

Invest in What Energizes Students to Learn: Investigating Students' Attitude towards Debate in the Foreign Language Classroom

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Abstract—Debate has noticeably been penetrating our educational practice the last decades. Many studies have revealed many benefits of debate, including sharpening up debaters' critical and analytical thinking, and deepening their understanding of the issues being debated. Debate has also been deemed as an effective pedagogical tool, for critical thinking and for L1 and L2 language development. Its effectiveness has been mainly ascribed to its ability to integrate the four language skills, stimulate learners to be active and engage them in interactive activities that entail working collaboratively to negotiate meaning. In many studies students acclaimed debate as fun and enjoyable. This study investigated the factors that underlie the 44 participants' (belonging to 2 groups) positive attitude towards debate as an instructional tool in the foreign language classroom. The data collection was triangulated consisting of a questionnaire and interviews. The study has revealed that the factors that positively shape the participants' favourable attitude towards debate are: active participation, challenge, teamwork, fun, critical thinking, language proficiency and debate vs coursebook. The independent samples t-test showed that both groups extended the same relevance to these factors in shaping their attitudes towards debate with the exception of critical thinking factor. However, the comparison between males and females revealed a number of significant differences.

Index Terms—terms, debate, attitude, foreign language teaching, pedagogical tool

I. INTRODUCTION

Debate is an inherent part of our life. We are constantly involved in attempts to convince others and to influence their views and decisions. Debate occurs everywhere, at home, at school and in meetings. Debate can be formal, like in parliaments or informal like between friends. Debate enhances debaters' communication skills. In the context of the increasing importance of communicating knowledge effectively and of the social and political debate, it is imperative to have strong communication skills (Akerman & Neale, 2011). Studies have shown that people with strong communication skills find their way quickly to leadership and promotion at work (Snider, 2008). Debating skills are even extolled as indispensable ingredients for success in all walks of life. In other words "Debating creates the skills you need for success wherever your life may lead you" (Snider, 2008, p. xiv).

Debate is an important tool for an enriching learning experience (Lieb, 2007), and using it as a teaching/learning approach brings a lot of benefits to learners (Zare & Othman, 2013). It offers teachers the chance to engage their students in a variety of activities that inspire students to explain, justify, convince and counter. Also, debate does not only help students deepen their comprehension of the issue/topic in question and foster their critical thinking abilities, but it helps them enhance their language proficiency as well (Zare & Othman, 2013). Moreover, debate enables teachers to involve students in an engaging and cooperative learning process that facilitates the interaction of students with each other and with the content as well.

Students enjoy debating (Kennedy, 2009). Many other studies have reported students' liking for debate and their preference of this pedagogical tool over other tools (see the literature review). It goes without saying that students lend their support to every activity they experience as enjoyable. What enjoyable is, fires students with enthusiasm and makes them love learning. Not surprisingly, the activities that students experience as fun bring the best out of them. What is more, what fun is, holds students' attention and safeguards it from distraction.

This study tries to uncover the factors that make students admire debate. The theoretical framework that underlies the hypothesis of this study stems from the literature and a small-scale exploratory qualitative study. In short, this study attempts to address the following questions:

- What are the factors that shape students' attitude towards debate?

- How do these factors differ between males and females?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Debate is “the process of inquiry and advocacy, a way of arriving at a reasoned judgment on a proposition” (Freeley & Steinberg, 2008, p. 4). Debating involves a process of considering different viewpoints and making a judgment (Goodwin, 2003; Kennedy, 2007, 2009). Debate can function as a performance as well as a method that conveys ideas and arguments; it is a communication event in which the mode of operation can be oral or written (Snider & Schnurer, 2006). Snider and Schnurer (2006) maintain that the use of debate as a teaching method dates back to Ancient Greek and Roman philosophers. They mentioned that Confucius and other Chinese philosophers wrote famous treatises that characterized debate as a valuable method of learning. **Importantly, one of the characteristics of debate is that it involves and promotes critical thinking.**

Critical thinking is “thinking about how you think” (Rybold, 2006, p. 74). In our modern time critical thinking is a necessity since we are continuously snowed under information. Worthen and Pack (1992) maintain that the ability to evaluate information critically is a must-have for every person. They added that when students are stimulated to think critically, they will be better prepared to cope with the future and its complexities. Moreover, Rashtchi and Sadraeimanesh (2011) note that “practicing critical thinking changes the learners from passive receivers of the new materials into critical thinkers” (p. 386).

In-class debate is a vital instructional tool that promotes critical thinking (Rashtchi & Sadraeimanesh, 2011). In this connection, Nisbett (2003) argues that “debate is an important educational tool for learning analytic thinking skills and for forcing self-conscious reflection on the validity of one’s ideas” (p. 210). Worthen and Pack (1992) and Bellon (2000) even advocate for the initiation of debate within school and college curriculum since it is a viable means of teaching critical thinking and promoting learning. Bellon (2000) states in this regard that “those of us who have witnessed the power of debate to enhance learning and motivate students are becoming advocates of instituting debate across the entire college curriculum” (p. 161).

Debate-like activities can also enhance disciplinary learning. **Goodwin (2003) says that both teaching experience and empirical research have proved that debate helps students develop content mastery.** Accordingly, Bellon (2000) argues that if students are not given a chance to debate about important concepts they get in class, they will not be able to “develop deep or mature understandings of course content” (p. 172).

Students gain a lot of benefits when teachers use instructional strategies that invite active engagement (Doody & Condon, 2012). In-class debates do attain the goal of active learning (Kennedy, 2007, 2009). Active learning is any activity that engages students in a classroom other than listening passively to an instructor (Faust & Paulson, 1998). Bellon (2000) maintains that cognitive research shows that successful classrooms are interactive whereas students learn less when being forced into passive roles or practices. Furthermore, debate helps students to cultivate an open-minded acceptance of various views on a given topic (Kennedy, 2007).

Effective learning entails engaging students’ “attitudes, feelings, preferences and values” (Omeliheva & Avdeyeva, 2008, p. 604). Debate as a teaching method may do this job as it is claimed to be “an excellent form of active learning” (Fallahi & Haney, 2007, p. 83). Engaging students actively in the learning process necessitates creating opportunities in which they can communicate verbally (Bellon, 2000). In-class debates create these opportunities and are effective since they facilitate the process of taking students to “a new level of skill or learning desired by the instructor” (Firmin, Vaughn & Dye, 2007, p. 20). They are also effective because they encourage students to learn (Alford & Surdu, 2002; Jugdev, Markowski & Mengel, 2004).

In-class debates benefit the whole class and not only the enthusiastic and excellent students. This benefit extends even to the passive students (Stewart & Pleisch, 1998). Stewart and Pleisch (1998), reported that their teaching practice revealed that passive students enjoy working on language tasks, undertaking research and writing papers for debates. Warner and Bruschke (2001) compare this benefit that touches every student in the debating process to a gym class. In the gym class, all students benefit from some exposure to physical fitness.

In-class debate has also been characterized as an effective **FL pedagogical tool as it has ability to furnish students with a chance to take part in a learning process that involves practising the four major skills of language** (Alasmari & Ahmed, 2013; Lieb, 2007; Rybold, 2006; Snider & Schnurer, 2006; Zare & Othman, 2013). Zare and Othman (2013) contend that in-class debate **facilitates access to linguistic input and output. In addition to speaking, debate can provide ESL/EFL students with an opportunity to promote critical reading through researching the topics of debate, critical listening by listening to each team’s opposing arguments and trying to locate weaknesses in them, and writing as debaters take notes and prepare argumentative speeches.** Indeed, the fact that the debate process engages the practice of the four skills that hone debaters’ language proficiency testifies to its richness and comprehensiveness as an L2/FL pedagogical tool. However, the **debate community has not produced enough research that demonstrates that participating in debate cultivates the debaters’ language proficiency** (Omeliheva & Avdeyeva, 2008). The very few works being published on debating for EFL/ESL learners have mainly only focused on the format and procedures of debating (Zare & Othman, 2013).

Debate empowers students to intellectually challenge and outperform each other in their arguments and the way they frame them. Debaters competitively push each other to the limit. In other words, “the competitive process pushes

students to excel” (Rowland, 1995, p. 108). In such a competition students sharpen up their reasoning abilities and language proficiency (Lieb, 2007). Mitchell (1998) contends that “... contest round competition is a powerful motivating force that draws in novices and pushes advanced debaters to dizzying heights of professional and academic excellence” (p. 50).

Furthermore, the environment being created in debate is conducive to collaborative working and learning. In debate students work collaboratively to settle down the issues being raised by the resolutions in question. By so doing, students foster communicative and cooperative skills and discern the importance of conjoint effort in creating successful learning. In their study, Fallahi and Haney (2007) reported that “a total of 80% experienced a feeling of group accomplishment or teamwork during the debate, and 64% preferred working with a team rather than working alone” (p. 86).

Importantly, students also support and value the use debate as a teaching method (Alford & Surdu, 2002; Kennedy, 2009). Stewart & Pleisch (1998) reported that their students consistently approved debate with a rate above 80% as “the best/most interesting course activity” in their course surveys between 1994 and 1998. They also pointed out that not even one student in four years recommended to exclude debate from the course. Khan, Omar, Babar and Toh (2012) conducted a study on students of Health Economics in which the participants were divided in two groups of active debaters and non-active debaters. The participants’ perception about debate as a teaching tool was evaluated with a structured questionnaire before and after the debates. In addition to the increase in their knowledge of the topics being discussed, the active debaters also reported an increase in their interest in debate as well. In another study, Kennedy (2009), pointed out that the majority of the participants in five debates spoke favourably of these debates and even mentioned that they would consider using debate as an instructional tool. Hill (1982) also reported that *enjoyment/fun* was among the most frequently advanced motivating motive for participating in debate. In a similar vein, a number of other studies reported that the students who took part in the debate activities described it as *fun* and *educational* (Alford & Surdu, 2002; Fallahi & Haney, 2007; Omelicheva & Avdeyeva, 2008; van de Woude, Janssen & Sanders, 2011).

Also, Teachers who employed debate in the class hold a positive attitude towards this tool. Jiménez, Perdiguerro and Suárez (2011) reported that the teachers who experimented with debate in the Industrial classes were positive about this tool. They characterized the experience as motivating and rewarding. However, students’ attitude towards debate also suffers from little research. It is important to gain a comprehensive insight into the underlying factors that generate and sustain this positive attitude. Park, Kier, and Jugdev (2001) state in this regard “... further research is needed on this teaching strategy, not only in terms of faculty perceptions and experiences, but also in terms of student perceptions and experiences” (p. 14).

Hill (1982) pioneered the study of what motivates students to debate. In his study in which he used a questionnaire, he asked debaters to list in order of importance the reasons that accurately describe their motivation for being involved in debate. From this study six categories emerged: *educational*, *social*, *competitive*, *career preparation*, *miscellaneous* and *financial*. Wood and Rowland-Morin (1989) replicated the study of Hill using a five point Likert scale questionnaire. Jones (1994) points out that Hill’s as well as Wood and Rowland-Morin’s studies were restricted by the methodology in that the categories of the former were based on truncated and non-developed answers while the latter was based on a Likert scale which does not allow for an in-depth response that accounts for the importance of the given reasons. With these methodological restrictions in mind, Jones (1994) replicated the study of Hill in an attempt to accurately locate the specific reasons for the motivation behind debaters’ behaviour. This methodological refinement and study replication are crucial in Jones’ eyes to justify debate as a worthwhile activity. Jones adopted a qualitative approach by using interviews and field research as a source of data. 98 debaters were observed and interviewed at six intercollegiate debate tournaments. After analysing and coding the content, 5 primary categories: *cerebral*, *competition*, *heuristic*, *social*, and *miscellaneous*, in addition to one secondary category: *intellectual reinforcement* emerged.

Hill, Wood and Rowland, and Jones’ studies explored only the factors that account for L1 debaters’ liking for debate. These studies, moreover, did not investigate the differences in males and females’ perceptions. This study endeavours to dig up these factors in the L2/FL context and investigate how they are conceptualized by males as well as females, since a number of studies have shown that gender is a relevant variable in the perception of foreign language learning. For example, Aldosari (2014) concludes that males and females differ in their motivation and attitude towards foreign language learning. Siebert (2003) also found a number of significant differences in beliefs among males and females with regards to FL learning and strategy use.

This study sets out to answer the following research questions:

- What are the factors that shape students’ attitude towards debate?
- How do these factors differ between males and females?

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

The participants of this study were 44 Dutch students belonging to two classes at a secondary school in Rotterdam: a lower secondary class group (third grade) consisting of 25 students, including 12 males and 13 females (aged 14-16), and an upper secondary class group (fifth grade) consisting of 19 students including 7 males and 12 females (aged 16-19). The first group was studying English at B1 level and the second group at B2 level. Both groups got three English

sessions of 50 minutes a week by the first author. During this study one session was dedicated to debate, and in the other two sessions the subjects received regular lessons based on the coursebook. The subjects participated in ten debates of different formats.

B. Educational Treatment

Before asking the students to fill out the questionnaire and take part in the interviews, the following steps were taken:

1. Preparing for the debate

As homework, the students were required to brainstorm a list of controversial resolutions that interest them and submit them. Each student was required to hand in two resolutions. The resolutions were gathered, ordered on a list and submitted to the vote. The students were asked to mark the resolutions they eagerly like to debate and the ones they don't. Accordingly, a final list was made. This list included resolutions like: *Abortion should be banned*, *students should wear uniforms*, etc.

The students were informed about the topics that would be discussed at least one week in advance so that they could prepare and research the resolutions of the debate. The exception was when the *debate format 4* was employed. In that case, the students were informed of the resolutions on the day of the debate. To guarantee a smooth and effective flow of the debate, the debaters had to research both sides of each issue, and to make sure that the students made the necessary preparation, they were asked to submit their preparatory notes.

2. Performance of the debates

Prior to each debate regardless of its format, the whole class was divided in teams of three to four students to have a warming-up debate about the topic(s) in hand. This took approximately 5 minutes. After that, the students were engaged in debates of different formats. In each debate lesson, one debate format was used. Because of the class size of the first group (25 students) and time constraint (50 min.), it was difficult to involve every student in the *debate format 2* in one session. The students who were not debating were asked to take notes of their classmates' performance.

Because there is principally no right or wrong way of having debates (Snider & Schnurer, 2006), the following debate formats were selected because they ensure equal and effective involvement of as many students as possible, and they pique students' interest to eagerly and actively participate in the debates:

Debate format 1

The class is split up into two teams. One team is affirmative while the other is negative. Students are free to choose which side they want to defend. To assure everyone of an equal opportunity to speak, cards are used. Each student receives three cards. Each time a student talks, s/he has to hand in one card.

Debate format 2

This debate format involves two teams (affirmative and negative) of two speakers. The debate starts with each speaker holding a constructive speech of 1 minute. After that, both teams get a short break to prepare a rebuttal which they present together in 1 minute. The debate ends with the speakers facing each other in the grand cross fire (questioning period).

Debate format 3

This debate format involves two debaters. One debater is in the affirmative side and the other in the negative. Each debater gets an opportunity to voice their argument, rebut and cross-examine their opponent. The debaters get one minute time in each round.

Debate format 4

This debate format does not differ much from the previous one. The class is divided into pairs. The teacher randomly assigns topics (from a box) to each pair. The debaters get five minutes to prepare and write down any notes they wish to use during the debates. A coin is flipped and the winner of the flip decides which side s/he wants to defend. Each debater gets a chance to present their argument, rebut and cross-examine their opponent. The debaters get 30 seconds time in each round.

C. Data Collection

To map the underlying factors that motivate students to debate, triangulation was used as a data collection method. In addition to a **questionnaire, interviews** were used to enhance confidence in the ensuing findings. In this connection, Griffie (2012) argues that "questionnaires represent a data collection process that is considered 'a mile wide and an inch deep,' as opposed to interview data which might be described as 'an inch wide and a mile deep'" (p. 139).

To generate and specify the critical concepts which should be addressed by the questionnaire, a small-scale exploratory qualitative study was carried out in the form of a series of focus group interviews and one-to-one interviews. "Such a design is effective in improving the content representation of the survey and thus the internal validity of the study" (Dörnyei, 2010, p. 110). It is noteworthy that a number of items were modelled on the *attitude, fun, challenge*, and *critical thinking* scales of Jones (1994) and Gardner (1985).

The questionnaire was piloted with a group of 18 students almost similar to the target sample. The obtained data were submitted to item analysis using SPSS to check whether the internal consistency of each construct was larger than the 0.7 threshold (see Dörnyei, 2010). The internal reliability of the constructs ranged from .74 to .85. This means that the items in each construct were internally consistent. This guaranteed that the questionnaire did not contain any glitches that could jeopardize the quality of the questionnaire in the final administration. It is important to note that after the

piloting phase, the factor of *language proficiency* emerged as a potential factor which could positively influence the participants' attitude towards debate. This factor was included in the final questionnaire.

TABLE 1:
DEFINITIONS OF THE 8 CONSTRUCTS OF THE UNDERLYING FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE STUDENTS'
ATTITUDE TOWARDS DEBATE USED IN THE CURRENT STUDY.

Attitude	Attitude towards debate.
Fun	Pleasure gained from debating.
Active participation	Active involvement in the learning process rather than passively absorbing information.
Critical Thinking	Thinking critically to find strong arguments to outperform the opposing team/debater and locate flaws in their arguments.
Challenge	The challenge being posed by debating and by convincing classmates.
Teamwork	Working collaboratively during debates.
Language proficiency	Influence of debate on language proficiency.
Debate vs Coursebook	The attractiveness of debate as opposed to working with coursebooks.

D. Procedure

The questionnaire, which consisted of 40 items, addressed 8 constructs of the underlying motivating factors to debate (see table 1). The participants were asked to rate each item on a five-point Likert scale: 1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= neutral, 4= agree and 5= strongly agree. The higher score the respondents got in the constructs composing the underlying factors of debating, the more it was indicated that these constructs contributed to the motivation to debate.

Before piloting the questionnaire, 9 students were recruited around the age of the participants to go through its items and indicate whether they were straightforward and easy to understand with the least possible cognitive effort. The 9 students who attended and participated in a number of debates were also asked to check whether they could think up more items which would represent other (missing) factors. They all assured that all the potential factors they could think of were in the questionnaire. The items of the questionnaire were randomly ordered to avoid frustrating the respondents with the repetitive content. Besides, the wording of some items was reversed to prevent bias response.

For the interview, 10 students (8 females and 2 males) agreed to participate. A semi-structured format was used. To make the participants feel at ease and tackle the issue of status of inequality between the first author (teacher) and the participants, group interview was opted for. The participants were interviewed in a group of two or three in a classroom. The interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes. They ended once the researcher felt all aspects of the questions in interest were exhausted. At the beginning of the interview, the participants were informed of the purpose of the research and interview.

IV. RESULTS

A. Quantitative Analysis

TABLE 2:
THE INTERNAL CONSISTENCY OF THE CONSTRUCTS

Constructs	Number of items	Cronbach' alpha
Attitude	5	.80
Fun	5	.80
Active participation	5	.85
Critical Thinking	5	.83
Challenge	5	.70
Teamwork	5	.88
Debate vs Coursebook	5	.97
Language proficiency	4	.76

Table 2 illustrates the internal reliability of the scales which was calculated through *Cronbach's Alpha* coefficient. The internal consistency met expectations in all scales with the exception of the *language proficiency* scale which did not reach the .70 threshold (remember this scale was not piloted). Some fine-tuning was then needed. With the deletion of item 22 the internal consistency raised to .76. This was the only necessary modification since the internal consistency of the other scales exceeded the threshold, ranging from .70 to .97. This signifies that the items of each scale are strongly interrelated and thus measure the same underlying constructs.

TABLE 3:
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR THIRD GRADE AND FIFTH GRADE GROUPS

Constructs	Group	N	Mean	SD
Attitude	Group 1 *	25	3.97	.66
	Group 2 **	19	3.77	.53
Fun	Group 1	25	4.06	.62
	Group 2	19	3.90	.42
Active participation	Group 1	25	4.01	.70
	Group 2	19	3.64	.60
Critical thinking	Group 1	25	4.08	.68
	Group 2	19	3.50	.61
Challenge	Group 1	25	3.93	.74
	Group 2	19	3.65	.42
Teamwork	Group 1	25	3.82	.67
	Group 2	19	3.61	.83
Debate vs. coursebook	Group 1	25	4.48	.73
	Group 2	19	4.07	.87
Language proficiency	Group 1	25	3.53	.74
	Group 2	19	3.65	.70

*third grade

** fifth grade

As table 3 shows, the mean scores of all constructs is above 3. It ranges from 3.58 to 4.30. This indicates that the participants perceived all the constructs as playing a role in generating the positive attitude they hold towards debate. This fact is espoused by a *one sample T-test* which showed that all mean scores on all scales deviate significantly from the scale center. This means that the participants acknowledged the importance of all factors in instilling a favourable attitude into them about debate.

As table 3 also reveals, the *coursebook vs debate* factor was rated as the highest influential factor in both groups, with an average mean of 4.48 in group 1 and 4.07 in group 2. The fun factor was also rated highly in both groups. It was rated as the third influential factor in group 1 and as second in group 2. Strikingly, the critical thinking factor was rated as the second influential factor in group 1, while it was rated as the least influential factor in group 2.

The *language proficiency* scale was not highly rated by both groups. Item 36 in this scale which states *I like debate because it is important for my writing skill* was the lowest rated item. Its deletion will substantially raise the mean score of the scale. Prior to most debate, students were asked to hand in a *debate preparation form* (as homework) in which they had to write among other things a constructive speech. Getting a writing task as homework is not what students generally like. Because of this, students probably associated this item with homework and rated it low, thereby affecting the mean score of the whole scale. The mean scores of the other constructs are very close. This means that the participants attached the same importance to these factors in influencing their attitude towards debate.

To compare the group scores for each construct, an *independent-samples test* was conducted. As table 4 demonstrates, only the *critical thinking* construct has a Sig. (2 tailed) value above the required cut-off of .05. This means that there is no statistically significant difference in the means of other constructs. In other words, the respondents in both groups more or less attached the same importance to these constructs. The Sig. (2 tailed) value for the *critical thinking* construct (.007) reveals that there is a significant difference in the scores of group 1 ($M = 4.08$, $SD = .68$) and group 2 ($M = 3.50$, $SD = .61$; $t(42) = 2.86$, $p < .05$). The difference in the mean scores is 0.58 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from .16 to .97. The eta squared statistic (.16) indicates a large effect size (see Cohen, 1988).

TABLE 4
INDEPENDENT SAMPLES TEST BETWEEN THIRD GRADE AND FIFTH GRADE GROUPS

Constructs	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Attitude	1.06	42	.294
Fun	.95	42	.346
Active participation	1.84	42	.072
Critical thinking	2.86	42	.007
Challenge	1.48	42	.146
Teamwork	.93	42	.355
Coursebook	1.66	42	.103
Language proficiency	-.57	42	.566

To compare males' and females' perception of the factors in question, an *independent samples t-test* was conducted. This test showed that females found debate more fun than males $M_{(males)} = 3.8$ ($SD .62$), $M_{(females)} = 4.2$ ($SD .42$); $t(42) = -2.5$, $p < .05$. Also, females attached more importance to the *active participation* $M_{(males)} = 3.6$ ($SD .65$), $M_{(females)} = 4.0$ ($SD .65$); $t(42) = -2.6$, $p < .05$ and *challenge* factors than males $M_{(males)} = 3.6$ ($SD .70$), $M_{(females)} = 4.0$ ($SD .53$); $t(42) = -2.2$, $p < .05$. Interestingly, males extended more importance to the *critical thinking* factor than females $M_{(males)} = 4.0$ ($SD .82$), $M_{(females)} = 3.6$ ($SD .57$); $t(42) = -1.9$, $p < .05$.

B. Qualitative Analysis

To read between the lines of the questionnaire and dig deep in it, interviews with ten participants were conducted. In these interviews, the participants were confronted with the potential factors that may shape their attitude towards debate.

Debate is fun. All the participants in the interviews extolled debates and stated that they liked them and would certainly participate in them once the opportunity arises. Interestingly, some participants even advocated for the use of debate in other subjects like German, Dutch and Biology. Still, some argued that debating in French and German is not sensible at the moment because their current command of these languages is not good enough to stage adequate debates. One participant even expressed readiness to join a debate club and participate in debate competitions.

Active participation. Debates may create a fertile ground for active engagement in the lesson through providing students with the opportunity to explain, clarify, analyze, synthesize and rebut. The participants appreciated this quality of debate. One participant said that she liked debate because it facilitated active participation in the learning process rather than passively absorbing the lesson material. It was also pointed out that debate was preferred because “everyone is stimulated to participate” and that “everyone is engaged and gets something out of it”.

Critical thinking. In the interviews, all the participants praised debate for pushing them to think critically and analytically. One participant said “it is pleasant to think critically to prove **why** your arguments are ok and the ones of your opponents aren’t”. Another said: “I like debate because it makes you reflect”.

Challenge. Debate may pose an interesting challenge to students as one participant contended. That challenge is a source of enjoyment was also corroborated by the study of Williams (2006) in which he concluded that “[students] liked being challenged and they thought that challenge did lead to enhanced learning and enjoyment” (p. 9-10). Williams (2006) also concluded that “to really be challenging [teachers] needed to include higher order thinking skills, for example a need to evaluate or justify a statement or action or to manipulate information before applying knowledge to a problem” (p. 8). This conclusion is in line with this study since debate, as has been argued before, cultivates high order thinking skills, and the participants reported that they enjoyed this challenge. Interestingly, some participants also reported enjoying the challenge of trying to outshine their classmates in the way they framed arguments.

Teamwork. Debate may facilitate teamwork through creating an environment which is conducive to working collaboratively. The participants recognized and confirmed this merit of debate and acknowledged its influence on their attitude towards it. One participant said “it was fun to work together to prepare arguments and rebuttals [during the debate]”. Also a number of participants said that they learnt from each other in the debate: “you learn words from each other. I was impressed by the expression ‘*up to...*’ [which a classmate used]”.

Debate vs coursebook. In the eyes of the participants, debate is an interesting teaching tool that has the ability to pique their interest, arouse their curiosity and make them experience fun with learning unlike coursebooks which are boring and fail to infuse lessons with effectiveness and students with enthusiasm. One participant said that this factor is the most important factor that accounts for her liking for debate. She also said “I prefer debate over coursebooks because coursebooks lack the ingredients that make debate interesting”. Another one said “coursebooks are not challenging [unlike debate]”.

Language proficiency. The participants in general believe in the power of debate in honing their four language skills. One participant said “you practice all the skills at the same time”. When asked whether the factor of language proficiency is an ingredient that makes them like debate, all the interviewees answered in the affirmative. One further confirmed this by saying “you practice the [four] skills in a fun way [in the debate]”.

At the end of the interviews, the participants were also asked if they could think up other potential factors that fire them about debate, they unanimously said that they could not think of any factors beyond what has been discussed. They all underscored the completeness of the factors being confronted with. The participants were also given a chance to discuss what they did not like about participating in the debates. Many of the participants expressed discomfort with speaking in front of the class, especially when they were straining and struggling to find the suitable words. However, some other participants praised the role of debate in bolstering their self-confidence in public speaking. One participant said in this regard “debate lessens the anxiety of public speaking”.

V. CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The participants’ responses in the questionnaire revealed that the positive attitude that students have towards debate is shaped by the factors of *active participation*, *challenge*, *teamwork*, *fun*, *critical thinking*, *language proficiency* and *debate vs coursebook*. That is to say, the results revealed that the participants recognized the contribution of all the factors in question to their appreciation of debate. The mean scores, which significantly deviated from the scale center, espouse this, a fact that corroborates that the participants extend relevance to all the factors. This is also confirmed by the participants in the interviews when they were confronted with the factors underlying the variables of the questionnaire and asked to indicate whether all these factors contributed to their positive perception of debate. They unanimously pointed out that each factor plays its bit in influencing their attitude towards debate.

The *independent samples t-test* revealed that the third grade group as well as the fifth grade group attached the same the importance to all factors with the exception of the *critical thinking* factor. However, a comparison of males’ and females’ perception showed that females attached more value to the factors of *fun*, *active participation* and *challenge* than males. Yet males valued the *critical thinking* factor more than females.

To make the learning process successful, teachers should invest in the pedagogical tools that students admire and make them experience fun with learning. This study has revealed that students acclaim debate as an interesting teaching tool that energizes them to participate in a rich and engaging learning process. Therefore, debate as a teaching tool should get a place in the pedagogy of ESL/EFL teaching.

Given the small sample size of the study, the ability to generalize its findings to all ESL/EFL students is restricted. Therefore, further research is needed to confirm and maybe uncover other factors that have not been identified in this study. It could also be interesting to ask students to prioritize the factors, and then analyze the order in which they were listed. Further research is also needed to further explore the pedagogical benefits of debate and their implications for the pedagogy of foreign language teaching.

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