COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING IN SUPPORT OF CRITICAL THINKING: THE ROLE OF IN-CLASS DEBATE

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Abstract:
In today’s knowledge-based, globally-competitive economy, types of skills and competencies that students need to gain are different from in the past. Emphasizing both the communicative competence and the critical thinking skills is one of the most influential developments in language education. The implementation of communicative activities in EFL/ESL classroom, in particular, prepares learners to use English in the world beyond based on their own needs, interests, and opportunities; besides, it develops their critical thinking abilities and helps become effective during learning, responsible citizens and active participants in everyday life and decision makers in the job market. Hence, this paper is an attempt to explore the extent to which the incorporation of communicative activities can enhance learners’ critical thinking skills using in-class debates using action research. Data was collected through observation and focus group interviews. The study results confirmed that using in-class debate is considered a constructive learning activity as it improves learners’ critical thinking skills including argumentation, explanation, questioning, reasoning, negotiation, among other skills.

Keywords: communicative language teaching, critical thinking, debate, oral proficiency, EFL.

Introduction
Today, communities are increasingly facing rapid and profound changes and tensions that affect the social, economic, and political aspects of life. The role of education has also become questionable in the millennial era. A matter of fact, the 21st century education requires a gradual shift in curriculum construction focusing on the transferable competencies that learners need to develop in instructional settings. For proficient language learning, learners need to be able to understand the language, master the mechanisms by which it works, learn its system, and use it in context. However, authors confirm that effective language learning implies that the learners must be creative in their production of ideas, and critically support them with logical explanation, details and examples (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Recently, critical thinking has gained a high position in foreign language instructional settings. There is an increasing need for learners and future personnel who are equipped with advanced critical thinking skills, negotiation, problem solving, and decision making skills as well as a high communicative competence. Additionally, Mason (2007) stated that people with sophisticated critical thinking skills and strong communicative ability show behavioral dispositions that are highly appreciated in both academic and professional contexts. Generally, enhancing the critical thinking and oral competency in learners is considered one of the main requirements for the 21st century. For this reason, various studies have been carried out looking at the different methods and approaches that might promote and develop critical thinking and oral communication skills in the classroom context (Halpern, 2003). The literature confirms that the implementation of communicative language teaching activities such as in-class debates, discussion, public-speaking, role-play, among others, creates an environment that supports...
understanding, reflection, questioning, negotiation, and rational judgment. On the other hand, promoting critical thinking activities within language culminates in oral proficiency. Therefore, it can be further deduced that the relationship between the two is positive as they complement each other. Hence, the present study attempts to explore this relationship within an EFL context using classroom debate. The latter, as an instructional activity, improves the mastery of the content, fosters the articulation of arguments, enhances the acquisition and utilization of data, and cultivates the categorization and communication of information in a comprehensible way (Rudd, 2007). As attested in the literature, debate is considered an effective educational tool that offers a lot of benefits. It helps learners form independent perspectives based on evidence and also the ability to accept a variety of viewpoints and arguments and appreciate the other coming from diverse backgrounds.

Specifically, this work seeks answer to the following research questions:

1- To what extent does the incorporation of debate as a communication activity develop learners’ critical thinking skills?
2- How did the students find the classroom debate experience?
3- Did the students believe that classroom debate help them improve critical thinking skills and oral communication ability?

So as to give tentative answers to the research questions stated above, the researcher adopts action research using observation and focus group interviews.

1- Review of the Literature

1.1. The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Approach

Emphasizing the communicative competence is one of the most influential developments in language education. Hymes (1972) defines communicative competence as the “aspect of our competence that enables us to convey and interpret messages and to negotiate meanings interpersonally within specific contexts” (cited in Mulat, 2003). In other terms, communication competence is the knowledge that helps a speaker to appropriately and functionally use a specific language or a linguistic system within a speech community. Based on the communicative competence, the communicative language teaching approach emerged in the early 1980s in Britain and spread throughout the world as an effective approach in second and foreign language instruction, English in particular (Liao & Zhao, 2012; Ozsevik, 2010). The communicative language teaching approach is meaning-oriented (Hedge, 2000). Research confirms that learners tend to better learn a foreign language when their attention is focused on the meaning rather than the linguistic form. For instance, Krashen & Terrell (1983) state that teachers should provide sufficient communication input and opportunities in a psychologically non-threatening environment in order to enhance students’ foreign language acquisition. However, Savignon, (2002) argues that “communicative language teaching does not necessarily mean total rejection of familiar materials [grammar]” (p. 7). CLT gives recognition to both fluency and accuracy in language teaching and learning. Additionally, Canale & Swain (1980) point out that both linguistic and communicative competence are fundamental in language teaching and learning, ESL/EFL in particular. They further explain that communicative competence is based on the interaction between the grammatical competence and knowledge and the socio-linguistic competence and knowledge. That is, in order to communicate efficiently, it is important to know what to say, how to say it, and when to say it.

In English as a second or foreign context, teaching the communication skills is increasingly gaining ground due to the remarkably large number of learners who confirm their need and motivation to study English in order to be able to use on a daily basis. In this regard, educators like Brown (2000) and Savignon (1991) assert that underscoring the communication
competence in language curriculum allows learners to perform in an atmosphere of expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning from psycholinguistic and socio-cultural perspectives. CLT is a multidisciplinary perspective that builds on several disciplines including linguistics, psychology, philosophy, sociology, and education. According to Savignon (2002) the CLT model is based on incorporating methodologies and pedagogies that can better engage learners in functional and authentic use of language for meaningful purposes. It involves teaching and learning a language in order to be used in real-life situations. That is, learners learn a language to communicate in their day-to-day experiences. The CLT approach, thus, provides students with countless opportunities to be involved in using language. The implementation of communicative activities in ESL/ESL classroom, such as role plays, simulations, situational dialogues, games, projects, and debate competitions, prepares learners to use English in the world beyond based on their own needs, interests, and opportunities. Such activities allow students to expand their linguistic knowledge by creating meaningful situations where they can develop their receptive and productive skills deemed highly recommended to achieve a quality education in the millennial age (Thongwad, 2011).

1.2. In-class Debate

The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is manifested in different forms, using different tasks and activities such as pair/group work, role-play, simulation games, scenarios, group discussion, and debate. The latter is considered as one of the contemporary methods in language teaching and learning that emphasize not only speaking and communication skill but also critical thinking (Hasibuan & Batubara, 2012). Debate is defined as an active learning process where meaning is created; it is a series of operations where multiple viewpoints are considered to arrive at a final judgment and decision (Freeley & Steinberg, 2005). As a teaching strategy, debate was credited to the “father of debate” Protagorus in Athens who implemented it in instructional settings over 2400 years ago (Darby, 2007). It was first established in the United States’ higher education in the 19th and 20th century, and became more popular in the late 80s as a teaching and learning instrument in various subject areas to improve student academic achievement and develop their critical thinking skills (Freeley, 2009; Redding, 2001).

1.3. Debate and Critical Thinking

Debate activates students’ critical and creative engagement as it emphasizes various skills such as comprehension, analysis, interpretation, evaluation, problem-solving, decision-making, and collaboration. According to Vygotsky (1978), debate is a form of social interaction that improves participants’ higher-order psychological functions and critical thinking skills. Critical thinking refers to a self-guided and self-disciplined thinking which helps individuals take charge of their own thinking and develop appropriate criteria and standards to live rationally, reasonably, and empathically (Paul, Elder & Bartell, 1997). It involves considering an issue from various perspectives, challenging any possible assumptions underlying the issue, and exploring its possible alternatives. Similarly, debate is based on defining the issue, evaluating the credibility and relevance of the sources, and identifying the different assumptions of arguments. In this regard, Krieger (2005) asserts that when debate is used in the classroom, students tend to critically express and defend their ideas taking various aspects into account such as considering the opponent arguments and trying to recognize their flaws, analytically think about the given information and evaluating their validity, asking questions when it is needed, to name but a few. Besides, Nisbett (2003) says that “debate is an important educational tool for learning analytic thinking skills and for forcing self-conscious reflection
on the validity of one's ideas (p. 210).” That is, debate, as an educational tool, which enables students to play an active and autonomous role in the learning process by involving both their communicative and critical skills, namely analysis, interpretation, and evaluation, in practice. Other researchers like Hall (2011) and Darby (2007) state that debate, unlike the traditional teaching and learning tools, motivates learners and provides them with opportunities to freely express themselves, develop their higher-order thinking, and create their own knowledge instead of being mere recipients. Eventually, the literature confirmed that critical thinking skills are the fundamental pillars that constitute the debate process. Participants are required to understand the issue in question, look for and gather relevant information to support their arguments, evaluate the reliability of resources, recognize contradictions, and identify challenging assumptions.

2- Research Methodology

The data collection was done qualitatively using classroom observation and focus group interviews. The participants of the study included 40 undergraduate students from the National School of Commerce and Management (ENCG Fes). The 40 students were divided into three main groups namely the debaters, the judges, and the organizers. The activity took place in a large room in school and involves two stages: the pre-debate stage and the debate competition. The pre-debate stage was conducted during the first week. In this period, organizers were engaged in the competition preparation. Besides, debaters were divided into groups and were invited to attend a workshop animated by the researcher and another student who was familiar with debate structure, format, and rules. The purpose of the workshop was to help participants achieve an effective argument and rebuttal. Then, groups of debaters, which were randomly assigned to four groups, were provided with the topics and were given a period of one week to do research and find evidences, resources, and relevant information to support their interventions. As for the second stage, the debate competition, it was carried out two weeks later; each debate took about 40 minutes.

Two instruments were used to collect data namely observation and focus group interview. Observation attempts to explore the extent to which in-class debate can improve students’ critical thinking skills, emphasizing the comprehension of concepts, argumentation, reasoning and explanation, questioning, organization, and team work. Moreover, focus group interviews were conducted with a number of volunteered students who participated in the debate competition at the end of study. The aim of these interviews was to get a detailed description on students’ perceptions and reflections about the in-class debate. The focus group interviews were directed and audio-recorded by the researcher.

3- Results

3.1. Findings of the Observation

The qualitative results of both the class observation and focus group interviews confirmed the role of in-class debate in promoting critical thinking skills. As for the researcher observation, there were several areas where critical thinking was highly manifested:

1) Comprehension of the concept: Students showed a deep understanding of the different issues tackled during the debate. They demonstrated their ability to thoroughly explain meanings in their own words, trying to make the conception in question clear to the opponents, the judges, and the audience, by using their prior knowledge, examples from real-life, social news, and facts.

2) Argumentation: Students were giving formal, argumentative, and persuasive speech using strong evidence to support their opinions. Moreover, debaters were stating their
arguments in a strong and interesting manner using eye contact, body language, posture, voice and humor. Not only good speakers, students were actively listening to the arguments put forth from both sides, taking down notes and enthusiastically seeking opinions and new ideas within the group to rebut the points raised.

3) Reasoning and explanation: reasons presented by debaters were put in order, from the most important to the least important. Besides, the elaboration of arguments was supported by evidences taken from a variety of resources such as books, news media, and the internet by avoiding all kinds of generalizations and distorted information. For instance, while explaining the reasons why abortion must not be allowed, debaters from the opposition group were referring to some quranic verses, in addition to other statistical data presented online.

4) Questioning: students were speculative and inquisitive throughout the whole debate competition; they were personally engaged with the content by raising pertinent questions and thoroughly examining the arguments of the opposition.

5) Organization: throughout the whole debate period, debaters were maintaining a smooth and well-organized delivery of information and opinions. The first speaker from both groups started with presenting the philosophical and historical background of the issue in question, plus the definition of key terms, the second set of speakers justified their statement using facts and examples, the third pair gave some suggestions and recommendations, while the last two speakers summarized the position of each team. More than that, as mentioned earlier, students were attentively listening to each other’s’ arguments, taking notes, discussing with their team members, and rebutting the counter-claims.

6) Collaboration and communication skills: from the pre-competition stage till the end all team members were respectfully and actively engaged in collaborative activities to achieve a common goal. For example, before each round, debaters were having a one-minute closed meeting to brainstorm their ideas for the discussion session, they were listening to each other’s opinions, negotiating, sharing pieces of advice, and more importantly, motivating and encouraging each other’s.

3.2. Findings of the Focus-group Interview

As aforementioned, three days after the debate competition, 14 debaters were randomly asked to sit for a focus group interview aimed at garnering their different opinions and attitudes towards this experience, and the extent to which it was efficient in fostering their critical thinking skills.

Students’ answers were thematically analyzed. Findings showed that participants have a positive perception and outlook towards the debate activity. According to the interview results, the majority (57 %) have already had a similar experience before. Therefore, almost all students stated that they were stressed and anxious, but only at the beginning, because they confirmed that they easily and quickly overcame the situation and felt more confident and comfortable. For instance, a student said “Well, at first I was really stressed to the point where I couldn't even talk, then after my teacher and classmates encouraged me I got over it”. Another one puts forth “It was a good experience; I learnt how to manage my stress and improve my self-confidence”. Moreover, students were also asked to state what they most liked and disliked about the debate competition. Overall, debaters positively perceived this experience as, according to them, it was an opportunity to discover their hidden skills and talents like public-speaking, leadership, and communication. A student declared “I liked the fact that it opened my eyes to the tangible possibilities of becoming a great public speaker with a little training
and coaching”. Additionally, other students pointed out to the role of debate in increasing their learning motivation; they confirmed that it was an interesting and fun experience that helped them get rid of the stressing and traditional classes. A participant stated “I liked the experience a lot and, it was very motivating and interesting, and I liked that our teacher took this initiative because we didn't use to do debates in English”. On the other hand, 90% of the students said that they did not like the fact of being disturbed by some members from the audience, “the noise and the disturbance from our classmates … They make it hard to hear what's being said and hard to debate” a debater said. As for the difficulties that they have encountered, two participants pointed out to the linguistic obstacle especially at the level of pronunciation; other students said that it was challenging for them to find sound evidences related to their issues, such as statistical data.

As far as critical thinking is concerned, the majority of students (95%) confirmed that this experience helped them develop their critical thinking skills especially comprehension, argumentation, questioning, analysis, and evaluation. A student said “definitely, debate improves my critical thinking skills because starting from the pre-competition stage till we finished, we were all critically engaged in findings arguments, preparing our speeches for rebuttals, preparing for some questions that we might be asked…”. Another student stated “I learned how to argue and convince people by accepting their opinions, assess their validity, and then criticize them by giving counter examples and arguments. I learned to know what to say and when to say it”. Another participant added “the debate has sharpened my critical thinking skills: first, it allowed me to go and look for information in order to develop my understanding of the topic, also, it made me learn to analyze what I hear and ask questions when needed”. Besides, 75% maintained that debate enabled them to be more open-minded and avoid being biased and judgmental. Finally, students highlighted another aspect that they considered important in the classroom debate which is teamwork and cooperation. All participants expressed that the best part of the debate was when they were preparing for the competition and were asked to work in groups, interact and collaborate to conduct research and collect data, organize their interventions, and prepare their arguments. As some students stated, it was important in improving their leadership, communication, creativity, problem-solving, and decision making skills.

4. Discussion

This study is an attempt to examine the relationship between critical thinking and debate. The findings exposed earlier in this article confirmed that debate, as a communicative language teaching strategy, is considered an interesting and innovative method to teaching and learning that stimulates learners’ critical thinking on different subject matters. It is an active approach that cultivates students’ engagement as active, creative and autonomous learners (Snider & Schnurer, 2002). The results emanating from both observation and focus group interviews supported the assumption that the integration of debate in language teaching and learning, EFL/ESL in particular, develops students’ critical thinking and oral proficiency. The observation conducted by the researcher during the debate competition highlighted several critical thinking aspects such as comprehension, argumentation, reasoning, and questioning. Debaters were highly engaged in exposing their statements using sound arguments, smooth and well-organized rebuttals, critical analysis, and unbiased evaluation of the counter-claims. On the other hand, the debate competition has significantly increased participants’ language achievement especially their speaking skills and vocabulary use. The majority of debaters demonstrated higher levels of fluency; they were fluently delivering their speeches and confidently defending their arguments. In a similar study, Williams, McGee, & Worth, (2001)
argued that improving students’ communication skills is the most substantial benefit of debate. As a matter of fact, in the focus group interviews, the majority of students confirmed that this experience helped them overcome some of the obstacles they encounter in using English, mainly at the level of pronunciation and vocabulary.

In addition to improving their language fluency, students claimed that this experience was significantly beneficial. They stated that their participation in the debate competition helped them reduce their stage fright and overcome the feeling of stress and anxiety while talking in front of an audience. Some of them, those who have never taken part in a debate before, confirmed that they did not have enough confidence to speak in public; however, after going through this experience they have gained confidence to express themselves freely, easily, and spontaneously. Goodwin (2003), who conducted a research to explore learners’ perceptions about in-class debate, stated that only few students experience distress and fear at the beginning but easily get over these feelings as they get involved in the different stages of the competition.

As far as critical thinking is concerned, the focus group interviews results showed that students strongly believed in the role of debate in developing their critical thinking abilities. They said that thanks to this experience they have learned to logically investigate on issues and look for evidences, to deliver their arguments in a well-organized and convincing way, to critically evaluate different opinions, and to raise pertinent questions. More than that, students highlighted teamwork skills as one of the most crucial aspects that debate fosters. All participants said that the best part in this experience was when they were preparing for the competition and were asked to work in groups, interact and collaborate to make research, organize their interventions, and prepare their arguments. As some students stated, it was very beneficial to foster their leadership, communication, creativity, problem-solving, and decision making skills.

Conclusion

Overall, the study results demonstrated a positive improvement in critical thinking skills among the debate participants, which supports the previous research assumption saying that there is a strong relationship between debate and critical thinking. The qualitative results of the present study indicate that in-class debate is an innovative and constructive approach to teaching and learning, foreign languages in particular. First, debates improve learners speaking ability and oral proficiency; they find it easier to talk, express their points of view, and participate actively in classroom discussions. Second, findings highlighted the prominent role of in-class debate in developing students’ critical thinking skills. This experience helped participants think quickly and critically, search for evidences and proofs, support their arguments, analyze issues from different perspectives, and critically evaluate others’ opinions.

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