team to listen and respond respectfully to their opponents requiring them to be tolerant of their different perspectives on the issue at hand.

Another interesting result is that most participants agreed that debates allowed them to be creative and helped them in negotiation, 80% & 75% respectively.

C. Overall effectiveness of Debates

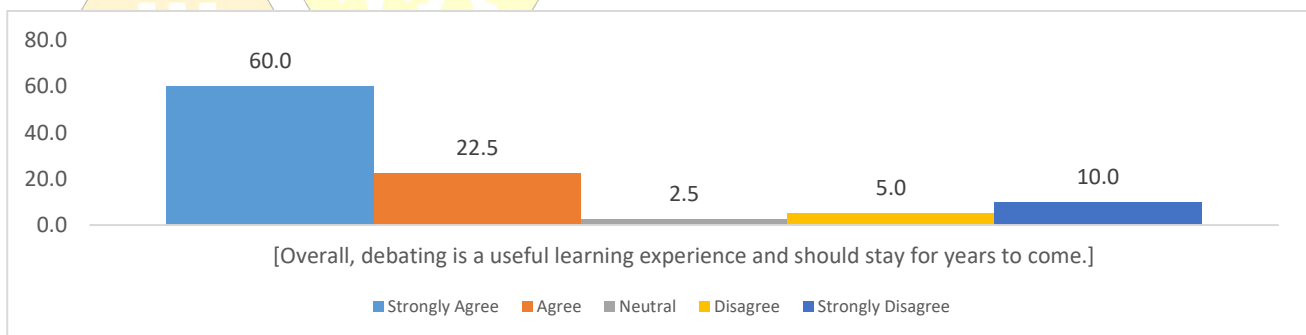


Figure 4. Chart of Survey Results (Overall Perceptions of Debates)

Overall, 77.5% participants believed that debates are enjoyable course activities and that they are useful learning experiences (82.5%) and should be kept part of the course for years to come. This shows how much value debates have added to students' learning experience in English for Business 1. It is worth mentioning that 67.5% of the students are reaping the benefits of classroom debates even after the course has ended which emphasizes how transferable the skills enhanced by debates are.

V. DISCUSSION

The results of this study provide insights into the effectiveness of using debates as a pedagogical tool in EFL business classes, specifically in enhancing both cognitive and affective communication skills. The findings align with the existing literature that emphasizes the importance of debates in developing critical thinking, vocabulary acquisition and communicative competence among students (Cinganotto, 2019; Zare & Othman, 2013). This study,

Debates are largely a way of convincing the other team and the audience of one's perspective while maintaining the flow of ideas in opposite directions. Additionally, the intensity of the debate and the depth at which students go in presenting their ideas requires a high level of creativity in formulating and presenting ideas.

The linguistic skill that participants ultimately witnessed great improvement in is their speaking skill as 83.5% of the participants agreed that their level of confidence increased because of performing the debates. This ultimately led to the improvement of their presentation skills. Interestingly, almost all the participants (90%) agreed that debates enhanced their presentation performance which is a result that every EFL business student aspires to achieve.

however, details the subtle communication skills that students acquire through debates that are often neglected in research.

One of the most notable outcomes is the high percentage of participants who reported an improvement in their research skills which requires a high level of cognitive processing of information, information analysis and synthesis in a timely manner and formulating counterarguments backed with evidence, all of which are prerequisites to an effective performance in any debate.

Even though research considers debates as a high-level form of communication which is normally accompanied with higher levels of anxiety (Alasmari & Ahmed, 2013), participants in this study showed improved confidence as they moved from one debate to another. They also showed improved speaking and presentations skills due to performing the debates regardless of their emotional state. Anxiety only decreases when students

are allowed to perform and act out the classroom activity rather than shying away from it. It is worth mentioning that debates allow all students to take part without leaving anyone behind and leaves no one disadvantaged in the process.

Affective communication skills, namely creativity, negotiation, collaboration and tolerance, which participants improved through debates, are a cornerstone of success in the business world. These also feed into the 21st century skills that educational institutions are promoting through their educational programs. Add to that, participants found debates to be very engaging rather than a boring or monotonous activity as they reported enjoyment throughout the process of debating. Debating is a full learning cycle of engaging and active processes of planning, delivering and reflecting.

Despite these outcomes, the study highlights some limitations. Not many participants found debates helpful in mastering the course content which emphasizes the importance of supplementing this activity with different language activities that enhances comprehension of the course materials, such as reading and writing activities.

Another limitation is that teachers' perspectives on the execution and assessment of debates is lacking. The teacher plays a pivotal role in facilitating the whole process of classroom debates. Therefore, their role is worth investigating and researching to find ways to understand it and thus improve it.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study aimed at researching the cognitive and affective communication skills enhanced by classroom debates from university business students' perspectives. The results showed promising advantages of this pedagogical tool and gave insight into the underlying communicative potential that can go unnoticed in the day-to-day teaching and learning routine. Further research is needed to investigate the teachers' different approaches to facilitating and assessing debates in EFL business classes and how different alterations of this process can influence students' experiences. It is also possible to investigate if debates have different advantages to students in different fields of study and how that can affect them cognitively as well as affectively.

REFERENCES

- [1] Alasmari, A., & Ahmed, S. S. (2013). Using debate in EFL classes. *English language teaching*, 6(1), 147-152.
- [2] Cinganotto, L. (2019). Debate as a teaching strategy for language learning. *Lingue e Linguaggi*, 30, 107-125.
- [3] Delemare, S., & Lipsham, L. (2024). Debating in the Classroom. *Literacy Forum*, 39(2), 22–27.
- [4] Hilborn, M. (2022). What is Debating? The ESU's complete guide to the history and development of debating. English Speaking Union. Retrieved 5 August 2022 from: <https://www.esu.org/news-and-views/what-is-debating-history-developments-relevancy/>
- [5] Iman, J. N. (2017). Debate Instruction in EFL Classroom: Impacts on the Critical Thinking and Speaking Skill. *International Journal of Instruction*, 10(4), 87-108.
- [6] Jagger, S. (2013). Affective learning and the classroom debate. *Innovations in Education & Teaching International*, 50(1), 38–50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2012.746515>
- [7] Khidirova, M. K. K., & Nashirova, S. B. (2021). Task-based Language Learning and Teaching: The Use of Debates in ELT. *European Journal of Humanities and Educational Advancements*, 2 (5), 183-185. doi:10.17605/OSF.IO/ZJRX9.
- [8] Lan, W. & Lam, R. (2020). Exploring an EFL Teacher's Beliefs and Practices in Teaching Topical Debates in Mainland China. *Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research*, 8(1), 25–44.
- [9] Lustigova, L. (2011). Speak your mind: Simplified debates as a learning tool at the university level. *Journal on Efficiency and Responsibility in Education and science*, 4(1), 18-30.
- [10] Mubaraq, Y. F. (2016). Debating techniques in language learning to trigger students' communication in English and critical thinking. *STILISTIKA: Jurnal Bahasa, Sastra, dan Pengajarannya*, 1(2).
- [11] Sakallı, Ö., Tlili, A., Altınay, F., Karaatmaca, C., Altınay, Z., & Dağlı, G. (2021). The Role of Tolerance Education in Diversity Management: A Cultural Historical Activity Theory Perspective. *Sage Open*, 11(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440211060831>
- [12] Zare, P., & Othman, M. (2013). Classroom debate as a systematic teaching/learning approach. *World Applied Sciences Journal*, 28(11), 1506-1513.