A Case Study of the Development of an ESL Learner's Speaking Skills through Instructional Debate

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Abstract

This study aimed to describe the implementation of debate activities in teaching English to Malaysian secondary students which can enhance students' speaking skills. Moreover, through observing a Form One student, it was tried to identify the strategies used to compete in classroom debates and to describe the development of the participant's speaking skills through debates. The study found that debate activities had an impact on the participants through improving collaborative skills, raising awareness of speakers' roles and guiding participants via prepared texts. Besides, the main communicative strategies employed by the participant were compensatory and avoidance strategies. The result has also shown the improvement of the participant's speaking skills after five rounds of debate activities.

Keywords: English as a second language learner, debate, speaking skills

1. Introduction

Effective communication is considered to be one of the most important skills for any individuals. Receptive and expressive language abilities constitute a significant aspect of effective communication in terms of language skills. One of the expressive language elements is the speaking skills seen as the active use of language to convey meaning which people can make sense of it (Cameron, 2001). The key to successful communication is to be able to speak effectively and articulately which is linked to one's success in life as it occupies an important position both individually and socially.

In English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, successful language learning is determined by the learners' oral ability. Research has shown that the more a learner communicates, the more the learner would practice the target usage language (Phillip, 1992). This will facilitate the language learning process (MacIntyre, 1998) and will improve the target language fluency (Mie, 2011). Most ESL language learners receive large amount of theoretical information about the target language. Basically, they have satisfactory level of grammar and vocabulary knowledge, but they do not know how to make use of it in real life situations because they do not get enough opportunity to practice and use that knowledge (Thornbury, 2005). Subsequently, it is believed that very little attention is given to the speaking skill in language learning (Flowerdew & Lindsay, 2005). Therefore, it is essential to create an interactive classroom for effective language learning process to occur. In this aspect, researchers have discussed the limitations of the traditional classroom where the teachers initiate (I) the conversation, followed with the students' response (R) and finally give the feedback (F) (Henzl, 1979; Brown & Yule, 1983). Thus, the acronym IRF is used for classroom discourse.

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Such a classroom does not help to develop the students' communicative competence as it is teacher centered. Hence, many educators have repeatedly made calls to adopt a student-centered approach (Weimer, 2013). An example of a student-centered approach is debate. Debate can compensate for the limitation of the traditional classroom by shifting the focus of conversational control to students. This will allow other language models to be employed as debate is a structured discourse that allows students to take up various roles. Furthermore, debate involves a competition which can motivate them to be involved in classroom activities. This will assist their learning process and development of speaking skills as debate involves comprehensible input and output, reshaping and expanding schemata, communicative strategies and cultural understanding (Othman et al., 2013). In fact, debate has been used as a teaching method in first language among various disciplines at the tertiary level (Darby, 2007). Many educators have recognized the value of debate activities in language instruction (Christudason, 2003). However, no comprehensive rationale for using debate in foreign and second language learning has yet been developed. Therefore, this study aimed to describe the implementation of debate activities which can enhance speaking skills. Furthermore, it focused on the development of speaking skills of a secondary student through debate to identify the communication strategies used during debate and to describe the participant's development in speaking skills through five rounds of debate in classroom. Moreover, the study was an attempt to answer the following questions:

(1) How does the implementation of debate activities enhance speaking skills?
(2) What strategies were used by the participant to compete in debate activities?
(3) How was the participant's development of speaking skills through classroom debates?

2. Literature Review

As a crucial part of second language teaching and learning, speaking has often been viewed as the most demanding amongst the four skills engaged in a certain language. Bygate (1987) views speaking as a skill which needs attention in first and second language teaching. It can express the needs-request information (Brown & Yule, 1983). Perhaps a more comprehensive description of speaking comes from Chaney (1998, p. 13) who defines it as "the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols, in a variety of contexts." However, there are more aspects to this particular skill of language. Speaking involves accuracy and fluency. Accuracy refers to "the correct use of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation," whereas fluency is concerned with "the ability to keep going when speaking spontaneously" (Gower et al. 1995, pp. 99-100). Thus, while speaking fluently, learners are supposed to be able to get message across without paying direct attention to grammatical errors or conscious word choices. In helping students to overcome this challenge, teachers should provide their students with lots of conversational practices in the target language. In case of accuracy, many educators believe that it is not necessary to force students to communicate accurately since having a flow of conversation is considered to be more important in keeping a conversation alive. According to Nolasco and Arthur (1987, p. 3), "being able to speak reasonably correct and even fluent English is one thing, but being able to engage in on-going, interactive, mentally satisfying conversation is another."

In dealing with growing demands for highly proficient English speakers, an emphasis has been placed on programs that offer extensive opportunity to practice ESL in Malaysian schools. It is, in fact, the teachers' responsibility to expose students to classroom tasks and activities where meaningful communication takes place. Having fruitful debate sessions can indeed help learners to become engaged in these sorts of activities. Students will undoubtedly play various social roles in their future life and teachers have to prepare them for these real-life situations in which they might participate. Debating sessions will certainly contribute a great deal in helping learners to develop basic interactive skills which are necessary for them to learn. This will in turn lead the students to develop the ability to initiate and sustain conversation, a skill often noted to be lacking among ESL learners (Brice, 1992). In dealing with communicative activities such as debate, teacher's less dominant role while maintaining individual accountability of students will build higher self-esteem which will result in more improvement and higher participation in speaking skills. However, while engaged in debating sessions, students might use different kind of strategies in their speech acts. As Cook (2016) mentioned "unlike L1 children, L2 learners are always wanting to express things for which they do not have the means in the second language" (p. 133). That is the reason that second language learners try to use strategies which enable them to participate in communicative tasks. Therefore, the psycholinguistic approach of Færch and Kasper (1983) was employed in this study to examine the use of communicative strategies. According to Færch and Casper (ibid.), ESL learners mainly make use of "*avoidance strategy*" which is a common way of avoiding the topic.

In particular, learners might have different methods of topic avoidance such as changing the subject, pretending not to understand, abandoning a message when sentences become difficult to express or simply not responding at all. The other strategy which can be employed by learners is *"compensatory strategy"* which according to Oxford (1990) refers to strategies that "enable learners to use the new language for either comprehension or production despite the limitations in knowledge" (p. 38). In this case, they mostly use prefabricated patterns which are turning back to ready-made or memorized phrases or chunks of language. They might seek the help of others by asking direct help from teachers or classmates, which is referred to appeal for help.

3. Methodology

3.1 Method

This study is a qualitative case study. According to Sanders (1981), "Case studies help us to understand processes of events, projects and programs and to discover context characteristics that will shed light on an issue or object" (p. 44). Moreover, case study provides "an in-depth exploration of a bounded system (e.g., an activity, event, process, or individuals) based on extensive data collection" (Creswell, 2008, p. 476). Therefore, it meets the purpose of this study as it aims to give a detailed and in-depth description of the implementation of classroom debate activities which can enhance students' speaking skills. Besides, it can help the researchers to identify the strategies used by a Form One student during five rounds of debate and to show the development of his speaking skills.

3.2 Participants and Data Collection Procedure

This study tried to present the implementation of debate activities in a Malaysian school which can improve students' speaking skill. Therefore, purposeful sampling was chosen to focus on a Form One student with the low English proficiency level to discover how the student's speaking skills can develop via debate activities. An English proficiency test was given to the students to choose the student with the lowest proficiency level. Therefore, one of the students who obtained the lowest raw score, 16 out of 50, was selected for the purpose of this study. During mock debate as well as four rounds of planned debate facilitated by undergraduate students, the subject's participation was thoroughly observed and the notes from the observation were used in analyzing his performance. The debate sessions were audiotaped and video-recorded to help the researchers gauge the impacts. To ensure the validity of the research, triangulation of data collection method was used. To achieve this, a semi-structured interview was conducted to provide an in-depth explanation of the data. The debate activity involved a mock debate followed by four rounds of debate. In each debate there were two groups: the opposition and proposition. Each group consisted of six members. The proposition group also known as the "Government Group" supported the idea and motion of the day while the second group known as the "Opposition Group" gave reasons against it. A brief description of each group's members is presented in the following table:

Table 1: Groups Participating in Classroom Debate

Government group (GOV)	Opposition Group(OPO)
1st speaker: Prime Minister Agrees with the motion, makes a stand and supports it firmly, gives POI when other opponents deliver their remarks	1st speaker: Leader Disagrees with point given by the government team, makes a rebuttal, makes a stand and supports it firmly, gives POI when other opponents deliver their remarks
2nd speaker: Deputy Prime Minister Gives rebuttals, states the stand again, gives one point, accepts POIs/gives POIs	2nd speaker: Deputy Leader Gives rebuttals, states the stand again, gives one point, accepts POIs/gives POIs
3rd speaker: Member I Gives rebuttals, states the stand, gives one point (it can be a new point or any extension of the point made by speaker one or two), accepts or gives POIs	3rd speaker: Member I Gives rebuttals, states the stand, gives one point (it can be a new point or any extension of the point made by speaker one or two), accepts or gives POIs
4th speaker: Member II Gives rebuttals, states the stand, gives one point (it can be a new point or any extension of the point made by speaker one or two), accepts or gives POIs	4th speaker: Member II Gives rebuttals, states the stand, gives one point (it can be a new point or any extension of the point made by speaker one or two), accepts or gives POIs
5th speaker: Whip Rebuts all points given starting with the most recent-3rd, 2nd and 1st	5th speaker: Whip Rebut all points given starting with the most recent-3rd, 2nd and 1st
6th speaker: Closure Summarizes, states the gist of the opponents 'points and explain why it is unacceptable, states the gist of the team's points, why the team's points are better, state once more the teams' stand.	6th speaker: Closure Summarizes, states the gist of the opponents' 'points and explains why it is unacceptable, states the gist of the team's points, why the team's points are better, states once more the teams' stand.

Three facilitators were responsible for the debate briefings. The students were provided with handouts with explanations on debate. A very useful handout was the debate script format for each speaker, including speech texts with gaps which required the students to complete the gaps in order to deliver their speech. The facilitators introduced the topic, the motion of the debate and allowed the students some time to discuss the topic, make notes and prepare their arguments. This was the brainstorming session and usually students were given twenty minutes. The facilitators assisted the learners in clarifying the topics and/or providing new ideas and insights about the debate as well as suggestions on how to handle each round appropriately. When students were ready to start, the facilitators became the judges and welcomed both teams to debate on the topic. When the debate was over, the judges thanked all of the presenters for their interesting and thought-provoking remarks. A very important rule settled by the facilitators was that students were given the opportunity to appreciate diverse opinions or mindset about the issue. The facilitators played a very crucial role. During the all rounds, there was no error correction from the facilitators since the nature of the activity was communicative and failure was accepted. They never corrected students' mistakes during debate or when discussion was in progress. Basically, their role was to observe and supervise the discussion through. When students had difficulty, they offered their help eagerly. Thus, students were not forced to deliver a correct speech all the time. What was mostly focused on was their ability to deliver a complete and appropriate speech.

4. Discussion

This section focuses on the analysis of the data to answer the research questions. First, it describes how the implementation of debate activities can improve students' speaking skills. Then, it presents the strategies used in communicating in debates. Finally, it shows the development of the participant's speaking skills through debate activities.

4.1 Implementation of Debate Activities to Enhance Speaking Skills

Debate activities can be used to enhance students' speaking skills in the following ways:

(1) Improving Collaborative Skills through Brainstorming: Brainstorming was important for the participants to activate their prior knowledge or schema, share and see the connection of their ideas and form a personal link between themselves and the content subjects. Participants were also able to focus their attention on different aspects of the information.

(2) Raising the Awareness of Different Roles of Debate Speakers: Mock debate, the trial session, played a significant role to raise the participants' awareness of roles each speaker had to play. Even though the facilitators had explained the concept of debate and described all the rules and regulations of the debate sessions, the fact remained that the mock debate played a crucial role to concretize the abstract explanation. The mock debate enabled students to understand clearer the complex ideas by relating it into their world. It provided the context and opportunity for participants to use the formal language and practice debate.

(3) Guiding Participants through Prepared Texts: Guided participation was made possible with the provision of script template which contained phrases and sentences for each speaker. In the early stage, participants were depended on the script, consisting of phrases and sentences with gaps,which they required to fill in the gaps and use them as their prepared texts in debate. At this stage, they were dependent on the prepared texts and were often observed reading the text. As such, participants were not focusing on nonverbal gestures such as eye contact. This was natural as they were often observed to be holding the text in their hand. During the third and fourth rounds, the students could overcome their uncertainty. At this stage, students were referring to the texts more than close reading. They became familiar with the phrases and sentences of the format or roles of each speaker. Often the text was placed on the table. Hence, they had opportunity to use hand gestures to emphasize. Therefore, at the fifth round participants expressed confidence in delivery by incorporating non-verbal strategies such as good eye contact and gestures for emphasis of points.

4.2 Strategies Used in Classroom Debates

Moreover, analysis of observation data focused on communicative strategies and it was found that the subject mainly made use of "prefabricated chunks" which were ready made phrases available in the debate script format. This is an example of "compensatory strategy" as stated by Oxford (1990). These chunks made it possible for the subject "to use the new language for either comprehension or production despite the limitations in knowledge" (Oxford, 1990). It certainly helped him to quickly come to conclusion and finish his speech with least possible grammatical mistake so that his incompetency will not take much attention from the audience.

At the same time, he also employed, *"avoidance strategy"* (Færch & Casper, 1983). This occurred when he simply refused to accept questions posed from the opponents. This indicates that he was not ready to get into any verbal interaction or clashes; he was aware of his limitations perhaps. Analysis of interview data also supports the idea that he had difficulty in finding appropriate words and linguistic resources to elaborate or support his statement.

4.3 Development of Participant's Speaking Skills through Debates

Mock Debate: Spider Man is better than Iron Man

The subject of the study performed his first role as the 'Whip' of the opposition group in the trial round. He was supposed to rebut all the points made by the speakers of the government group. He articulated the first argument (point) of the opponent but stopped halfway in his half-formed sentences. Then he ended the speech by reading the conclusion line from the given script format. Thus, he never accomplished his task successfully as he did not provide any rebuttals to the motion.

Debate 1: KFC is better than McDonald

The subject of the study had a role as the second member of the government group in this debate. Therefore, he was supposed to rebut the previous remarks mentioned by the opposition group and make a firm stand in defending his groups' stand. When it was his turn to speak up, he did not have clear pronunciation of words and he could not elaborate on his points. As expected he still did not demonstrate any sign of confidence while delivering his speech. Instead, he was reading from his debate script and never lifted up to look at the audience. He used the same sentences from the text provided. Overall, he could not get acceptable marks from the judges and ended his speech nervously and hastily. However, it should be mention that the notion of debate was new to students and it was not expected much from a low proficiency student in a first round of debate.

Debate 2: Girls talk more than boys

The subject remained in his previous role as 'Member II' for the second round of debate as well. However, he seemed to be more confident when he received Point of Information (PI), a question from the opposition group, while he was not willing to accept it before. He made progress and judges seemed to be pleased with his performance. He was trying to sound persuasive and defended his group mates in their stand. The pronunciation was more accurate and the pauses were shorter. Unlike the first two attempts, he tried not to rely much on the handout; instead, he tried his best to deliver a spontaneous and meaningful response. His speech was acceptable to other members of his team and he got a warm support from his group mates.

Debate 3: Batman should remove his mask

Based on the result of the previous debate and rearrangement of the groups the subject was given the role of first speaker or 'Member I' of the opening opposition. Obviously, he had more responsibility in this round. He was supposed to rebut the previous remarks made by the government group and make a firm stand in defending his group mates. Surprisingly, he did not make any attempt this time. He basically repeated the sentences from the paper by reading them quickly. This led him to the conclusion. In addition to his weak pronunciation, repetition of the sentences from the text and vague explanations, the fluency level remained the same this round. The other noticeable observation was that after two rounds of debate, the students seemed tired. In order to keep their interest level up, the facilitators reminded them that it was a humor round and they were allowed to include funny remarks and opinions. Despite the relaxing learning atmosphere provided by the facilitators acting as judges, the subject remained silent and did not offer any funny remarks. At this point, the facilitators tried to be more encouraging by helping him to overcome his fears gradually. Hence, no remarkable progress was found in his speech and unlike the second round he seemed a lot more conservative in his presentation skills.

Debate 4: Western cartoons are better than Japanese cartoons

The round four of the debates ended with the subject remaining in his position as 'Member I' of the opening opposition. However, the noticeable observation was his acceptable level of self-confidence during the last round. He tried hard to put his shyness aside, voice his opinion convincingly and defend his team mates in their stand. Moreover, the facilitators' reflection and reaction helped him to overcome his shyness. Therefore, debates helped the participant to acquire the social skills required to be part of a team and compete against the other team.

5. Conclusion

Analysis of the participant's use of communicative strategies and development of speaking skills through debate activities has shown that the group work strategy with peers allowed the student to interact and collaborate. The team work approach enabled the subject to carry out the tasks, while maintaining individual accountability. It built his confidence, promoted collaborative skills which in turn resulted in better understanding of the topic and improved performance. Overall, the subject made slight improvements throughout the debate rounds. No doubt, at the initial stage he mainly used "avoidance strategy". Initially, the task was difficult. As observed, he abandoned the attempts to debate in midst sentence construction.

In the next few stages, the subject used a combination of strategies, compensatory as well as avoidance. At the later stage he made use of nonlinguistic signals such as gestures and face expression which are subcategory of compensatory strategy as well. No doubt debate provided a challenge to these students, where they needed to concentrate to get the tasks done, but it also strengthened their mental work as they had to deliberate carefully. Thus, every debate round implemented in this study created an environment which allowed for friendly competition; collaborative learning and interactive activities. Apart from the context and collaborative skills with peers, the debate script is believed to be an important element to guide the participant to debate. The debate script enabled the subject to become familiar with the discourse through repeats of the same role or task each round.

Effective speaking skills are fundamental requirement of a successful life. Communications come in such a wide variety of forms, and it is important for teachers to help their students in picking up the most appropriate and helpful interpersonal skills. By engaging students in meaningful communicative activities such as debate, they will represent themselves better. In other words, through well-prepared debate sessions and discussions, students will have the liberty to experiment with language and improve their speaking skills (Carroll, 2014; Fauzan, 2016). These sorts of activities will foster creative and critical thinking and quick decision making in problem solving matters (Dundes, 2001).

This will in turn promote motivation and instill students' self-confidence among second language learners. Therefore, the result of the study has important implications for English teachers and ESL/EFL learners. Teachers can be aware of the effectiveness of debate and, thus, they can integrate debate sessions in the classroom which can improve learners' speaking skills. It offers a chance for the learners to articulate their opinions and find their voice. They have a chance to collaborate with their peers and to be actively involved in their own learning process.

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