JOURNAL OF EDUCATION AND APPLIED TEACHING (JEAT)

Volume 1 Nomor 2 2025, 102-115
E-ISSN:
DOI:

The Effect of Online Debate Activities on Critical Thinking and English Speaking Skills

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji pengaruh kegiatan debat daring terhadap keterampilan berbicara dan kemampuan berpikir kritis siswa EFL (English as a Foreign Language). Desain penelitian quasi-eksperimental digunakan dengan dua kelompok: kelompok eksperimen (n = 15) yang mengikuti debat daring terstruktur, dan kelompok kontrol (n = 15) yang mengikuti diskusi konvensional. Keterampilan berbicara dinilai menggunakan rubrik berbasis CEFR, sementara kemampuan berpikir kritis diukur dengan tes standar. Hasil kuantitatif menunjukkan peningkatan signifikan pada kelompok eksperimen dari skor pra-tes rata-rata 5,75 menjadi 7,50 pada pasca-tes (selisih = +1,75; t = -41,413; p = 0,000). Kelompok kontrol menunjukkan peningkatan yang lebih kecil, dari 5,52 menjadi 6,00 (selisih = +0,43; t = -9,539; p = 0,000). Uji t independen menunjukkan perbedaan signifikan antara kedua kelompok (t = -8,607; p = 0,000). Temuan kualitatif mendukung hasil ini; siswa melaporkan peningkatan kepercayaan diri, partisipasi aktif, dan kemampuan berpikir kritis. Meski menghadapi kendala seperti kecemasan awal dan gangguan teknis, sebagian besar siswa mampu beradaptasi. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa debat daring merupakan strategi pembelajaran yang efektif untuk meningkatkan keterampilan berbicara dan keterlibatan kognitif siswa EFL.

Kata kunci: *Debat daring, keterampilan berbicara, siswa EFL, berpikir kritis, pembelajaran bahasa.*

Abstract

This study examines the impact of online debate activities on the speaking skills and critical thinking abilities of EFL students. A quasi-experimental design was employed involving two groups: an experimental group (n = 15) that participated in online debates and a control group (n = 15) that engaged in conventional discussions. Speaking skills were assessed using CEFR-based rubrics, while critical thinking was measured using a standardized test. Quantitative findings revealed that the experimental group's speaking scores improved significantly from a pre-test average of 5.75 to a post-test average of 7.50 (mean gain = +1.75; t = -41.413; p = 0.000), while the control group showed only a modest improvement from 5.52 to 6.00 (mean gain = +0.43; t = -9.539; p = 0.000). An independent t-test confirmed a significant difference in gain scores between groups (t = -8.607; p = 0.000). Qualitative data supported these results, with students reporting increased confidence, engagement, and critical thinking. Despite initial challenges such as anxiety and technical issues, students adapted well. The study concludes that online debate is an effective pedagogical strategy for enhancing speaking performance and cognitive engagement in EFL settings.

Keywords: Online debate, speaking skills, EFL learners, critical thinking, language learning

1. INTRODUCTION

In the evolving landscape of language education, the integration of digital technology into classroom practices has drastically transformed how English is taught and learned. The use of online platforms has opened up new avenues for interactive and collaborative learning, especially in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. This shift aligns with the demands of 21st-century education, where communication, critical thinking, and technological literacy are considered essential competencies (Trilling & Fadel, 2019; Wahyuni et al., 2019). Digital platforms enable learners to engage in authentic language use, offering a space where they can practice and develop their skills beyond the limitations of

History:
Received : 2 August 2025
Revised : 4 August 2025
Accepted : 8 Augustl 2025
Published : 8 August 2025

Publisher: Horizon Edukasi Prima Indonesia

traditional classrooms (Foxworthy & McCarter, 2025; Jones & Flint, 2022; Novak et al., 2023). Among the various pedagogical tools available, online debates are gaining traction for their ability to simulate real-world communication while fostering cognitive and linguistic development simultaneously (Alharbi, 2023; Namaziandost et al., 2019).

Debate as a learning activity has long been recognized for its capacity to enhance both language proficiency and higher-order thinking. In a debate setting, students are encouraged to construct arguments, defend their views, challenge opposing perspectives, and articulate ideas clearly core processes that demand both fluency and logical reasoning (Bigs et al., 2022; Ball, 2021; Noviyenty, 2018). With the emergence of online learning environments, these benefits can now be accessed virtually, allowing for greater flexibility, participation, and inclusivity. Online debates incorporate synchronous and asynchronous communication tools, such as video conferencing apps and discussion forums, to facilitate structured argumentative exchanges. These tools provide students with opportunities to engage in meaningful conversations that mirror real-life interactions in English, thus reinforcing their speaking skills while also nurturing critical engagement with ideas (Sari et al., 2022).

One of the major advantages of online debate is its ability to develop two fundamental 21st-century skills: English speaking proficiency and critical thinking. Speaking in English requires more than just grammar accuracy it involves clarity, coherence, fluency, and interactional competence (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2019). Simultaneously, engaging in debates stimulates cognitive skills such as analyzing evidence, weighing perspectives, synthesizing ideas, and forming reasoned judgments (Suárez-Perales et al., 2021). These are skills that are essential not only for academic success but also for real-world problem-solving and decision-making. Online debates, therefore, serve as an integrated activity that encourages language learners to think critically while communicating effectively in English (Gulnaz, 2020; Aarar, 2024; Hattani, 2021).

Despite the theoretical and pedagogical support for debate in language learning, the exploration of online debate specifically remains relatively under-researched, especially in EFL settings. Most studies have focused on traditional in-person debate formats, while fewer have addressed how digital adaptations affect learners' language and thinking skills (Moorhouse & Wong, 2022; Sari et al., 2022). In particular, the combined effect of online debate on both speaking skills and critical thinking has yet to be thoroughly investigated. Furthermore, student perspectives on the use of online debate as a classroom strategy are often overlooked, even though learner feedback can offer valuable insights for instructional design and engagement (Chen et al., 2018). Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by examining how online debate activities influence both the speaking and thinking skills of EFL students, along with their perceptions of this pedagogical approach.

Based on the background explained above, this research focuses on three main questions:

1) How do online debate activities affect students' English speaking skills?
2) How do online debate activities influence students' critical thinking skills?
3) What are students' perceptions of the use of online debate as a learning tool?

By answering these questions, the study intends to contribute to the growing field of digital language pedagogy and offer practical implications for EFL educators. The findings are expected to not only validate the use of online debates as an instructional method but also highlight best practices for integrating technology into communicative and cognitive skill development in English language learning.

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Design

This study employs a quasi-experimental mixed-method design to investigate the effect of online debate activities on students' English speaking skills and critical thinking abilities. The quantitative component of the research focuses on measuring changes in students' speaking performance and critical thinking test scores before and after the intervention (Sugiyono, 2021). This is conducted using a pre-test and post-test approach for both experimental and control groups. Meanwhile, the qualitative component is intended to capture students' perceptions and experiences through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews (Patton, 2020; Tisdell et al., 2025). The mixed-methods approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the effects of online debate, as it combines statistical data with in-depth insights into students' subjective views. This design is appropriate given the complexity of language learning and the cognitive processes involved in critical thinking development.

2.2 Population and Sample

The population of this study consists of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students enrolled at IAIN Ash-Shiddiqiyah, a private university in South Sumatra. The sample includes 30 students who were selected through purposive sampling, a non-probability technique used to identify individuals who meet specific criteria relevant to the study. The sample is divided into two groups: 15 students in the experimental group, who participated in online debate activities, and 15 students in the control group, who received traditional discussion-based instruction. This sampling method was chosen to ensure that participants have a similar level of English proficiency and are capable of engaging in both the debate and conventional discussion formats. The relatively small but manageable sample size allows for focused observation and analysis within the study's limited time frame.

2.3 Instruments

To collect data, four instruments were utilized. First, a Speaking Rubric was used to assess students' oral performance based on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). The rubric evaluates four key components: fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, and interaction (Lasso Rosero, 2019). Second, a Critical Thinking Test adapted from the Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal was used to measure students' ability to analyze, evaluate, and infer logically (Arif, 2024). Third, a Likert-scale questionnaire was designed to gather students' perceptions of the online debate experience, including their feelings of confidence, engagement, and perceived skill improvement (Robinson, 2024). Lastly, an Interview Guide with semi-structured questions was employed to explore deeper insights and narratives from selected students in the experimental group regarding their experiences, challenges, and reflections on participating in online debate sessions (Kvale, 2021).

2.4 Procedure

The research was conducted in several stages. Initially, a pre-test on speaking and critical thinking was administered to both the experimental and control groups to establish baseline data. Following this, the experimental group participated in six online debate sessions over a period of three weeks, using platforms such as Zoom or Google Meet, and following structured formats including opening statements, rebuttals, and conclusions. The control group, by contrast, was involved in conventional classroom discussions that did not involve structured argumentative exchanges. After the intervention, a post-test on speaking and critical thinking was conducted for both groups to measure any changes or developments. Finally, questionnaires and interviews were administered to the experimental group to collect qualitative data regarding their perceptions of the effectiveness and challenges of the online debate process.

2.5 Data Analysis Technique

To analyze the collected data, both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed. Quantitative data from the pre- and post-tests were analyzed using paired-sample t-tests (to compare pre- and post-results within the same group) and independent-sample t-tests (to compare results between the experimental and control groups). These statistical tests help determine whether any observed differences are statistically significant. On the other hand, the qualitative data from open-ended questionnaires and interviews were analyzed through thematic analysis, which involves coding the data, identifying recurring themes, and interpreting patterns that reflect students' experiences, opinions, and learning outcomes. This dual-method analysis provides both measurable evidence and contextual understanding of how online debate impacts EFL students' speaking and critical thinking development.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Quantitative Findings

This section presents the results of the quantitative analysis conducted to examine the effects of online debate activities on students' English speaking skills and critical thinking abilities. The data were collected through pre-tests and post-tests administered to both the experimental and control groups. The experimental group participated in structured online debate sessions, while the control group engaged in conventional classroom discussions without debate elements.

To assess students' development in speaking skills, their performances were evaluated using a rubric based on CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) descriptors, which included fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, and interaction. Meanwhile, students' critical thinking abilities were measured using a standardized test adapted from the Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal, covering key components such as inference, interpretation, deduction, and logical evaluation.

Statistical analyses, including paired-sample t-tests (to compare pre- and post-test scores within each group) and independent-sample t-tests (to compare post-test results between the two groups), were conducted to determine whether the differences in scores were statistically significant. The following sections describe the findings related to each variable: speaking skills and critical thinking.

1) Speaking Skills Improvement

The analysis of pre-test and post-test results from both groups indicates an overall improvement in students' English speaking skills. However, the experimental group, which participated in online debate activities, showed a more significant enhancement compared to the control group, which engaged in conventional classroom discussions.

Table 1. Pre-Test Speaking Scores – Control Group

No	Student ID	Fluency	Accuracy	Pronunciation	Interaction	Total Score	Average
1	C01	6	6	6	6	24	6
2	C02	5	6	6	5	22	5.5
3	C03	5	5	6	5	21	5.25
4	C04	6	5	5	6	22	5.5
5	C05	7	6	6	6	25	6.25
6	C06	6	6	6	6	24	6

7	C07	5	5	5	5	20	5
8	C08	6	5	6	5	22	5.5
9	C09	5	6	6	5	22	5.5
10	C10	6	6	6	6	24	6
11	C11	5	5	5	5	20	5
12	C12	6	6	6	6	24	6
13	C13	6	5	6	5	22	5.5
14	C14	5	5	5	5	20	5
15	C15	6	6	6	6	24	6

Table 2. Post-Test Speaking Scores – Control Group

No	Student ID	Fluency	Accuracy	Pronunciation	Interaction	Total Score	Average
1	C01	7	6	7	6	26	6.5
2	C02	6	6	6	6	24	6
3	C03	6	5	6	5	22	5.5
4	C04	6	6	6	6	24	6
5	C05	7	7	7	7	28	7
6	C06	6	6	6	6	24	6
7	C07	6	5	6	5	22	5.5
8	C08	6	6	6	6	24	6
9	C09	6	6	6	5	23	5.75
10	C10	6	6	7	6	25	6.25
11	C11	6	5	6	5	22	5.5
12	C12	7	6	7	6	26	6.5
13	C13	6	6	6	6	24	6
14	C14	6	5	6	5	22	5.5
15	C15	7	6	7	6	26	6.5

The control group's speaking scores show a moderate improvement from pre-test to post-test. Initially, most students scored between 20–25 points (average: 5.0–6.25). After the intervention (conventional discussion method), their scores increased slightly, with several students reaching 26–28 points (average: 5.5–7.0). The improvement was consistent but not substantial, suggesting that while regular classroom discussions helped maintain and slightly improve speaking performance, the impact was limited compared to more interactive methods like online debates.

Table 3. Pre-test Speaking Score – Experimental Group

No	Student ID	Fluency	Accuracy	Pronunciation	Interaction	Total Score	Average
1	S01	6	6	7	6	25	6.25
2	S02	7	6	6	6	25	6.25
3	S03	5	5	6	5	21	5.25
4	S04	6	6	6	5	23	5.75
5	S05	7	7	6	7	27	6.75
6	S06	5	6	5	5	21	5.25
7	S07	6	5	6	6	23	5.75

8	S08	5	5	5	5	20	5
9	S09	6	7	6	6	25	6.25
10	S10	6	6	6	6	24	6
11	S11	5	6	5	5	21	5.25
12	S12	7	6	7	6	26	6.5
13	S13	6	6	6	6	24	6
14	S14	5	5	5	5	20	5
15	S15	6	7	6	7	26	6.5

Table 4. Post-test Speaking Score – Experimental Group

No	Student ID	Fluency	Accuracy	Pronunciation	Interaction	Total Score	Average
1	S01	8	8	8	8	32	8
2	S02	8	7	8	8	31	7.75
3	S03	7	7	7	7	28	7
4	S04	8	7	7	7	29	7.25
5	S05	9	8	8	9	34	8.5
6	S06	7	7	7	7	28	7
7	S07	8	7	7	8	30	7.5
8	S08	7	7	7	7	28	7
9	S09	8	8	8	8	32	8
10	S10	8	7	8	8	31	7.75
11	S11	7	7	7	7	28	7
12	S12	8	8	8	8	32	8
13	S13	8	7	8	8	31	7.75
14	S14	7	7	7	7	28	7
15	S15	9	8	8	9	34	8.5

The experimental group showed a notable improvement in speaking skills after participating in online debate activities. In the pre-test, most students scored between 20–27 points (average: 5.0–6.75), indicating moderate proficiency. However, in the post-test, their scores increased significantly, with many achieving 28–34 points (average: 7.0–8.5). This marked improvement across all components fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, and interaction suggests that online debates effectively enhanced students' ability to express ideas clearly, argue persuasively, and interact spontaneously in English.

2) Paired Sample T-test

A Paired Sample T-test was conducted to compare the pre-test and post-test speaking scores within each group. The control group showed a slight improvement, but it was not statistically significant, indicating limited impact from conventional discussion. In contrast, the experimental group, which participated in online debate activities, showed a statistically significant improvement, suggesting that debates effectively enhanced students' English speaking skills.

Table 5. The Result of Paired Sample T-test

Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Precont - Postcont	-,433	,176	,045	-,531	-,336	-9,539	14	,000
Pair 2	Preexp - Postexp	-1,750	,164	,042	-1,841	-1,659	-41,413	14	,000

The results of the Paired Samples T-test revealed significant improvements in both the control and experimental groups. In the control group, the mean difference between the pre-test and post-test speaking scores was -0.433, with a t-value of -9.539 and a p-value of .000, indicating a statistically significant yet modest improvement. This suggests that while conventional discussion contributed to better speaking performance, the effect was relatively limited. In contrast, the experimental group, which engaged in online debate activities, showed a much greater improvement with a mean difference of -1.750, a t-value of -41.413, and a p-value of .000. The large difference and strong statistical significance indicate that online debate activities were highly effective in enhancing students' English speaking skills.

3) Independent Sample T-test

To determine whether there was a significant difference in speaking score improvement between the control and experimental groups, an Independent Samples T-test was conducted using the gain scores (post-test minus pre-test) of both groups. The test aimed to compare the effectiveness of online debate activities versus conventional discussion in improving English speaking skills. The results showed a statistically significant difference between the two groups, with the experimental group outperforming the control group. This indicates that students who participated in online debates made significantly greater progress in their speaking abilities compared to those who engaged in traditional discussions. Thus, online debate activities were proven to be a more effective instructional method for enhancing EFL students' speaking skills.

Table 5. The Result of Independent Sample T-test

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Result	Equal variances assumed	1,399	,247	-8,607	28	,000	-1,567	,182	-1,940	-1,194
	Equal variances not assumed			-8,607	27,136	,000	-1,567	,182	-1,940	-1,193

Based on the Independent Samples T-test results, the analysis revealed a statistically significant difference in speaking score improvement between the experimental group (who engaged in online debate activities) and the control group (who participated in conventional

discussions). The Levene's Test for Equality of Variances indicated that the assumption of equal variances was met (F = 1.399, Sig. = 0.247 > 0.05). Therefore, the row for "Equal variances assumed" was used in interpreting the t-test results. The t-value was -8.607 with a p-value of .000 ($p < 0.05$), indicating a significant difference in the mean improvement scores between the two groups. The mean difference was -1.567, with a 95% confidence interval ranging from -1.940 to -1.194. These findings confirm that students in the experimental group significantly outperformed those in the control group in terms of speaking improvement, suggesting that online debate activities were more effective in enhancing English speaking skills.

3.2 Qualitative Findings

1) Student Perceptions

The results from the student perception questionnaires and interviews revealed overwhelmingly positive responses toward the use of online debate activities in English speaking classes. Most students agreed that online debates significantly increased their confidence when speaking English, encouraging them to engage more actively and spontaneously in real-time discussions. Many also highlighted how the debate format stimulated logical and critical thinking, as they needed to process information quickly, construct arguments, and respond effectively to opposing viewpoints.

Table 6. The Result of Questionnaire

No	Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA
1	I feel more confident speaking English after participating in online debate.	0	0	0	46.7%	53.3%
2	Online debate helped me speak more fluently in English.	0	0	0	53.3%	46.7%
3	I was able to think more critically while constructing arguments in online debate.	0	0	0	46.7%	53.3%
4	Online debate made me more active in English speaking class.	0	0	0	60.0%	40.0%
5	I became more interested in learning English through online debate activities.	0	0	0	26.7%	73.3%
6	Online debate helped me structure my arguments in English more clearly.	0	0	0	46.7%	53.3%
7	I found online debate challenging and it improved my abilities.	0	0	0	46.7%	53.3%
8	I experienced technical difficulties during online debate (e.g., unstable connection).	0	0	26.7	60.0%	13.3%
9	I feel more comfortable expressing opinions online than in face-to-face class.	0	0	46.7	46.7%	6.6%
10	I would like online debate to be continued in English speaking classes.	0	0	0	26.7%	73.3%

The results of the student questionnaire revealed overwhelmingly positive responses toward the use of online debate activities in English speaking classes. For all positive statements (Items 1–7 and 10), 100% of the students agreed or strongly agreed, indicating that the online debates effectively boosted their speaking confidence, fluency, critical thinking, and argumentation skills. Students also reported becoming more active and engaged in class, with 73.3% expressing strong interest in continuing online debates as a learning strategy. Although

73.3% of the students experienced technical difficulties, such as unstable internet connections, this did not significantly hinder their overall positive perception. Interestingly, responses were more varied regarding comfort in expressing opinions online versus face-to-face (Item 9), with 46.7% remaining neutral. Overall, the findings demonstrate that online debate activities are not only engaging and enjoyable but also serve as an effective method for enhancing speaking skills and critical thinking in EFL learners.

> One student expressed, *"Debate forced me to think before speaking. It helped me speak more clearly and with purpose",* emphasizing the cognitive and communicative benefits of the activity.
>
> Another participant noted, *"At first I was nervous, but after a few sessions, I felt more confident using English to express my opinions",* pointing to increased self-assurance in spoken interactions.
>
> A third student shared, *"It wasn't just about talking; it was about thinking fast and supporting my argument logically",* reflecting how the debates fostered both language and reasoning skills.
>
> Furthermore, students appreciated the interactive and dynamic nature of the learning process. One respondent mentioned, *"I usually find English class boring, but with debate, I enjoyed it and wanted to participate more",* showing how online debates can enhance student engagement.
>
> Another added, *"Debating with my friends online made the class feel alive. It felt real, like we were using English in the real world",* demonstrating how debates bridge the gap between classroom learning and authentic communication.

Overall, the qualitative data strongly support the notion that online debate is an effective and enjoyable strategy for improving English speaking skills, fostering both linguistic competence and critical thinking ability in EFL learners.

2) Challenge Faced

The implementation of online debate activities, while largely beneficial, also presented several challenges for students. One of the most commonly reported issues was technical difficulty, particularly related to unstable internet connections. Many students mentioned that poor connectivity interrupted the flow of debate, causing frustration and occasional miscommunication.

> As one student commented, *"Sometimes the screen would freeze or the voice would lag. It made it hard to understand what my friends were saying or to respond in time".*

Another significant challenge was the initial anxiety about public speaking in English, especially for those with lower confidence or limited speaking experience. Students admitted feeling nervous at the beginning of the program.

> One participant shared, *"I was scared of making mistakes or being judged, especially in front of others".* This nervousness often led to hesitation and reduced fluency during early debate sessions.

A third challenge was the difficulty in understanding different accents and fast-paced speech, which hindered comprehension during live debates. Some students found it hard to keep up when their peers spoke too quickly or used unfamiliar pronunciation.

> One student noted, *"If someone speaks too fast or has a strong accent, I sometimes miss the point and don't know how to reply".*

Despite these challenges, most students reported that their confidence and listening comprehension improved over time, especially with continuous practice and peer support. Addressing these obstacles through training in debate skills, strategies for listening, and technical support could enhance the effectiveness of online debate in future implementations.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide compelling evidence that structured online debate activities significantly enhance students' English speaking skills, particularly when compared to conventional classroom discussions. The results of the statistical analyses both the paired sample and independent sample t-tests indicate that students in the experimental group, who participated in online debates, experienced substantial improvements in fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, and interaction, as reflected in their post-test scores. These results align with previous research that emphasizes the pedagogical value of debate as a communicative and cognitive tool. Ball (2021) assert that debate encourages learners to engage in spontaneous interaction, thereby improving their speaking fluency and critical thinking abilities through real-time argument construction and rebuttal.

The improvement in the experimental group's scores from an average of around 6.0 to over 7.5 suggests that the debate format fosters not only linguistic performance but also confidence and spontaneity in speaking. This supports the view of Sari et al. (2022), who emphasized that debates offer a meaningful context for language use, as students must listen actively, think critically, and respond appropriately processes that are all integral to effective oral communication. Furthermore, the use of CEFR-based rubrics for assessment adds robustness to these findings, as they align with international standards of language proficiency, ensuring that the improvements observed are pedagogically valid and transferable.

The control group also demonstrated a modest improvement in their speaking scores, although the mean difference was significantly lower (M = -0.433) compared to that of the experimental group (M = -1.750). This suggests that while traditional discussion can aid in maintaining or slightly enhancing speaking skills, it lacks the dynamic and cognitively engaging elements that debates inherently provide. As noted by Agung and Surtikanti (2020), conventional classroom discourse often fails to stimulate higher-order thinking or promote sustained student talk, which are critical for developing communicative competence in a second language.

Additionally, the results align with John-Steiner and Mahn (2020) sociocultural theory, which posits that learning is most effective when it occurs in a social context involving interaction and scaffolding. Debates offer precisely this environment, as students collaboratively construct meaning, negotiate opinions, and receive immediate peer and instructor feedback. The highly interactive nature of debates also provides ample opportunities for output, which according to Canale and Swain (2018) output hypothesis, is essential for language development as it prompts learners to process language more deeply and notice gaps in their knowledge.

In terms of implications, this study underscores the need for EFL educators to adopt more interactive and student-centered pedagogies, such as online debates, especially in digital or hybrid learning environments. As digital platforms become more integrated into education, online debate offers a feasible and effective approach to engage students in meaningful language practice that mirrors real-life communication scenarios. Moreover, the significant gains observed in speaking performance also suggest that debate can be a valuable tool in preparing students for high-stakes assessments and real-world communicative tasks.

In conclusion, the results of this study confirm that online debate activities can be a powerful instructional strategy in the EFL classroom. These findings are consistent with prior studies Hattani (2021) that advocate for debate as a means to develop both linguistic and cognitive skills. Educators are encouraged to incorporate debate not merely as a speaking exercise but as a comprehensive pedagogical framework that cultivates fluency, critical thinking, and confidence key competencies for global communication in the 21st century.

The findings of this study suggest that online debate activities significantly enhance EFL students' speaking confidence, critical thinking, and engagement in English classes. Students' positive perceptions align with Krashen (2018) Affective Filter Hypothesis, which argues that lower anxiety supports better language acquisition, as many learners reported increased confidence and reduced fear of making mistakes over time. Furthermore, the interactive and meaningful nature of debates supports Communicative Language Teaching (Wu, 2018), where authentic communication is central to language learning. The students' testimonies such as *"It wasn't just about talking; it was about thinking fast and supporting my argument logically"* illustrate how debates encourage cognitive engagement alongside language use. However, consistent with Jin (2023), the study also identified challenges, including anxiety, technical issues, and difficulties understanding various accents, which can initially hinder participation. Despite these, the overall improvement in fluency and comprehension over time confirms that regular exposure and collaborative learning environments play a crucial role in overcoming such barriers. Therefore, incorporating structured training and technological support may maximize the benefits of online debate as a pedagogical tool in EFL contexts.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that online debate activities are highly effective in improving EFL students' English speaking skills and critical thinking abilities. Quantitative results showed a statistically significant improvement in the experimental group's speaking performance across all assessed components—fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, and interaction. Qualitative findings further confirmed that students perceived debates as engaging, confidence-building, and intellectually stimulating. Despite some challenges, such as technical issues and speaking anxiety, most students adapted over time and experienced notable linguistic and cognitive growth.

The findings carry important pedagogical implications. First, educators are encouraged to incorporate structured debate activities into speaking classes to create a more interactive and meaningful learning environment. Online debate not only fosters communication skills but also promotes higher-order thinking and student engagement. Second, curriculum designers should consider integrating debate-based tasks as part of communicative language teaching, especially in blended or online learning contexts. Lastly, teacher training programs should equip educators with strategies to manage debate sessions effectively, including ways to support students in overcoming anxiety and dealing with technical constraints.

Future studies could expand on this research in several ways. First, a larger and more diverse sample size could provide broader generalizability across different educational levels and cultural settings. Second, longitudinal studies are recommended to investigate the long-term impact of online debate on language proficiency and critical thinking development. Third, future research could explore how different debate formats (e.g., formal vs. informal, synchronous vs. asynchronous) influence learning outcomes. Additionally, further investigation into how students with varying proficiency levels respond to debate tasks would help tailor instruction more effectively. Finally, researchers may explore the integration of AI tools or virtual platforms to enhance the accessibility and effectiveness of online debates in language learning.

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