

Fostering English Language Skills' Literacy Through Debate: Students' Views

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ABSTRACT

Education greatly influences the outcome of the students' learning process. One obstacle in education today concerns the literacy of students' English language skills, namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Most students possess a low interest in enhancing the literacy of those four skills. The researchers believe that the strategy that can be adopted to enhance students' literacy skills is the use of debate. So, the purpose of this research is to identify the students' views of debate as a strategy to enhance English language skills' literacy. Since the research used qualitative design, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews, and used primary data and secondary data for data collection. The participants involved are debaters from different public and private universities in South Kalimantan. The result of the research showed that all participants agree that their literacy skills are influenced positively by debate and most participants view that debate can be used as a strategy to enhance the four skills' literacy.

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Introduction

Education in Indonesia has begun to develop with changes in the curriculum that previously tended to be teacher-centered (KTSP), now turned into student-centered (K-13). With a student-centered learning process, students get the opportunity and facilities to be able to build their own knowledge, so that they will gain a deep understanding which in turn can improve the students' quality (Karsen, 2008). However, another problem arose. In 2019, Indonesia was ranked 62 out of 70 countries in terms of literacy levels or was in the bottom 10 countries with low literacy levels (Program for International Student Assessment, 2019). These data indicate that changes in the curriculum have not been able to improve student literacy skills. Lack of motivation and an unsupportive environment causes many students to be lazy to improve their literacy skills (Oktarin & Hastomo, 2024).

Lacking vital literacy skills holds a person back at every stage of their life. As a child they will not be able to succeed at school if they lack the ability to read, write, speak, and listen (Oktarin et al., 2024). As a young adult, they will be locked out of the job market, and as a parent, they will not be able to support their own child's learning (Hasbi & Nursaputri, 2024). This intergenerational cycle makes social mobility and a fairer society more difficult. People with low literacy skills may not be able to read a book or newspaper, understand road signs, fill out a form, read instructions on medicines, or use the internet (National Literacy Trust, 2017). From the description above, the researchers understand how important literacy is for students to get success in school and life.

When learning language skills is a big problem for a learner, it is mandatory to deal with elevating their interest and attitude first (Hasbi, 2013). For instance, English teachers could elevate students' writing performance by revolutionizing their writing instruction (Sari, 2024) and through guided writing enhancement tools (Waziana et al., 2024; Hasbi, 2024). To stimulate speaking enhancement, EFL teachers could bring into the class such as interactive online applications (Hasbi & Nursaputri, 2024), picture series (Islamiah & Nurhasanah, 2019), modern student-friendly speaking performance activities (Hasbi, 2017), and direct method (Utami et al., 2020). The use of videos such as the ones from YouTube helps students elevate interest in listening courses (Islamiah & Yudha, 2021). Then, intercultural materials (Furyanto et al., 2021), graded visualized reading books (Mohammad & Hasbi, 2021), and Explicit grammar instructions (Aprizani et al., 2020) could be used for enhancing students' reading interest. Finally, building a very friendly classroom management (Sari, 2024) and utilizing e-learning platforms (Hasbi, 2021) also works for elevating motivation for all four-language skill learning.

Literacy used to be known as the ability to read and write. Today, in the 21st century, the definition of literacy is much wider. It includes listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Hasbi, 2017). It also includes such things as awareness of the sounds of language, awareness of print, and the relationship between letters and sounds (Istiara & Hastomo, 2023). Other literacy skills include vocabulary, spelling, and comprehension (Twinkl, 2021). In this research, the researchers only focus on the literacy of the four basic English language skills namely reading, writing, speaking, and listening, and literacy skills in general.

When the researchers thought of the 4 basic skills of English language and literacy skills, the debate activities immediately came to the mind. Debate itself according to Hornby (1987), is a formal discussion, for example in public speaking; contests between two speakers or two group speakers, to show ability in arguing. The debate contest or competition that exists motivates debaters to continuously try on build up their literacy (Istiara et al., 2023). They receive new information through reading articles or listening to the news on the television. They also share their knowledge through writing arguments on notes and speaking in front of their partners, opponents, or judges. These activities of debate make the researchers have a presupposition that the students who join the debate have better literacy skills than

those who do not (Andewi, 2024). Thus, to confirm the statement, we need to identify the students' views of debate as a strategy to enhance literacy skills.

According to Zare & Othman (2015), students demonstrated positive views and outlook toward the classroom debate. Specifically, the results show that participants found the classroom debate to be a new experience and innovative way of teaching and learning, enjoyed the debates and found the experience interesting, and chose to participate in debate again if it was available. They also believed that in-class debate increases learning motivation and interest level in the subject matter, enhances learning on the course content, and stimulates thinking on the subject matter (Hastomo & Zulianti, 2021). Regarding critical thinking, students believed that classroom debate enhances and promotes critical thinking skills. Specifically, statements nine to nineteen investigate respondents' points of view toward classroom debate in promoting and developing critical thinking skills. The respondents believed that debate reduces biases, promotes considering and understanding different perspectives, and helps students learn to use evidence and data to support their arguments and viewpoints. Moreover, the results show that debate helps learners realize that issues are not merely black and/or white, and students learn to be open-minded and accept reasonable criticisms. In addition, regarding oral communication, participants believed that debate improves oral communication and argumentation skills, and helped them improve their speaking skills.

Alen et al. (2015) observed that in the short term, students considered that debate activity had improved their knowledge of the course material, that the activity had increased their interest in the debate topic, and that they had learned a lot from hearing their classmates, though to a lesser extent. The activity was stimulating for the students, they enjoyed participating in the debates. In the long term, the students recognized elements linked to presentation (specifically, public speaking and debate), public communication abilities, and research. The students affirmed that their participation in the debates had helped them realize the existence of unclear problems, that is, that the debates stimulated a process of analytical and critical thinking. Students evaluated the participation of the members of their groups as either positive or very positive. The vast majority found the activity to have a normal level of difficulty or to be very easy, even though they had to defend positions with which they did not identify. Together, all of these elements led participants to say that they would recommend the activity to other students.

The researchers state the research problem as followed, "What are the students' views of using the debate as a strategy to enhance English language and literacy skills?". Based on previous studies, the researcher found that they are related to the research conducted by the researcher. They are similar to this research but have different objectives of the research. In this study, the researchers tried to find out the students' views on debate as a strategy to enhance the four literacy skills namely the students' reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. Whereas previous studies aimed to find out students' views on debate but are more focused on the improvement of students' speaking or oral skills, such as how debate affects students' communication and public speaking skills as well as their critical thinking skills.

Method

Research Design

The design of this research uses a qualitative interview study. Through this research, the researcher would like to observe and identify the students' views toward debate as a strategy to enhance literacy skills. The researcher will use semi-structured interviews to get an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences of debate. According to Leech (2002), since a semi-structured interview is a combination of an unstructured interview and a structured interview, it has the advantages of both. During the interview, the interviewees will share their experiences and they are also able to ask the interviewers questions, which allows them to provide qualitative analysis with more valuable information, such as their views on critical topics.

Setting

This interview study was conducted in different universities in the southern part of Borneo Island. The researchers undertook this study to explore the students' views of debate as a strategy to enhance literacy skills. Three participants were required voluntarily in this study in which their names are pseudonyms: Charles, Jane, and Quinn. The participants came from different majors and age 20 to 22 years old. They had joined the debate club for at least more than 1 year. There are main reasons why the researcher asks them to participate in this study namely, debaters use literacy skills when they practice debating and the researcher believes that identifying their experiences in the practice of debating will help many parties to improve their literacy skills.

Table 1. Demographic Information of Participants

Name	gender	Age	Study Program	University
Charles	Male	20	Engineering	Politeknik Banjarmasin
Jane	Female	22	English	Universitas Lambung Mangkurat
Quinn	Female	20	English	Universitas Islam Kalimantan MAB Banjarmasin

Data Source

According to Mesly (2015), gathering data can be accomplished through a primary source or a secondary source. In this study, the researcher uses both primary and secondary sources. The primary data source in this research are the university students who are also debaters, they are from Politeknik Banjarmasin, Universitas Islam Kalimantan MAB Banjarmasin, and Universitas Lambung Mangkurat. The researchers obtained the primary data source through interviews. Meanwhile, the secondary data sources in this research are from articles and journals of the previous research. In conducting this study, the researchers used semi-structured interviews to identify the students' views of debate as a strategy to enhance literacy skills. In the semi-structured approach, the researchers asked a standard set of questions to collect data. However, it allows researchers to ask additional questions if an interesting or new line of inquiry develops during the interview process (Young et al., 2018).

Data Collection

This flexibility of asking questions helps the researcher to discuss in depth about a particular topic. That is why the researcher chose the semi-structured interview method for collecting data for her thesis. Before interviewing the participants, the researcher first contacts them via WhatsApp messenger or Instagram direct message to request their willingness to participate in this research. After they agree, the researcher negotiates and discusses an appropriate interview time with the participants' spare time. Interview activities were carried out using Zoom Meeting and WhatsApp so that we could meet face-to-face with the participants and see their reactions well. According to Harrell and Bradley (2009), interviews may be performed face-to-face or by phone, depending on the type of research and accessibility of participants. The interview would use Indonesian-English during the conversation. It takes about 30-60 minutes to perform each interview. Each participant was interviewed separately at different times, according to their availability. Before the interview, the participants were asked for consent to record all conversations that occurred via Zoom Meeting and WhatsApp.

Data Analysis

When the interview process was complete, the researcher transcribed the participant interview according to their true words. Widodo (2014) stated that transcribed interview data is a way to represent, analyze, and interpret the data that has been submitted. After that, we sent the interview transcript back to the participants via WhatsApp messenger to be double-checked. The participants could return the transcription of the interview data with approval or confirmation feedback to us. In the final stage, we sent data transcripts to participants to double-check (member checking) whether the transcribed data matches the narrative data given by each participant.

Results and Discussion

Results

1. Students' Views Towards Debate as a Strategy to Enhance Four English Language Skills

The researchers realized that it is important to have a comparison on before and after participants joined the debate. It is specifically to know whether the participants' literacy skills are really influenced by debate or not. After thorough interviews were conducted, the researchers found that debate had positively affected the participants' listening skills.

"My listening skills have improved quite significantly compared to before I joined the debate environment. I think that I gained a lot of new vocabulary and I got to listen to many accents such as British, Australian, and American." [Charles]

"Before knowing about debates in my senior high school, the only exposure that helped me in growing my listening skills was only from Western music or maybe movies but knowing debates gave me a wider exposure to listening skills and helped me to grow my listening skill from the actual speaker itself. I exercised

my listening skills a lot from the actual speakers even though they were not native they gave me much more perspective in navigating and understanding other people's voices, and then tone, and then the flow of their speaking itself." [Jane]

"In my opinion, my listening skills have improved since I joined the debate. Because when we want to understand what the opposition team said we must listen more carefully, that is the reason why debate has made my listening skills better." [Quinn]

The participants shared their views on how debates have affected their speaking skill development:

"I think I have improved a lot. I mean my structure, my pronunciation, and then my grammar have improved well since I joined the debate circumstances. I learned from my competitors, I learned from my teachers, I learned from my partners, and many people have motivated me to improve my speaking skills." [Charles]

"After learning debate by joining the English extracurricular in my senior high school, I gain much more good support in improving my English skills. When we are joining the debate community, it doesn't matter if we are fluent or not in English but at least we should force to have confidence in speaking. This is kind of like the basic confident mental requirement of debaters, it helped me a lot when I was afraid of my own pronunciation, etc. It didn't only give me a good environment, but also speaking partners, sparing partners, and a very understanding environment where I can make mistakes and learn from them." [Jane]

"Talking about my speaking skills, before I joined the debate, to be honest, I had bad pronunciation, and afterward, I really learned about the pronunciation itself and became a person who is more confident to speak." [Quinn]

The participants went on sharing their views on how debates have affected their reading skill development:

"Since as a debater, we must search for news as much as possible from the internet, books, and many other kinds of literature. so, I believe my reading skills have improved. I read many kinds of literature such as from books, blogs, and webpages. My reading slowly but constantly improved." [Charles]

"I love fiction so I have a habit of reading English fiction. When I entered the debating world it challenged me to explore my genre in English reading in a much wider aspect. When debating it came with a lot of motions that needed to be done or researched on beforehand. It challenged me as a debater and any other debaters out there to conduct multiple research projects on those aspects, and it is usually not only limited to the national issue but also the multinational ones researched in the international sources. We have to explore many more genres like non-academic

writing itself, read blogs written by native speakers, and familiarize ourselves with a lot of vocabulary outside of the academic field. Thus, I read a lot while preparing for a debate" [Jane]

"My reading skill has improved since I joined the debate because when we want to have a good argument, we must read the page of Wikipedia and then we must research the material itself of Google so that is the reason why my reading skill was improved when I joined the English debate itself." [Quinn]

The participants also narrated their views on how debates have affected their writing skill development:

"Just like other skills, of course, my writing has been improved. My method of presenting my speech is by writing them down first. We have our matter bank and we must try to make and build our cases in writing. This is how my writing has been improved thanks to my debate experience." [Charles]

"Based on my personal experience writing is quite affected by debate in certain aspects for example my coach in training taught us to write or exercise or train ourselves in writing the case-building, when we must write what we have in mind for example, training for the actual competition itself. It helped us to be more eloquent in our writing. It also gave a larger genre of writing because in school we only have to learn basic writing genres like descriptive, procedure, etc. but in debate, we learn to write the argumentative. It's really challenging and it's really improving our critical thinking and the way that we have to write what's on our mind and arrange it within the flow." [Jane]

"I think my writing has improved since I joined the debate. Because on the debate we must not only write, or copy-paste but should be able to summarize from the source for rewrite again and to make an argument." [Quinn]

2. Students' Views Towards Debate as a Strategy to Enhance Literacy Skills

Charles, Jane, and Quinn shared their insights on whether debate has enhanced their literacy skills:

"I extremely agree that debate has an effect on my literacy skills. Just like what I explained before, my speaking, my listening, and my writing have improved. Every day, I mean literally whenever we have connected to English, we have connected about the debate, we debate and we learned that, and most importantly we implement that in our debate competition." [Charles]

"Debate is really contributing towards the improvement of literacy skills of the debaters itself. Especially because the debate is like the exercise of active speaking. It also has a positive contribution to the passive skill of English as in reading and listening because when we debate, we are using a combination of these four basic skills of English." [Jane]

"Oh yes, I agree about debate improving our literacy skills. It is a good way or the key to improve the literacy." [Quinn]

Finally, the three participants shared whether involvement in debate should be tried by other language learners:

"From my point of view, the debate is worth trying. There are no disadvantages when you jump into the debate circumstances because you know we gain speaking, we can speak. It has improved our public speaking. It gives us the opportunity and experience to meet other people that can motivate us to enhance and level up our literacy skills." [Charles]

"Debate is very recommendable because it has its own unique way of enhancing literacy skills because they could go into four directions of the basic skills of English". [Jane]

"Since I participated in debates, I found it a good strategy to improve my literacy skills; in fact, it is one of the best ways. So, others must try doing it too." [Quinn]

Discussion

From the presented results, it is undoubtable that debate is correlated with the four literacy skills namely reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. It was shown by the fact each participant agreed with how debate already influenced their four literacy skills. In the previous studies, it is also shown that debates can be successfully used in a wide range of disciplines (Budesheim & Lundquist, 2000; Dundes, 2001; Keller et al., 2001; Musselman, 2004; Roy & Macchiette, 2005; Vo & Morris, 2006). It works well also due to the nature of the activity itself as being close to a humanized model of learning, where language is learned in a more natural or real-life context (Muthmainnah, & Hasbi, 2022).

The next thing we need to discuss is whether the participants agree with the statement that debate can be a good strategy to serve as a platform for educators and students to improve their literacy skills. Based on the findings, the first participant namely Quinn was sure enough to recommend debate as a strategy to enhance literacy skills because she felt the benefits of it. The second participant namely Charles also happily recommended it to others although he said it all with the requirement that the people who want to improve need to enjoy all the processes they need to go through. As supported by a statement of the previous research, if learners wish to be motivated, they should enjoy learning. Intrinsically motivated learners are more likely to continue their studies than extrinsically motivated learners and simply participate in an activity for the pleasure of learning. There should be some sort of enjoyment while learning to be motivated to continue studying any material which in this context was a debate (Wu, 2003).

Meanwhile, the last participant namely Jane did not really recommend the debate to other people because she thought it needed a lot of sacrifices and drained energy so much due to the competitiveness of the people who joined the debate. She thought not everyone was able to improve their literacy skills through debate. Indeed, students' main activities can be considered as a form of work, everyday academic fatigue occurs due to overcoming

academic stress arising from routine experiences (Scannapieco, 1997). Jane also stated that if there is another better way to improve literacy skills which is not draining energy too much then she would recommend the other way than debate. However, the researchers believe that Jane felt that way because according to her the debate in question included the debate competitions in which she has participated before, in fact, the researchers only intended to recommend debates as a forum for students to learn, whether the students later want to be a professional debater and compete in national competitions like Jane will be a different question.

Conclusion

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that debate is indeed strongly correlated with the four core literacy skills namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The study demonstrates that debate positively influenced the literacy skills of all participants involved. Among the three participants interviewed, one expressed a strong preference for debate, believing it to be an excellent strategy for enhancing literacy skills. Another agreed that debate has numerous benefits, as long as students find enjoyment in the process. However, the third participant, while acknowledging the improvement in her literacy skills through debate, felt that it is not suitable for everyone due to its challenging nature. As a result, she did not fully recommend it. At last, this study suggests that debate can be a valuable tool for improving literacy skills in the classroom and should be encouraged by educators. The researchers also call for further research to explore the broader impacts of debate on students' skill development.

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