

THE INFLUENCE OF DEBATE METHOD TO STUDENTS CRITICAL THINKING IN EFL SETTING: IN SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the impact of the debate method on the development of critical thinking and speaking skills of first-grade students at an Islamic High School. The research instruments include interviews and observations, with participants divided into two groups, each consisting of three students. Debate is used as a method to train critical thinking and speaking skills, which is believed to foster leadership qualities through students' roles in teams, while transforming students from passive recipients of information into active participants who take responsibility for their learning. Data were collected through interviews, where students were asked questions related to specific topics, as well as observations that monitored students' engagement during the wrong learning process, with these interviews serving as the foundation of qualitative research to explore participants' in-depth understanding. By combining interviews and observations, this study aims to describe the effectiveness of the debate method in the context of active learning. Data analysis was carried out using a structured qualitative framework consisting of three steps: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Data condensation helps summarize and filter essential information, while data display visualizes findings to facilitate analysis. The final step, conclusion drawing and verification, generates an in-depth understanding of the impact of the debate method on students' skills. The findings of this study are expected to make a significant contribution to the development of active learning methods, particularly in enhancing students' critical thinking and speaking skills. With a structured approach, this study highlights the importance of the debate method in creating more interactive and meaningful learning experiences for students.

Keywords : *Debate Method, Critical Thinking, Speaking Skills.*

INTRODUCTION

In the twenty-first century, critical thinking has emerged as a fundamental competency in education, standing alongside collaboration, communication, and creativity as essential skills for navigating an increasingly complex, globalized world. The ability to reason logically, analyze information systematically, evaluate diverse perspectives, and solve intricate problems enables learners to adapt effectively to rapid advancements across various academic and professional disciplines. Educational systems ideally aim to cultivate these higher-order cognitive capabilities by creating dynamic, student-centered learning environments where active inquiry and analytical discourse are prioritized. However, standard classroom practices in field settings frequently diverge from this ideal vision by remaining heavily reliant on conventional, teacher-centered instructional approaches. In these passive learning settings, learners primarily act as receptive consumers of static information rather than active participants in intellectual exploration (ANG, 2025; Awuor & Okono, 2022; Mthembu et al., 2023). This lack of cognitive engagement limits opportunities for students to construct well-

reasoned arguments, question assumptions, or synthesize complex concepts independently. Consequently, many learners struggle to develop the analytical rigor and intellectual agility required to meet modern academic expectations and address real-world challenges (Jamil et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2024; Zhai et al., 2024)

To bridge this persistent gap between educational ideals and classroom realities, educators must implement innovative pedagogical strategies that actively engage learners in structured observation, questioning, data analysis, and persuasive argumentation. One particularly promising instructional approach aligned with these objectives is the formal debate method, which provides an interactive framework for developing logical reasoning, argument construction, and critical analysis. By requiring participants to articulate well-supported claims, evaluate opposing viewpoints, and engage in structured verbal exchanges, the debate technique transforms the learning process into an active, student-centered experience. This collaborative method compels learners to think critically under pressure, weigh evidence carefully, and deepen their cognitive processing while mastering subject matter. Furthermore, engaging in structured academic discourse fosters intellectual confidence and enhances communicative competence. Through systematic debate activities, classrooms evolve into vibrant forums where passive memorization is replaced by rigorous mental engagement, allowing participants to refine their reasoning capacities through continuous practice, immediate feedback, and collaborative problem-solving with their peers (Kunesa et al., 2026; Liu et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2025)

Despite widespread recognition of the debate method's pedagogical value, significant challenges emerge when applying this technique within English as a Foreign Language learning contexts. Within these specific educational environments, the research subject—consisting of English as a Foreign Language students—frequently encounters significant obstacles that hinder their ability to engage in high-level analytical reasoning during classroom activities. Based on initial field observations, the research subject faces a complex dual burden comprising both linguistic limitations and cultural communication barriers. These foreign language constraints often result in heightened anxiety, reduced speaking fluency, low self-confidence, and a pronounced hesitation to participate in spontaneous academic discourse. When tasked with evaluating arguments or expressing complex ideas in a non-native language, the research subject struggles to translate internal analytical reasoning into coherent verbal expressions. This systemic linguistic friction creates a noticeable gap in classroom performance, as the research subject's cognitive potential remains constrained by a lack of tailored instructional scaffolding that integrates critical thinking with language acquisition (Atobatele et al., 2024; Darwin et al., 2026; Xiaolei et al., 2023)

While extensive academic literature has documented the broad benefits of formal debate in improving general communication skills, public speaking fluency, personal confidence, and leadership traits, a distinct empirical gap remains regarding its precise impact on higher-order cognitive processing. Most previous studies have primarily examined debate as a tool for oral language mastery or general group collaboration, often overlooking how structured argument evaluation directly influences core analytical faculties within foreign language instruction. Existing research rarely explores the internal cognitive mechanisms through which non-native speakers process, deconstruct, and refute complex arguments under time constraints. This lack of targeted investigation leaves educators without clear empirical guidance on how to optimize debate procedures specifically for foreign language learners who are navigating both linguistic acquisition and critical reasoning simultaneously. Addressing this research gap is essential for developing evidence-based instructional frameworks that effectively transform foreign

language classrooms from passive vocabulary exercises into rigorous arenas for intellectual growth and analytical development.

To address these empirical and practical limitations, this study introduces an innovative approach by systematically investigating the direct impact of the debate method on the critical thinking faculties of the research subject within an English as a Foreign Language context. The novelty of this research lies in its integrated focus on argument evaluation, logical reasoning, and problem-solving capacities specifically tailored for non-native English speakers facing dual linguistic and cognitive demands. Rather than treating language acquisition and critical thinking as separate educational goals, this study examines how structured debate serves as an active cognitive catalyst that simultaneously enhances verbal fluency and analytical depth for the research subject. By evaluating these dynamic interactions without restricting the scope to a specific school name or academic year, the inquiry offers adaptable, evidence-based insights for modern educators. Ultimately, this research contributes a fresh perspective to pedagogical literature by providing a scalable, innovative framework that equips teachers to foster intellectual engagement, strategic argument construction, and advanced reasoning skills in foreign language environments.

METHODOLOGY

This investigation utilizes a qualitative research approach featuring a case study design to analyze the impact of the debate learning method on students' critical thinking skills within an EFL context. The research was set at an Islamic high school located in Garut, Indonesia, a setting chosen for its academic environment that strongly encourages active English discussion. The active participants for this project were selected from first-year high school students, who were divided into 2 distinct groups of 3 individuals each to engage in a structured 40-minute debate session, while the other classmates formed the audience. Data collection was carried out through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. The direct observations specifically monitored student argumentation strategies, logical reasoning, and overall cognitive engagement during the classroom debate, all captured through detailed field notes alongside audio and video recordings. Additionally, the semi-structured interviews were held following the classroom debates to capture a more detailed understanding of student perceptions regarding their own intellectual growth.

The analytical process for this qualitative study was executed through a systematic data analysis framework consisting of 3 sequential stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. During the initial data condensation stage, the researcher carefully selected, transcribed, and organized the core qualitative findings obtained from the field observations and student interviews. Next, the data display stage involved organizing the condensed information into clear thematic categories to facilitate an objective interpretation of the practical classroom phenomena. Finally, conclusions were drawn by identifying recurring behavioral patterns and verifying the accuracy of the findings through a rigorous cross-checking procedure of the different analytical sources. This structured procedural approach ensured that the operational study yielded highly reliable and meaningful insights into how debating practices can enhance critical thinking skills without using any pre-existing educational theories. This entire framework was conducted under strict ethical research standards to protect the academic identity of all school participants involved.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Result

Based on the data gathered from the observation of the debate method implemented at an Islamic senior high school, it is evident that this approach significantly enhances students' speaking and critical thinking skills. The structured debate process, where students were divided into pro and contra teams, encouraged active participation and the development of both speaking proficiency and critical thinking. The teacher's clear instructions and the use of the AREL method effectively guided students in constructing and presenting well-supported arguments, thus fostering the improvement of their argumentative and critical reasoning abilities.

Critical Thinking Assessment Rubric

Topic : The Important of Mental Health in School

Table 1. Student Pros

No	Criteria	Score	Indicators
1	Analysis	4	Demonstrates a deep understanding of the issue, able to elaborate on the opponent's arguments in detail, and provides sharp analysis.
2	Evaluation	3	Able to evaluate most of the existing evidence, distinguish between facts and opinions, but the conclusions drawn are still weak.
3	Inference	3	Able to make relevant inferences, but there are still some less logical inferences.
4	Interpretation	3	Able to interpret most of the information accurately, but there are still some interpretative errors.
5	Synthesis	3	Able to synthesize several ideas and pieces of information, but the arguments produced are still weak.
	Total score	16	

Table 2. Students Cons

No	Criteria	Score	Indicators
1	Analysis	3	Demonstrates a good understanding of the issue, able to dissect the opponent's arguments, and provides a fairly in-depth analysis.
2	Evaluation	2	Difficulty in evaluating the existing evidence, often relying on personal opinions, and the conclusions drawn are unclear.
3	Inference	3	Able to make relevant inferences, but there are still some less logical inferences.
4	Interpretation	3	Able to interpret most information accurately, but there are still some interpretive errors.
5	Synthesis	2	Difficulty in uniting different ideas and the resulting arguments are less coherent.
	Total score	13	

In the speaking test on table 1, students displayed varying levels of critical thinking. Student 1 demonstrated strong critical thinking skills, articulating well-structured and evidence-backed arguments. This student showed a high level of comprehension and analytical ability, suggesting significant progress in both speaking fluency and critical thinking. In contrast, Student 2 exhibited potential but struggled with considering multiple perspectives. While this

student was able to present coherent arguments, they faced difficulty expanding their viewpoint and considering alternative perspectives. Despite these challenges, student 2 showed noticeable progress, indicating that with further practice and guidance, their critical thinking abilities will continue to improve.

The teacher's role in facilitating the debate process was crucial in helping students refine their reasoning and critical thinking. After each round of arguments, the teacher encouraged students to reflect on their positions, summarize key points, and assess the strength of their arguments. This reflective process allowed students to evaluate their reasoning and enhance their ability to support conclusions with logical evidence. Additionally, the teacher's guidance in linking the conclusions back to the motion and the presented evidence further deepened students' understanding of how to structure and evaluate arguments effectively.

The data from the observation sessions and speaking tests indicate that the debate method has a positive impact on students' critical thinking and speaking abilities. The structured nature of the debate, with students presenting and rebutting arguments, fostered critical engagement and the development of reasoning skills. Furthermore, the reflection phase following the debate allowed students to consolidate their learning, further enhancing their ability to think critically and evaluate complex issues. Both students and the teacher reported improvements in students' speaking skills and their ability to think critically after participating in the debate activity.

The findings of this study suggest that the debate method is an effective approach to developing students' speaking and critical thinking skills. By engaging in structured debates, students were able to articulate their ideas more clearly, present logical arguments, and consider multiple perspectives. With continued practice and proper guidance, students can further improve their critical thinking abilities, which will serve them well in both academic and professional contexts. Further research could explore the long-term effects of the debate method on students' critical thinking development, offering additional insights into its impact on student learning.

Discussion

The empirical evaluation of the classroom debate method at the Islamic senior high school demonstrates its pedagogical value in expanding students' oral proficiency and cognitive reasoning. Based on the critical thinking assessment rubric applied to the topic of mental health in schools, distinct performance metrics emerged between the opposing teams. The affirmative group accumulated a total score of 16 points out of 20, driven by a maximum analysis score of 4 alongside consistent scores of 3 in evaluation, inference, interpretation, and synthesis. Conversely, the negative group reached a total score of 13 points, registering scores of 3 in analysis, inference, and interpretation, but dropping to a score of 2 in both evaluation and synthesis. These quantitative indices reveal that while both sides managed moderate interpretive abilities, constructing coherent synthesize-based arguments and evaluating evidentiary claims posed a greater challenge for the opposition team. Utilizing structured frameworks like the *assertion, reason, evidence, link* method provided the necessary scaffolding for learners to dissect complex social issues systematically, accelerating their transition from passive receivers of knowledge to active analytical speakers (Walker & Kettler, 2020; Zhang et al., 2025).

A deeper analysis of the scoring criteria highlights the cognitive mechanisms that differentiate high-performing debaters from those requiring additional instructional support. The affirmative team achieved 4 points in analysis by breaking down opposing claims in detail and delivering sharp rebuttals. Their evaluation score of 3 reflected an ability to distinguish factual data from subjective opinion, even though their final conclusions required further logical rounding. In contrast, the negative team struggled with evidence evaluation, receiving 2 points

due to an over-reliance on personal conjecture and unclear deductive pathways. Their synthesis score of 2 further underscores the difficulty lower-performing debaters experience when trying to unify disparate arguments under a single, cohesive thesis. These disparities indicate that while the debate framework naturally fosters oral spontaneous delivery, higher-order skills such as real-time evidence synthesis demand deliberate, repetitive practice. Classroom debate acts as an ideal diagnostic arena for teachers to identify specific logical fallacies and cognitive bottlenecks in student discourse (Deroy, 2026; Goodson, 2023; Hinek, 2022)

The teacher's instructional mediation played a pivotal role in bridging these cognitive gaps through targeted post-debate reflection cycles. By guiding students through a structured review after each debate round, the instructor enabled learners to re-evaluate their arguments against the motion, summarize primary claims, and audit the validity of their evidence. This reflective phase transformed the competitive exercise into a meta-cognitive learning opportunity, helping students recognize why certain inferences were deemed weak or ill-constructed. Instructors provided explicit feedback on tying conclusions back to the initial motion, which directly addressed the weaknesses observed in the negative team's synthesis and evaluation metrics. Such pedagogical intervention aligns with the core principles of task-based language teaching, where real-time communicative output is paired with form-focused instruction. As a result, students not only improved their lexical variation and oral fluency in English but also developed a structured approach to constructing logical, evidence-backed arguments under timed conditions (Buribayeva, 2026; Kahramonovna & Qizi, 2025; Yulianingsih et al., 2025)

The educational implications of these findings suggest that integrating structured debates into senior high school curricula offers a powerful, dual-purpose strategy for language acquisition and intellectual growth. Moving from a total score of 13 to higher competency levels depends on continuous exposure to debate formats that force students to adopt unfamiliar perspectives and defend them rigorously. However, certain limitations must be acknowledged regarding the scope of these conclusions. The current evaluation relies on a single debate session involving small group cohorts, which limits the ability to track long-term skill retention or generalize these specific score differentials across broader student demographics. Additionally, baseline speaking anxiety and pre-existing vocabulary mastery were not statistically controlled before administering the rubrics. Future research should implement longitudinal designs across multiple academic terms to determine whether these early gains in critical thinking automatically translate into improved academic writing and formal testing outcomes (Ebright, 2024; Huang et al., 2025; Minh, 2024)

Ultimately, the structured debate method proves to be an effective instructional tool for fostering active participation, critical reasoning, and English speaking confidence in secondary education. By requiring students to analyze, interpret, and synthesize complex arguments under competitive yet supportive conditions, the approach elevates classroom discourse beyond simple memorization. The observed performance gap between the total score of 16 achieved by the pro team and the total score of 13 earned by the con team illustrates that cognitive skill development occurs at varying paces. Teachers must therefore design differentiated follow-up activities, focusing specifically on evidence evaluation and synthetic reasoning for struggling debaters. Expanding the use of collaborative argumentation in high school classrooms prepares students for the rigorous intellectual demands of higher education and professional communication. Continued exploration of gamified and scaffolded debate strategies will further refine how educators cultivate confident, analytical speakers in second-language learning environments.

CONCLUSION

The empirical evaluation concludes that the classroom debate method effectively enhances senior high school students' oral proficiency, critical reasoning, and speaking confidence in second-language learning environments. Implementing a structured argumentation framework provides necessary pedagogical scaffolding that transforms passive learners into active analytical speakers. Through structured rounds, students actively engage in breaking down complex social topics, distinguishing factual data from personal conjecture, and constructing logical arguments under timed conditions. Although cognitive skill acquisition occurs at varying paces, targeted post-debate reflection cycles and instructor mediation successfully bridge analytical gaps. Ultimately, this communicative approach elevates classroom discourse beyond simple memorization, fostering higher-order thinking skills, real-time lexical variation, and spontaneous delivery. Scaffolding collaborative debate activities proves to be an indispensable instructional strategy in preparing secondary students for the intellectual demands of higher education and professional communication.

Future researchers are strongly advised to adopt longitudinal experimental designs across multiple academic terms to track long-term skill retention and verify whether gains in critical thinking translate into formal academic writing and standardized testing outcomes. Subsequent studies should expand the sample size by involving diverse student cohorts across multiple secondary schools to increase the generalizability of the empirical data. Researchers ought to introduce statistical controls for baseline speaking anxiety, prior vocabulary mastery, and socio-economic background to isolate the true effect of debate interventions. Furthermore, future investigations should explore scaffolded digital debate formats, *gamified* argumentation platforms, and automated feedback tools to examine their impact on synthetic reasoning. Integrating mixed-method approaches with in-depth qualitative interviews will also provide richer insights into students' internal metacognitive processes during competitive argumentation sessions.

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