

# An Analysis of the Speaking Skill Development of English Education Students through Participation in English Debate Competitions

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## Abstract

One of the most vital skills of English learning is speaking because it helps learners communicate and express ideas. The interactive and analytical nature of debate lets students practice using English as a tool of real-world communication as they build argumentation and reasoning skills. The purpose of the study is to discover what is enhanced in terms of speaking skills by taking part in debate competitions and to discuss how taking part in debate competitions enhances the speaking skills of English Education students at the University of Mataram. It was a qualitative cross-case study which used a sample size of five students who had one year of experience in competitive debate. The sources of data were semi-structured interviews and recording of debates (2023 and 2025). The recordings were processed with modified adaptation of the rubric on fluency, vocabulary, grammar, and cohesion created by Brown (2004), whereas the data of the interviews were processed with the interactive model developed by Miles et al. (2018). The results indicate that speaking proficiency of students significantly increased especially on fluency, vocabulary and cohesion, but grammatical improvements were minimal. The student stated that debate improved their speaking by giving them endless exposure to English, lots of practice, coach and peer feedback, active listening, and peer learning, which promoted the use of strategic language. To sum up, the idea of debate competition is useful to enhance fluency, confidence, and communicative competence of students; it is a useful tool to master speaking skills in EFL.

## Keywords

debate competition, speaking skills, fluency, communicative competence, EFL students

## INTRODUCTION

Language is an essential part of human life, which helps human beings to communicate ideas, emotions, and information. It is a medium between people in social, scholarly and professional life. English specifically has become a global language that reinforces communication between cultures and nations (Ali et al., 2022). In Indonesia, English is a foreign language starting at the elementary level and continues through to university level (Arung & Jumardin, 2016). In English Education students English, and the ability to speak fluently and confidently, is key to academic and professional success because speaking competence indicates both linguistic and communicative confidence.

Nevertheless, speaking is the easiest of the six language skills that EFL learners encounter since this skill involves real-time processing and instant expression of ideas (Iman, 2017). Fluency, cohesion, and self-confidence are also required to enable students to communicate effectively not only in terms of sufficient vocabulary and grammar. Although they are exposed to English in the classroom, English education students continue to feel nervous, lack vocabulary, and make grammatical mistakes and poorly organize their thoughts, which interfere with their fluency in speaking (Chand, 2021). Indeed, similar results were mentioned by Mandasari and Oktaviani (2018), who stated that learners do not have a chance to engage in a spontaneous spoken interaction and constructive feedback, leading to low levels of communicative confidence. These are constant challenges, which show that there must be meaningful interactive learning activities that facilitate actual communication practice, other than passive language exposure.

In that regard, debate is one of the activities that offer a real-life platform on which language learners can apply

English in an actual conversation. During a debate, the students make arguments and counterarguments and defend their position within a time limit (Iman, 2017). Linguistic, cognitive, and affective skills are incorporated in this activity because the participants need to think critically, arrange the ideas logically, and communicate them in a fluent way. Moreover, debate enhances confidence and critical thinking because it stimulates students to react impulsively and to consider arguments presented by other perspectives (Afri et al., 2021). Yanti (2016) also noted that engagement in the process of debating increases the willingness of learners to speak and expands their use of words in oral communication. Debate is also interactive, which also provides constant language exposure, plenty of speaking practice, feedback, and self-reflection, which are all imperative in enhancing speaking proficiency. In such a process, learners automatically improve fluency, vocabulary, grammar and cohesion factors in speech.

These observations have been supported by a number of past studies. Indicatively, Lumbangaol and Mazali (2020) demonstrated that debate improves fluency, vocabulary, and confidence; Tiasadi (2020) emphasizes its contribution to the development of the argumentation and critical thinking skills in students. On the same note, Hanna and Mahyuni (2019) pointed out that although participation in debates can greatly enhance the fluency and confidence of learners, grammatical correctness and discourse unity take more time and practice to improve further. However, the majority of the research conducted on debate as a classroom practice and not as a competition in learning. The research conducted on the dynamic growth of particular features of speaking like fluency, vocabulary, grammar, and cohesion in the context of active involvement in a debate competition remains limited. Consequently, it is worth knowing more about this connection

in order to develop effective speaking lessons as well as to make the use of debate more meaningful in terms of language education.

It is on the basis of these concerns that the research sought to explore the role of English debate competitions in developing speaking skills in students. In particular, it aimed at (1) determining what skills of speaking contribute to the development when participating in the debate, and (2) examining how the debate activities can assist students in improving their general speaking level when they are involved in debate competitions. In an effort to accomplish this aim, this study concentrates on students of English Education at the University of Mataram who have experience in competitive debating. The proposed research aims to offer a more in-depth understanding of how debate is an effective tool in the development of speaking competence, communicative confidence, and learner autonomy in EFL settings, through the analysis of recording performance and perceptions of both students.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This research was done in English Education Department, University of Mataram and the subjects were five students who had attended debate competitions at least a year. The qualitative researcher used the cross-case analysis design, where each participant is considered as an individual case that would be analyzed and compared. This design was selected due to the ability to explore in a detailed manner the individual learning experience of students in a debate situation. This design sought to investigate some common patterns and some distinct features of the role of debate participation to develop speaking skills of students. Participants were recruited under the purposive sampling, using clear criteria, including: The participants were active students of English Education and have at least one-year experience of the debate format, a minimum of three formal debate competitions, and accessible recordings of the debate in 2023 and 2025, which would be used to analyze the longitudinally.

When gathering the data, the researcher chose the participants that fitted the criteria and got their audio recordings of debate in 2023 to record their previous speaking performance. The researcher, therefore, gathered the latest recording 2025 onwards and checked their current performance and saw the progress over time. All the recordings (around seven minutes each) were reviewed with the help of Brown (2004) speaking rubric that addresses such aspects as fluency, vocabulary, grammar, and cohesion. To supplement this, semi-structured interviews were carried out to understand the reflections of the students concerning their experiences and development on the debate activities. To examine the collected data, the interactive model of Miles et al. (2018) data condensation, display, and drawing conclusions was applied with the underpinning of triangulation and the criteria of trustworthiness by Lincoln et al. (2011) to guarantee the validity and credibility of the study.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### What aspects of speaking skills improve through participating in debate competitions?

The results of this paper were based on the analysis of the audio records of the debate in 2023 and 2025 with the help of the interview transcripts of the chosen participants. The data consisted of ten recording of debates in total, five per year, and

results of interviews taken during the period between July 9 and 16, 2025. The respondents were English Education students who participated in debate competitions at that time. A modified version of the speaking rubric by Brown (2004) was used to interpret all speech performances in terms of speech excellence, speech goodness, speech fairness, and speech poor as per the categories of fluency, vocabulary, grammar and cohesion. The assessment tried to determine which aspects of speaking had improved the most. The second part will give the results of debate performance among students in 2023 and 2025.

**Table 1. Students' speaking performances in 2023**

Speaking component	Participants speaking level (2023)				
	ACD	AH	IH	NA	RA
Fluency	Good	Poor	Good	Fair	Poor
Vocabulary	Good	Fair	Good	Fair	Poor
Grammar	Fair	Poor	Good	Fair	Poor
Cohesion	Fair	Fair	Fair	Fair	Fair

**Table 2. Students' speaking performances in 2025**

Speaking component	Participants speaking level (2025)				
	ACD	AH	IH	NA	RA
Fluency	Fair	Good	Good	Fair	Poor
Vocabulary	Fair	Good	Fair	Fair	Good
Grammar	Fair	Good	Fair	Fair	Poor
Cohesion	Fair	Good	Fair	Good	Fair

The end results of the analysis in the table show that the participants had different speaking performances in fluency, vocabulary, grammar, and cohesion between 2023 and 2025. All in all, the majority of the participants improved with improvement being noted in fluency and vocabulary. AH showed best improvement, which was to improve to good, not poor levels, in a number of ways, and this showed increased confidence and control of speech. The development of ACD and NA was moderate, and the performance of IH was quite high throughout both years. Conversely, RA showed poor improvement particularly in grammar and fluency. These results show that the activity of debating helped to improve fluency and the variety of lexicon of participants due to constant exposure and practice, but grammatical mistakes and the ability to arrange the speech cohesively was found problematic to some students.

The results show that the act of debate had a positive impact on the speaking of the students especially on the fluency and vocabulary growth. The speaking practice also helped them speak more fluently, which is consistent with Ban et al. (2023) who also state the importance of repetitive oral activities in the development of fluency. Nevertheless, grammatical accuracy did not improve significantly, with students usually focusing on content and convincing clarity, rather than focusing on language correctness as Ellis (2006) suggested, fluency-based activities diminish the focus on form. Such an imbalance suggests that, although debate is a successful way to enhance communicative fluency and lexical use, grammar is least developed, and more sustained and explicit instructional attention is needed.

### How does participation in debate competitions contribute to the development of English Education students' speaking skills?

The analysis of the interview data based on the Interactive Model of Miles et al. (2018) demonstrated how the process of the development of the speaking of students took place, identifying a number of processes that interacted with each other. These involve: adequate exposure to English language, practice speaking of the language, feedback from coaches and peers, active listening and peer learning. The activities of debate offered an exposition of students to real English and stimulated them to go in search of pertinent materials, which reinforced their use of the language and minds. Continuous reading in the newspapers, in the news sources such as Atlantic, Guardian and even Economics, as IH notes, makes him argue and thus he was motivated to read various materials and enhance his vocabulary. The regular speaking sessions also promoted fluency and confidence because the students got used to speaking despite the pressure of time. NA noted this progress by indicating that she was able to speak only two minutes in the beginning. However, with constant arguments, *"I have become much more fluent"*. These results support the idea that regular participation in a debate is a natural environment of using meaningful language and developing fluency and is supported by Brown (2007) and Harmer (2007).

Besides practice and exposure, constructive feedback, peer interaction, and observation were important in the development of progress of students. They described that feedback provided by coaches and peers made them refine the argumentation, grammar, and clarity without feeling like they are being criticized, which supports Richards (2017) perspective that feedback forms self-monitoring and confidence. Debate also enhanced grammatical awareness and responsiveness by listening to experienced opponents. In a debate, as RA put it, *"we do not really listen to grammar. But I have a rivalry with all the people in the national that are really good at grammar. I begin to think about the grammar when I speak."* In the same manner AH observed that he organized his speech using AREL format demonstrating how peer-based learning works.

This result is reminiscent of the study conducted by Baso (2016) who concluded that besides students improving their capacity to share their ideas, structured debate activities help to build self-confidence by exposing students to a setting where they have to speak to an audience. Moreover, interactive learning conditions with a focus on collaboration and feedback are the key to keeping students motivated and engaged in the process of learning English (Nurhairati et al., 2021). These views resonate with the current study that shows that debate offers an interactive and collaborative setting where learners develop linguistic accuracy, coherence, and confidence as a result of social interaction and reflection.

### DISCUSSION

The results of the given research demonstrate that the activity of the debate is important in the development of the speaking abilities of the students, yet the degree of the improvement is not equal in all aspects. In the majority of situations, the field of debate will prompt the learner to be engaged in communicative contexts whereby learning opportunities are accorded to the learners to practice the English within the context of the real life scenarios that

combine linguistic, cognitive, and social aspects of learning. The outcomes that were obtained in the different speaking aspects such as fluency, vocabulary, grammar and cohesion shows how debate is not only instrumental in developing language but also creating performance awareness of criticality. This data prove that even though the majority of the participants thought that their speaking skills were positively changed, their perceptions were not always associated with the results which were displayed in the recorded performances and this fact indicates the complexity of relations between self-perception, confidence, and the result, which was measurable. The most praised feature was that of fluency and some of students said that whenever they were arguing, they were able to talk with a lot of fluency without a lot of interruption. We can compare it to this observation where Ban et al. (2023) gave the argument that the debate includes repetitive experiences of spontaneous speech production that is a decisive element in the development of fluency. The recording of the participants however made known that there was a variation among the participants with some highly progressive in reducing the pauses and the hesitation and others highly insignificant. This disconnect between the perceived confidence and the real fluency is an indicator of the facts stated by Tarigan et al. (2024) that learners have overestimates of their abilities. Additionally, other personal aspects, such as inspiration and nervousness described by Tuan and Mai (2015), were also the center of attraction. The students that believed that debate as the potential good opportunity would train them in speaking and writing English had better opportunities to show continuous improvement when compared to the students who were motivated by pure competition. Instead, anxiety has also been a barrier to fluency as some of the respondents suffer frequent pauses or fillers yet their emotions were more assured. This observation implies that psychological preparations and emotional control plays an important role in making practice visible in language change. Accordingly, the very process of debate, besides being a linguistic process, is a confidence-building, flexibility-building, and self-awareness building exercise, and these are the most important attributes of the second language acquisition.

There were several strengths and challenges of vocabulary development. The participants further asserted that lexical scope has been broadened largely due to the fact that they normally encounter numerous problems and new vocabularies when they are involved in the debates. This is in accordance with Ban et al. (2023) who cite that debate is an innate process of exposing learners to new vocabulary by providing them with authentic input and interaction. The recordings did however show that not every student was able to translate this lexical exposure to active use. The capability to use new phrases in their speech was the sign of the successful vocabulary development, and the impossibility was only possible to listen passively. This force is the difference in achieving knowledge of receptive and productive vocabulary as stated by Nation (2017) and underscores that a real process of vocabulary learning is an intentional process of reinforcement and practice implementation and not an exposure process. Another aspect that Safitri et al. (2022) discuss is that the new words are to be practiced and placed in context so that to join the active repertoire of an active lexicon. This idea is proven by the findings of this work: it was these students who were more likely to demonstrate a gradual improvement, those students who used reflective techniques,

i.e. keeping a set of vocabulary notes or using new words actively during the process of delivering their speeches. Conversely, individuals who had been exposed but not intentionally assisted were likely to stagnate. The implication of this is that debate as a legitimate means of lexical input should be complemented by the explicit vocabulary learning processes in order to maximise the results. In the meantime grammar was that which was most difficult to overcome. Most of the students confessed that when they were in the state of a debate they focused on making an argument that was convincing and quick as opposed to making one that was grammatically correct. This finding aligns with the characterization of work of the fluency-related nature associated with a more significant likelihood of learners to be more preoccupied with a meaning in comparison to the form and with Leong and Ahmadi (2017) that grammatical control may be diminished under the pressure of performance and anxiety. The presented data evidence indicated that changes in grammar were very slight, and many students committed the same structural errors throughout the sessions. This shows that fluidity and precision somehow are mutually exclusive to spontaneous communication. This kind of trade-off often happens in speaking activities, but paying too much attention to grammar can cause students to repeat the same mistakes over time. Therefore, it is recommended that teachers integrate debate as a complementary activity to form-focused instruction, corrective feedback, or post-debate reflection sessions to improve students' grammatical awareness without compromising their fluency. A sustainable increase in speaking proficiency will be guaranteed by such a pedagogical trade off between communicative practice and structural accuracy.

Another good speaking aspect that was not so positively developed but rather unbalanced was cohesion. Most of the students said that the argument has made them able to hold onto their thoughts and relate arguments, and it is also congruent to the notion presented by Halliday and Hasan (1976), later discussed in Halliday & Matthiessen (2014), that cohesion is based on intentional application of grammatical and lexical connections. The proficiency of this practice was however disproportionately reported via tape recordings. The other cohesive devices that were applied were the furthermore, on the other hand or in conclusion which were the coherent devices and delivery of the work was seemingly persuasive and coherent as compared to the other students who were applying the cohesive devices without being clear and seemingly the delivery of the work was not convincing. The fact that there is no consistency in performance is an indication that it is not true that when one practices a debate one can covertly establish cohesion but rather, must pay close attention to the structure of the discourse. As it is presented by Lumbangaol and Mazali (2020), planning and reflection play an essential role in the structuring of the coherent speech in case the learners are ready to plan and reflect on the performance and Richards (2008) focused on the importance of preparation and reflection as the instrument of the coherent speech constructing. As it turned out, the preparation phase, during which the students introduce the arguments and write briefing notes was the most effective one, as it allowed the participants to organize the ideas in a systematic approach and reestablish the logical sequencing. This process can also develop the critical thinking and coherence of ideas among students, and thus, debate is no longer a contest but a means to reflect learning. In general, the results indicate a positive

influence of debate on the process of fluency, vocabulary, and cohesion development, whereas grammar is the least influenced. This is because the gap between the actual and ideal performance shows the value of feedback and self-awareness in learning. These hypothetical findings are consistent with the model of Brown (2004) who views fluency, accuracy, vocabulary and coherence as the most important features of speaking proficiency and confirms the idea that the process of speaking is usually disproportional and multifaceted.

In addition to certain aspects of competence, debate also plays a role in general speaking in a number of interconnected processes: exposure to the actual application of the English language, content exploration, speaking, negative feedback, listening and presence of peers. The content of the discussion allows getting a comprehensive exposure to the actual communicative situations because the student is pushed to locate at least some information that is connected with it, evaluate the position of the other individual, and choose the correct words to enshrine his/her position. By doing so, learners get engaged in a framework that not only trains their linguistic competence but also their mind and in that sense, both Harmer (2007) and Tuan and Mai (2015) assert that meaningful communicative exposure helps create fluency and coherence when it occurs purposefully with the use of the language. The repetitive and time-based nature of the debating process provides enough chances to create spontaneous speech and, thus, leads to development of automaticity and feeling of confidence. As the participants are involved in the process of arguing and counteracting, with time they learn to be critical in thinking and be able to speak extempore that can be considered to be noticed by Brown (2007) that the more they practice the more they become fluent and less anxious. In addition to this, peer and coach feedback is necessary in the consolidation of learning. The improvement which is specific to the goals is usually attained when students are given feedback with regards to the content organization, grammar, pronunciation, and delivery terms. According to Richards (2017), positive feedback promotes the capacity to self-monitor and internalizing corrective feedback which was shown to the respondents who perceived feedback as a chance to grow and not to criticize. In addition, responding and hearing the reasons behind the other individual with whom we hold opposite views assists us to comprehend each other better which is similar to the meaning of speaking as a process of real-time negotiation of meaning which Thornbury (2005) has defined. Active listening assists the students to enable the interaction flow, build logical rebuttals and critical thinking. Last but not least, peer learning and observation seemed to be one more worthy aspect of improvement. The participants said that they acquire new strategies and rhetoric models through observing teammates and opponents and this agrees with the sociocultural theory advanced by Vygotsky (1978) that highlights social interaction as a scaffolding of learning. Within such a collaborative setting, positive communication behavior can be internalized by the learners and with time the learners would become independent and assured speakers of English. Collectively, the interacting processes exposure, practice, feedback, interaction, collaboration, all these processes indicate that the context of learning a language is dynamic and holistic and that the different cognitive, linguistic and social processes are complementary. Thus even though debate does not play an equal role in all the elements of

speaking it is a pattern of communicative competence progression of significant impact, developing the image of expertise of proficiency and learner self-sufficiency.

## CONCLUSION

This research discovered that enrollment in debate competitions had significant positive effects on various speaking components of students. It also enhanced fluency because students had to speak freely and fluently without fear, and expanded their vocabulary by using persuasive and diverse language. Cohesion in argument delivery was also enhanced because of debate, and students were able to organize and present ideas in a much more logical and systematic form, which further boosted confidence in communicating in English. Furthermore, argumentation enhanced speaking ability of students by providing constant exposure to the use of English and searching content, high frequency of speaking, positive feedback, active listening and interaction, and peer learning. Despite the fact that spontaneous delivery tends to put fluency over accuracy in priorities, debate nonetheless encourages gradual progress by creating a self-perception and motivation. Thus, debate has been proven to be effective in the development of students speaking by providing them with a certain regularity, exposure, and reflection.

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