

A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO THE ROLES OF DEBATE IN DEVELOPING AN INDONESIAN EFL TEACHER'S ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

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ABSTRACTS

This narrative inquiry delves into how debate plays critical roles in developing an Indonesian EFL teacher's English language proficiency. One female EFL teacher was purposefully recruited as the participant. Data were obtained through written reflections and semi-structured interviews. An inductive thematic analysis was then employed to analyze the data. The findings suggest that debate plays critical roles in promoting target language exposure, facilitating target language use, and becoming a conducive language learning environment, ultimately advancing English language proficiency. Debate is perceived to enhance vocabulary, rhetoric, and four main language skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. In addition to developing language proficiency, debate promotes essential academic skills, including arguing, public speaking, and critical thinking. Despite its advantages, encountered challenges can still be overcome. These findings highlight the transformative potentials of debate as a pedagogical strategy, underscoring its capacity to enhance language and academic skills. However, due to its limited generalizability, future studies should employ potential research designs and recruit diverse participants across various settings.

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INTRODUCTION

Proficiency plays central roles in language teaching, learning, and assessment, resulting in the urgency to delve more into this notion. It is widely accepted that proficiency in a second or foreign language includes both the ability to accomplish something with the language (knowing how) and the knowledge of the language itself (knowing what). Hence, language proficiency comprises a person's communicative abilities, knowledge systems, and skills. Currently, a multifaceted view of language proficiency underpins the teaching, learning, and assessment of foreign languages by recognizing the emergence of various communicative skills, communicative strategies, and linguistic competences, such as vocabulary, grammar, and socio-pragmatics (Harsch, 2017).

Attempts to improve the quality of English language teaching (ELT) across the world have increased the expectations on teachers' target language proficiency that has been acknowledged as an essential aspect of teachers' expertise and an important factor influencing students' learning (Canh & Renandya, 2017). One of the most important competences for language teachers is target language proficiency as it facilitates their objectives and duties in

classes (Freeman, 2017). Professional English language teachers must have adequate content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and English language proficiency to teach successfully in the target language although there is no perfect relationship between teaching efficacy and teachers' target language proficiency. Nevertheless, teachers can manage their lessons seamlessly and efficiently if they have sufficient language proficiency. Previous studies have indicated that teachers with a greater degree of proficiency tend to be more competent at utilizing English in classrooms and providing proper language assistance to their students (Nhung, 2017; Renandya et al., 2018).

The majority of English language teachers across the world use English as a second, third, or additional language instead of their mother tongue. Their levels of English language proficiency mostly become a source of concern. Consequently, they may fall short of the criteria set by employers who correlate greater levels of language proficiency with teaching effectiveness. English language teachers must have specific language skills, such as demonstrating excellent English, retaining fluency, recognizing students' errors, providing appropriate feedback, and creating instructional improvement (Faez et al., 2019; Richards, 2017). In Indonesia, the problem of English teachers with low language proficiency remains a concern although there is neither recent nor authoritative national data on English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers' language proficiency levels. However, many local studies have discovered a substantial percentage of teachers with low English language proficiency, indicating that a large number of professional English language teachers at formal schools were determined to have low proficiency to teach English (Yusuf & Novita, 2020). Globally, teacher language proficiency has garnered significant research attention and been a major aspect in determining a teacher's competence (Faez et al., 2019). In particular, this issue has drawn much research interest in countries where English is not the *lingua franca* (Lie et al., 2019).

Nowadays, people use a variety of methods to learn English. English debate becomes one of the strategies used to develop English language proficiency (Agustina & Bahrani, 2016). Debate is well-known as one of effective strategies to teach languages, including foreign languages such as English (Fuadah et al., 2020). Having popularly acclaimed as an effective teaching strategy, debate can be a promising strategy as it provides a conducive mechanism for L2 learning (Majidi et al., 2020). There have been several world-level debate championships in the last two decades where debaters across countries participate in high-level debate arenas. The debaters representing their own countries compete each other to achieve victory and become the champion of the world (Amalia & Hamzah, 2016). Actually, debate occurs in our daily lives when we have pros or cons with some social problems, and this provides the real practice of debate (Wijaya, 2016).

Debate is defined as a speaking activity in which two teams, comprising two or more speakers each team, present their arguments and counter the opponent team's arguments in relation to the given topic or motion (Ahmed, 2020; Iman, 2017). Debate is regarded as a dynamic learning strategy that allows students to develop their creative thinking while expressing their opinions to others (Ahmed, 2020). Debating is an activity in which debaters make constructive arguments, independent of personal viewpoints, for or against current topics, such as moral, legal, social, and political issues. Each team is given fifteen minutes to prepare their arguments. Eventually, debaters have to think critically, present strong arguments, and perform excellent teamwork with their teammates to achieve victory (Nasriandi & Masruddin, 2021).

Indonesian EFL teachers' English language proficiency has been the focus of several studies (Tamah & Lie, 2019). An array of studies on debate and English language proficiency have also been undertaken. Nevertheless, most of the studies merely focused on one or two aspects of language proficiency. For instance, there have been several studies on debate and speaking skill (Fuadah et al., 2020; Hetharie et al., 2020; Nasriandi & Masruddin, 2021;

Qomariah et al., 2020; Wahyuni et al., 2019; Widiawati et al., 2020; Wijaya, 2016), debate and written and oral argumentation skill (Majidi et al., 2021), debate and writing skill (Majidi et al., 2021), debate and reading and listening skills (Yang & Gamble, 2013), and debate and communication skill (Aclan & Aziz, 2015). Obviously, debate and speaking skill have gained the most attention from ELT researchers. Despite the relationships between debate and academic achievement (Yang & Gamble, 2013) and English language proficiency and academic performance (Martirosyan et al., 2015), several studies have been conducted to explore debate and other academic skills, such as critical thinking skill (Hadi et al., 2021; Iman, 2017; Rear, 2017; Wahyuni et al., 2020; Yang & Gamble, 2013) and problem-solving skill (Rear, 2017; Syahputra & Chaira, 2020).

In light of the pertinent studies, debate and overall English language proficiency have remained underinvestigated, especially in the context of EFL teachers as they must have a certain degree of English language proficiency to effectively perform their duties inside and beyond classrooms. It is also urgent to ensure the quality of EFL teachers, including their language proficiency, in countries where English does not become the *lingua franca* such as Indonesia. Therefore, the present study would like to fill this lacuna with one probing question: “How does debate play several roles in developing an Indonesian EFL teacher’s English language proficiency?”. Although this study is limited to a single participant due to limited time and resources, it can still serve as a stepping stone to exploring this critical issue.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

Rooted in a qualitative research paradigm, this study adopted narrative inquiry, which is suited to deeply exploring lived experiences through personal stories (Adhikari, 2021; Jeyasundaram et al., 2020). Since this approach values the quality and depth of data over quantity, using a single participant can unravel more nuanced understandings of complex phenomena, offering detailed contextual, social, and temporal dimensions to personal experiences (Adhikari, 2021; Daud, 2021; Metersky et al., 2023). However, it inherently limits the generalizability of the findings to broader populations or diverse contexts, thereby constraining any statistical or theoretical generalizations (Adhikari, 2021; Clandinin, 2006; Zubair & Moazzam, 2024). Following Clandinin and Connelly (2000), this narrative inquiry involved several reflective and iterative steps. First, a lived experience of interest was identified and situated within three dimensions: temporality, sociality, and place (Clandinin, 2006). Narrative data were then gathered through written reflections and in-depth interviews, ensuring rich personal stories (Lindsay & Schwind, 2016). Subsequently, an iterative analysis, including ‘broadening’ and ‘burrowing’, was carried out to situate narratives in a larger context and uncover deeper emotional and relational meanings. This analytical process culminated in the restorying of experiences into coherent narrative texts, authentically representing the person and her social milieu (Clandinin et al., 2011). Ultimately, dialogic refinement was accomplished by sharing and reflecting on the restoried narratives to further illuminate the intricacies of lived experiences (Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin et al., 2011).

Participants

One female EFL teacher was purposefully recruited to participate in this study. She was working at a private secondary school in Klaten, Jawa Tengah, Indonesia, where she taught English as a foreign language (EFL) subject. She had previously worked for five years before participating in this study. Moreover, she was 29 years old at the time of her participation in this study. Her stories with debate offered a nuanced understanding of the critical roles of debate in developing English language proficiency, sparking exploratory insights for similar EFL contexts. Despite its context-specific nature, this study contributed to exploratory

evidence for investigating the impacts of debate and developing debate-based pedagogical practices in broader EFL settings (Zhang, 2019). To protect the participant's identity and preserve the ethical standards of this study, the pseudonym "Nisa" was used to refer to her throughout this study. Furthermore, Nisa became the participant primarily because she met the recruitment criteria as follows: 1) being an EFL teacher at a secondary school in Indonesia, 2) having excellent English language proficiency as evidenced by high scores (590 on TOEFL ITP and 566 (C1 level) on CEFR) on multiple English standardized tests with complementary strengths in clarity, reliability, accessibility, and relevance to academic English and the global proficiency framework, and 3) actively engaging herself in debate at least once a week. As an ethical standard, Nisa had initially expressed her approval of the informed consent form before this study began.

Instruments

Data were obtained through written reflections prompted by a pre-determined series of questions, which were then followed by semi-structured interviews based on a well-prepared interview guide to elicit further details (Adhikari, 2021; Barkhuizen et al., 2024; Zhang, 2019). Initially, written reflections were prompted by several guiding questions as the following:

- 1) What facilities and resources do you need to undertake debate?
- 2) How often do you undertake debate?
- 3) How does debate develop your English language proficiency?
- 4) What are the advantages of debate that help develop your English language proficiency?
- 5) What English language skills and knowledge can be developed through debate?

Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were performed by asking the participant several follow-up questions, informed by the results of written reflections, as follows:

- 1) How did you initially join a debate club?
- 2) Why are you encouraged to undertake debate?
- 3) What challenges do you encounter in a debate?
- 4) How do you overcome these challenges?
- 5) Regarding the debate, why do you need to read and listen extensively?
- 6) How do you get English language exposure in a debate?
- 7) How do you practice all four English language skills in a debate?
- 8) How does debate become a conducive learning environment for developing your English language proficiency?

Data Analysis

This narrative inquiry employed an inductive thematic analysis to derive themes directly from the participant's narratives. It began with transcription and immersive reading of the narratives, allowing initial open coding to generate salient codes without imposing predetermined theoretical frameworks (Butina, 2015). Subsequent constant comparisons and refinement of codes enabled the emergence of broader thematic categories that authentically represent the intricacies of lived experiences (Peterson, 2017; Qaissi, 2024). This inductive approach ensured that themes were grounded in the narratives, thus capturing both shared patterns and individual nuances. Ultimately, overarching themes offered a coherent lens through which the narratives were interpreted while preserving the integrity and contextual richness inherent in narrative inquiry (Barkhuizen et al., 2024).

Several interlocking strategies were employed to ensure trustworthiness and rigor. Data triangulation compared themes derived from written reflections and interview transcripts, thereby fostering credibility (Shenton, 2004; Gill et al., 2017). Member checking involved the participant in reviewing and verifying the findings, which bolstered confirmability and dependability (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). Thick and contextual descriptions helped situate the

participant's narratives, offering sufficient details for transferability to similar contexts (Shenton, 2004; Morse, 2015).

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

Drawing on the analysis results of written reflections and semi-structured interviews, a series of findings are revealed and divided into two main themes in line with the research question. These central themes include how debate plays several roles in developing the EFL teacher's English language proficiency, language skills, knowledge, and other academic skills. Thus, the findings are presented in this section. Essential excerpts from written reflections (WR) and semi-structured interviews (SSI) are quoted and used to corroborate the findings.

The Roles of Debate in Developing English Language Proficiency

This subsection delineates the findings regarding the critical roles of debate in developing English language proficiency. It shows in what ways debate helps the EFL teacher develop her English language proficiency. It also explains how frequently she undertakes debate. These delineations would portray a clear picture of how debate can effectively help the EFL teacher enhance her English language proficiency.

Having successfully achieved high scores on two English standardized tests, comprising TOEFL ITP (590) and CEFR (566/C1 level), Nisa had excellent English language proficiency, which was above average among many other EFL learners. One of her secrets in developing her English language proficiency was actively participating in debate. Evidently, debate has many pivotal roles, which are central to English language proficiency development. Debate plays a crucial role in fostering target language exposure. Debate also facilitates target language use through writing arguments, listening to opponents' speech, delivering arguments and rebuttals by speaking, and studying debate motions by extensively reading, listening to, and watching debate materials and other related topics. Beyond all roles, one essential role of debate needs to be highlighted. Debate became a conducive learning environment that immersed Nisa into the target language environment. These important findings are evidenced by the excerpt below.

"Through debate, I get lots of exposure in both spoken and written materials. I read lots of references from various sources, e.g., books, newspapers, and online articles to understand a motion or topic being debated. I also need to read some references dealing with debate theories and watch a bunch of debate videos to learn the speech structure. I learn to write my arguments in a cohesive and coherent manner. I listen carefully to my opponents as I need to give rebuttals afterwards. Finally, I learn to convey my arguments to strengthen my team's case and rebuttals to tackle my opponent's case through a well-structured speech. Debate really exposes me to extensive reading and listening and helps me practice my speaking and writing skills. It also stimulates me to think more critically as I need to see a motion from two perspectives and offer a deep analysis on each viewpoint." (WR)

The frequency of debate undertaken by Nisa is revealed in this study. She used to undertake debate twice a week. Despite becoming a debater for many years in her secondary school and college periods, she also served as a debate coach in the school where she worked as a teacher and remained a debater at the moment. These findings are evidenced by the following excerpts.

“We practice debate twice a week. Together with my students in the debate club, I read lots of reading materials from various topics and learn to construct good arguments.” (WR)

“When I found out a debate club at my secondary school, I immediately joined the club. The goal was to be able to speak English fluently. It had continued for six years until I graduated from secondary school. Fortunately, I even got new knowledge other than speaking. When I was a university student, I joined a debate club again because it was really fun. Now, I currently become a member of a debate club and a debate coach at the school where I work.” (SSI)

English Language and Other Academic Skills Developed through Debate

This subsection portrays the findings regarding language skills, knowledge, and other academic skills developed as the impacts of debate. Debate does not only develop language skills and knowledge but also other academic skills that are crucial for everyone’s development in academic and non-academic settings. Furthermore, it delineates challenges encountered when undertaking debate. Several actionable strategies to address the hindrances have also been discovered.

Nisa narrated that debate could enhance all four language skills, comprising reading, listening, writing, and speaking skills. This occurred since debate could simultaneously facilitate the practice of the four language skills. Nisa used to read a lot to construct sound arguments. This reading activity indirectly enhanced her vocabulary, especially particular terms in various fields of study. Debate also facilitated listening practices since Nisa should listen to her opponents’ arguments to allow herself to deliver good rebuttals. Furthermore, debate offered sufficient target language exposure, which functions as the target language nutrition. Nisa also used to write her arguments first before delivering them in a speech. She was really trained to convey her arguments and rebuttals in front of people. Therefore, these practices contribute to developing her four language skills, vocabulary, and rhetoric. The following excerpts become the evidence.

“Debate improves my listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills simultaneously. I usually do lots of reading before coming up with sound arguments. This reading activity greatly improves my vocabulary as I get to know many specific terms in various fields outside my expertise. It also trains my listening skill as I need to listen carefully to what my opponents say to deliver good rebuttals and tackle their points. To give a persuasive speech, I also learn about rhetoric, which involves a wide range of grammatical structures and high-level vocabulary.” (WR)

“Language exposure in a debate can develop not only passive skills but also productive skills, such as speaking and writing skills.” (SSI)

In addition to developing language skills and knowledge, debate successfully enhances other essential academic skills, encompassing critical thinking, arguing, and public speaking skills. Debate not only facilitates the development of language skills and knowledge but also fosters other academic skills that are crucial for personal development. Debate has the mechanisms that enable debaters to develop their critical thinking, arguing, and public speaking skills since they must present their arguments and rebuttals to opponents, adjudicators, and other audiences based on valid data and strong reasonings supported by a thorough analysis. It is evidenced by the following excerpts, which portray the delineation.

“We can also develop our critical thinking skill. In a parliamentary debate, we have to present and refute opponents’ arguments. So, we have to really

understand the motion or topic being debated. We analyze the phenomenon. We present relevant data that support our arguments. Arguments must be based on data and strong reasonings. We indirectly learn inductive and deductive analyses, how to make strong premises that are not easily refuted, how to identify the weaknesses of opponents' premises, and others. So, debate actually facilitates thinking analytically and critically." (SSI)

"Through debate, I also learn public speaking skill while developing my critical thinking skill." (SSI)

Despite having beneficial advantages for English language proficiency, several hindrances related to debate also exist. Nisa found difficulties in listening in the context of parliamentary debate. Topics or motions that are beyond her expertise also become a challenge for her. Fortunately, she already found some actionable strategies to overcome these problems. She forced herself to have more listening practices to encounter her problem regarding difficulties in listening in the context of parliamentary debate. Furthermore, she read extensively and expanded her reading materials, covering various topics. The following excerpts are the evidence.

"I find it hard to listen in the context of parliamentary debate. It is especially true when our opponents speak at high speed and use a lot of sophisticated vocabulary. However, I really love debate and want to develop my debating skill so that I force myself to have more listening practices. As time goes by, I get used to it." (SSI)

"Another difficulty is dealing with topics or motions that are beyond my expertise, such as Law and Medicine. I struggle with many new technical terms in other fields of study because I am still unfamiliar with them. However, I can manage this problem by reading a lot." (SSI)

Discussion

The findings of the present study expand the current body of literature since they are both similar to and distinct from those of many previous studies. The present study yields nuanced findings regarding the critical roles of debate in developing English language proficiency. It uncovers that debate plays three critical roles: promoting target language exposure, facilitating target language use through reading, listening, writing, and speaking activities, and becoming a learning environment that immerses the EFL teacher into a conducive environment for EFL learning. Prominently, a conducive language learning environment simultaneously facilitates both English language exposure and use.

Informed by previous pertinent studies concerning its critical roles, debate promotes target language use, students' engagement, classroom discussion, target language exposure, and English language learning environment among students (Aclan & Aziz, 2015; Ahmed, 2020; Arung & Jumardin, 2016; Hetharie et al., 2020; Majidi et al., 2021; Qomariah et al., 2020; Suharsih & Supriatna, 2020). Furthermore, debate plays a role as an interactive and engaging instructional strategy to facilitate the development of macro skills, comprising listening, reading, writing, and speaking, and the enhancement of critical thinking skill (Suhendra, 2020). Debate also fosters collaborative learning since students will work together with their respective teammates (Aclan & Aziz, 2015; Hetharie et al., 2020; Iman, 2017). Additionally, debate enhances students' psychological factors for learning, encompassing motivation (Aclan & Aziz, 2015; Arung & Jumardin, 2016; Hadi et al., 2021; Hetharie et al., 2020; Suharsih & Supriatna, 2020; Tianame et al., 2019), enjoyment (Aclan & Aziz, 2015; Arung & Jumardin, 2016; Firmansyah & Vegian, 2019; Tianame et al., 2019), self-confidence

(Aclan & Aziz, 2015; Hadi et al., 2021; Hetharie et al., 2020; Suharsih & Supriatna, 2020; Tianame et al., 2019), and autonomy (Aclan & Aziz, 2015). Three critical roles of debate discovered in the present study align with those of previous studies.

The findings of the present study demonstrate that several English language skills, knowledge, and essential academic skills have been successfully developed through debate. The language skills and knowledge developed comprise reading, listening, writing, speaking, vocabulary, and rhetoric. Furthermore, critical thinking, arguing, and public speaking skills are essential academic skills successfully enhanced through debate. These findings echo the results of many prior studies. It was uncovered that debate facilitated the development of four language skills, comprising reading, listening, writing, and speaking (Ahmed, 2020; Suhendra, 2020). Furthermore, it was revealed that students' vocabulary was developed through debate (Hetharie et al., 2020; Iman, 2017). In previous pertinent studies, debate was also reported to enhance essential academic skills, encompassing critical thinking (Agustina & Bahrani, 2016; Hetharie et al., 2020; Iman, 2017; Suharsih & Supriatna, 2020; Wahyuni et al., 2019), problem solving (Hetharie et al., 2020; Syahputra & Chaira, 2020), arguing (Majidi et al., 2021), and public speaking (Aclan & Aziz, 2015; Agustina & Bahrani, 2016; Qomariah et al., 2020). Thus, the development of rhetoric is a novel finding in the present study that has not been discovered in a plethora of previous studies. These findings expand on current knowledge about the advantages of debate in fostering English language proficiency and essential academic skills.

Despite its success in developing language skills, knowledge, and other academic skills, several hindrances and overcoming strategies have been revealed. These challenges come from difficulties in listening in the context of parliamentary debate and unfamiliar topics or motions. To manage these problems, having more listening practices and extensively reading with expanded reading materials become the keys to success. In a similar vein, several challenges occurring in debate also existed in previous studies. These difficulties arose when selecting data and evidence, making arguments, and giving rebuttals (Suharsih & Supriatna, 2020). Furthermore, other hindrances encompassed limited meeting quantity and duration, insufficient time for novice students' case building, inability to cover the average student population in a class, lack of students' background knowledge, and students' poor speaking skill (Wahyuni et al., 2020). Uniquely, the findings of the present study indicate challenges in terms of difficulty in listening in the context of parliamentary debate and unfamiliarity with debate topics or motions.

These promising findings highlight the transformative potentials of debate as a pedagogical strategy, underscoring its capacity to intertwine language skills and knowledge development and academic skills enhancement. For EFL teacher training programs, it is recommended to develop modules dedicated explicitly to debate-based instruction, equipping student teachers with actionable strategies to cultivate an interactive and engaging class atmosphere conducive to extensive language exposure and use. Moreover, curriculum developers should consider incorporating debate into course frameworks to harness these advantages further in diverse EFL settings. In similar EFL contexts, debate-based instruction can transform traditional EFL classes into dynamic environments that promote practical language use and learning autonomy.

CONCLUSION

This narrative inquiry underscores the critical roles of debate in developing an Indonesian EFL teacher's English language proficiency. The EFL teacher's long journey with debate—regularly engaging in debate twice a week over many years—is instrumental in cultivating a conducive language learning environment while extensively facilitating the exposure and use of the English language. Through regular participation, debate not only successfully develops

the four primary language skills, vocabulary, and rhetoric, but also contributes to developing essential academic skills, including critical thinking, arguing, and public speaking skills.

Due to its limited generalizability to broader populations or diverse contexts that constrain any generalizations, further studies should extend this single-participant narrative inquiry by employing potential research designs, including multiple case studies, action research, mixed methods research, and longitudinal studies, to capture the evolving roles of debate in enhancing English language proficiency. Future researchers are encouraged to recruit diverse participants, such as EFL secondary school students, college students, and pre-service, novice, and experienced teachers, across various settings, including traditional classrooms, debate clubs, and online debate forums, to enhance transferability and enrich contextual insights. In addition, future studies can explore the impacts of debate on other EFL learning outcomes, such as intercultural communicative competence, problem-solving skill, and self-efficacy. Adopting socio-constructivist and critical pedagogical frameworks would also offer robust theoretical lenses to investigate the transformative impacts of debate on English language proficiency and other EFL learning outcomes, thereby enriching the understanding of debate-based instruction in Indonesian EFL contexts.

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