

FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND VIETNAMESE

DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS THROUGH DEBATING ACTIVITIES FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS AT VIETNAM UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT: This qualitative research explores the relationship between debating activities and developing of critical thinking skills among English students at Vietnamese universities. Data were collected online in two consecutive sessions: close-ended questionnaire and in-depth interviews of six English-learning participants with experiences in debating activities. Three themes were based on to analyze the collected data: research participants' evaluation of debating impact on critical thinking development, duration of this impact, and how the participants have implemented debating as signs of critical thinking development. Several findings may spotlight the significance of debating activities in promoting analytical thinking, logical reasoning, and hassle-fixing abilities among English learners. Some pedagogical implications may advocate incorporating dependent debating sessions into the curriculum to facilitate holistic ability development.

KEYWORDS: Critical thinking skills; Analytical thinking skills; Logical reasoning skills; Debating activities; English language learners.

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1. Introduction

One of the core aims higher education in Vietnam focuses on is to help English learners (ELs) improve their critical thinking abilities, in turn improving their language proficiency and even becoming better critics with strengthened critical acumen. Thus, the purpose of this research is to identify the beneficial aspects of debate activities and how they contribute to the growth of ELs' critical thinking abilities at the nation's higher education institutions. It also explores how these activities improve ELLs' critical thinking subskills, such as logical reasoning, communication skills, research and information literacy, and the ability to analyze sources and the credibility of ideas.

In the subsequent sections of this paper, we will embark on a comprehensive exploration of the literature surrounding debating activities, critical thinking, and English language education. Through empirical inquiry and theoretical analysis, we endeavor to unearth the nuanced relationship between debating activities and the cultivation of critical thinking skills among ELs in Vietnamese universities. This endeavor of ours is an attempt to contribute to the ongoing discourse on pedagogically effectual strategies of English language education that foster critical thinking.

2. Literature review

Critical thinking is an important skill in almost every discipline, at and beyond educational premises. Then, it is necessary for students to learn and be equipped with these skills. Numerous studies have explored different ways students can use cognitive games, model critical thinking, and make decisions (American Debate League, 2024). One of them is using debating activities where students collaborate, discuss, and organize their points of view for an argument. As a speaking activity, debating is effective for nurturing critical thinking skills among English major students (Boumediene et al., 2023). In essence, it fosters critical thinking through such benefits as development of logical reasoning and enhancement of communication skills. Defined by Richard (1991), critical thinking as making out in terms of scientific observation, being aware of our thinking process, and activating and organizing matters by taking an understanding may help students think

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more independently, question assumptions, examine, and combine information, and try to formulate hypotheses that need to be verified against solid evidence. Theoretically, debating enhances students' communication skills and contributes to developing logical reasoning, research, and information literacy (Aclan et al., 2016) including problem-solving (Facione, 1989). Students can present and defend their hypothesis, convincing others that they are right. Generally, they can support critical thinking development, which contributes to students' academic progress and success.

Joining in a debate, individuals can develop effective expression of ideas rather than mere eloquence; they can pass their opinions to counterparts with precision and clarity. Meanwhile, they should listen actively to counterarguments to better grasp and understand multiple viewpoints. Thus, they will become more open-minded and have empathy, which are essential steps in developing critical thinking skills (the (Reyes & Cuzzamu, 2022). In reverse, critical thinking abilities consistently stand to foster communication skills through experiences (Reyes & Cuzzamu).

Research has also explored the integral connection between debating and critical thinking development in which information literacy of English language students may be nurtured. For instance, to generate compelling arguments or anticipating how to address potential objections to their points, students will undertake thorough research (Boumediene et al., 2023). During research, students learn how to analyze numerous sources, assess the credibility and reliability of their ideas, and devise the most creative way of integrating them into their speeches. In other words, students' argument depth is enriched as they delve deep into diverse viewpoints while gathering evidence, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of the topic (Boumediene et al., 2023).

In brief, from the above analyses of the relationship between debates and critical thinking skills, we recommend the display of this supportive connection in the table below:

Characteristics of debating activities	Critical Thinking Skills
Developing Logical Reasoning	- Examining ideas; - Analyze arguments - Logical reasoning; - Thinking clearly (Facione, 1989)
	- Make inferences; - Conjecturing alternatives - Drawing conclusions (Lai, 2011)
Enhancing communication skills	- Creation of unique and impactful perspectives such as stating results - Employ a confident and assertive speaking style - Increase the ability to persuade, present and explain reasons through justifying procedures (Reyes & Cuzzamu, 2022)
Encouraging research & information literacy	- Addressing potential objections - Analyze numerous sources - Assess the credibility and reliability of their ideas, and devise the most creative way of integrating them into their speeches. - Delve deep into diverse viewpoints - Gather evidence - Facilitate a comprehensive understanding (Boumediene et al., 2023).
	Generate and evaluate arguments (Majidi et al., 2021)

3. Methodology

In the study, a qualitative research design is used to capture rich, descriptive accounts and understand experiences, perceptions, and dimensions related to developing critical thinking through debating activities.

The qualitative research design is appropriate for several reasons (Morgan, 2022): gaining a better understanding of the rich experiences and perceptions described by the participants in a natural setting allowing the development of some emerging methods and themes during the study. The study is set to be designed to elaborate on the experiences, perceptions, discourses, and nuances surrounding the development of critical thinking skills among Vietnam university English learners. The qualitative research design uses criterion sampling methods for the identification and selection of information-rich cases (Palinkas et al., 2015) by conducting an in-depth interview of 6-8 participants (Busetto et al., 2020) to answer two research questions:

RQ1: What positive characteristics of debating activities help university English language students develop critical thinking skills?

RQ2: How may those activities help them improve critical thinking subskills?

Criterion sampling involves reviewing all instances that fulfill specific predetermined criteria, typically employed in quality assurance initiatives (Palinkas et al., 2015). In this study, the selection of six volunteer students to account for the perception and experiences of debating activities toward critical thinking development is the parameter in participating in the research study.

Regarding demographic information about the respondents, they are varied in debating experiences and usage of English as seen in the table below:

Name	English-majored	Debating experience
<i>Hanh</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Module in BA. programme</i>
<i>Nguyet</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Module in BA. programme</i>
<i>Trang</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Debating club</i>
<i>Duc</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Module in BA. programme</i>
<i>Bao</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Module in BA. programme</i>
<i>Hiep</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Debating club</i>

Joining in the online interviews with both closed and open-ended questions and at their convenience, these six research participants were sent the questions in advance and signed the consent forms with full information of research purpose, confidential issues and data use transparency. First, a set of closed questions were delivered to the participants to identify the respondents' assessment of how debate activities may affect critical thinking skill development, of argument quality and of question asking abilities using the following criteria: 1/impact of debate on the development of critical thinking skills; 2/evaluation of arguments and criticism and questioning skills; 3/synthesis of ideas; 4/solutions to problems.

The second part of the interview is twelve deeper questions about the relationship between debates and critical thinking skills development

The answers to these two interview parts were valuable in painting a comprehensive picture of interest and understanding about improving critical skills through debate activities. During the interview, the researchers' observation and notes support the understanding of how debate tasks may relate to critical thinking skills (Tomaszewski et al., 2024).

4. Data analysis

Data collected from the interviews, observations, and documents were analyzed qualitatively through thematic coding. This method involves annotating or recognizing text or image segments based on shared themes or concepts arranged into distinct categories (Gibbs, 2007). After being transcribed verbatim, the researcher will read the transcripts various times and code them to find the

best organization and interpretation (Dehalwar & Sharma, 2024). Then, it will describe the overall themes and narratives that come to illuminate from the content tested. In addition, to ensure the validity of the findings in the study and give the participants a chance to play a role, members' checking will be carried out by involving them in validating interpretations of the analysis for their congruence with experiences. This will help in getting comprehensive ideas regarding the relationship between debating activities and critical thinking skills among Vietnamese university English language students.

Looking at the first set of data on six research participants' perceptions and experiences on the same aspects, they varied in their awareness level of the relationship between debating activities and critical thinking development. Four out of six participants agreed that debate activities at their universities strongly emphasize raising their awareness of critical thinking. Meanwhile, the others felt that it was extremely strong. Furthermore, all of them share common ideas of the benefits debating activities may bring to develop critical thinking skills.

In the second part, the open-ended interview questions are analyzed using thematic coding to reveal detailed factual perceptions and story patterns in relation to the effect of debates on the cognitive options of the learners. The in-depth interviews of six English language students at Vietnamese universities may give vast qualitative data of the multilevel experience with campus debates.

The practice of thematic coding is used systematically to organize and analyze students' replies to interview questions in such a way as to locate recurring issues and delve into students' views of critical thinking development in the context of a discursive debate. The following themes have been generated due to the initial coding of the interview data and the literature review: (T1) debating activities have positively affected both students' academic and life experiences; (T2) debating activities may have long-term effects on the students' critical thinking; (T3) debating activities can help the students execute thinking and cognitive actions at upgrading levels.

First, the logical reasoning of debating activities agreed by all six interview participants that it also contributes to critical thinking through argument analysis and evaluation of arguments. Most interviewees agreed that debate activities have positive impacts on the critical thinking skills of English learners at Vietnamese universities in the field of daily communication. Moreover, all interviewees agreed that the debating activities have strong affirmative impacts on Vietnamese university English language learners' critical thinking skills in research/information literacy. Second, the participants claimed that the skills learned through debating can help them become more confident, able to collect and evaluate information, organize arguments, and can persuade their opponents. They showed that debating activities enabled them to persuade others through explanation. Sub-skills are demonstrated through the way they present arguments and justifications. Third, it helped them not only have a deeper view of the topic and grab perspectives but also analyze multiple sources as well as evaluate the reliability of information and arguments. It also helped to infer by concluding debates and querying evidence. In general, participants reported that logical reasoning, communication skills, and research/information literacy in debating activities helped improve critical thinking skills and sub-skills. Qualitative method approach to grasp the essence of debating activities on the improvement of the critical thinking ability among English language learners at Vietnamese universities.

5. Findings and discussion

The data collected from in-depth interviews with six participants revealed several key findings on how debating helps Vietnamese university English language students improve critical thinking skills and subskills, aligning with relevant literature.

The debating students may develop long-lasting logical reasoning capability. Hanh noted, “*I have to analyze information from lots of sources and think logically*”. The students prefer debating as a crucial aspect of the problem-solving process, which sharpens their skills such as logical thinking, examination of ideas critically, identification and analysis of arguments, leading to the formulation of objective-oriented and well-supported conclusions. They shared that debating activities enhanced subskills like examining ideas, analyzing arguments, conjecturing alternatives, and drawing conclusions. For instance, Duc stated that debating helps him to analyze information and have deeper viewpoints on the topic.

The debating students may communicate various viewpoints scientifically and persuasively. The study participants thought that debating enabled them to develop extraordinary, productive viewpoints and helped them employ a more confident, assertive communication style. Duc said, “*learn personal bias and allow to make more pro side to approach the arguments*”. Debating activities made them able to express themselves more confidently, developed more critical persuasion skills, provided coherent explanations, and improved the ability of English learners to present their reasons and thoughts. It also sharpened active listening skills by requiring attentiveness to opposing viewpoints.

The debating students have applied flexibly research skills and verifying information at work and in life. Debating played an exemplary role in developing research skills and information literacy. The students were required to conduct extended research, address counterarguments, analyze various sources, peruse diverse perspectives, gather supporting evidence, and be well conversant with the issue. As Hanh said, she had to scrutinize sources, read them clearly, and understand the authors' key points to make my argument more logical. She stated debating helps her to analyze the information, delve deep into diverse viewpoints and evaluate arguments and evidence. This requires learning critical thinking skills such as assessing cases, objectively evaluating arguments, and selecting reliable sources.

The research findings were aligned with the existing literature on the prolific role of debating activities in developing the ability of English language learners to think critically. The development of logical reasoning is in agreement with research showing that debates are regarded as a problem-solving process that demands critical and systematic analysis. As a result, the students could consolidate opinions and such skills as analyzing concepts, strategy planning, logical inference, and decision-making, thus improving their critical thinking skills (Facione, 1989). It can be noted that while debating, students often gather a lot of information from their research and other peers, enabling them to gain more knowledge on the subject matter and have views from many sides. Obviously, debating activities necessarily benefit the students' development of critical thinking skills.

In addition, the findings on improved communication skills through debating resonate with previous work. For instance, according to Reyes & Cuzzamu (2022), debate helps to develop superior perspective-taking, resolute speaking styles, superior persuasion abilities, and clarity in argument presentation. The current research participants noted that debating activities help them to listen actively, be more confident, and persuade others through logical reasoning, all of which are important aspects of communication competency. Moreover, debating activities sharpen their sentence structures, which enables them to present ideas with evidence and more persuasively. Furthermore, vocabulary gained from debate preparation also facilitated coherent and smooth communication. According to Facione (1989), explaining, or in other words, the ability to speak logically, the ability to present evidence and information that is easy to understand for others is a critical thinking skill.

Both research and information literacy findings are by the literature showing debating as a powerful tool in compelling students to conduct thorough research on the topics, evaluate the credibility of the research sources, deal with diversity of views, and compose cohesive arguments.

Clearly, the findings on the research and information and literacy showed that through adequate and comprehensive debating skills, English learners can evaluate a range of sources and develop compelling arguments from them.

The variety of examples given by the participants exhibited how effective debating activities led to the contentious ability of English learners to develop in reasoning, communication, research, and evaluation. The qualitative data from the research provides a comprehensive understanding of the importance of debating as a teaching method in cognitive skills development, substantiating prior research while providing relevant contextual perspectives from Vietnamese university students. The research findings indicate that implementing debating activities in an institution would improve the student's communication skills, logical thinking, and research, which are key to the general improvement of their performance.

Generally, the research reveals debating's multi-dimensional role in enhancing the critical thinking of students, their communication skills, and research and information literacy. The research also shows debating as an important tool for English learners in developing the economies of countries like Vietnam. Through the implementation of structured and effective debate, it is possible to instill the current skills among learners in various institutions.

6. Pedagogical implications

Several significant pedagogical implications have been drawn from the research findings. First, structured debate platform acts as a dynamic and live feedback channel where students can explore and treat various issues in depth, validate and critically look through the positions, and finally come up with rooted arguments. Students, while taking part in debating sessions, not only sharpened their analytical capacities but also developed their communication skills and the tendency to assess the presented evidence critically.

Specifically, analyzing the instruction that comes with applying debating activities, this practice helps students develop their analytical ability. The act of going through the process of getting ready and performing in the debates leads the students to analyze, thus separating the information and creating the assumptions that are the core of the data. According to Boumediene et al. (2023), through the structured process of analysis, students are trained to apply critical thinking skills to assess information and arguments comprehensively, which later brings a habit of mind of more sophisticated and rational thinking in both academic and real-world contexts.

In addition, communication skills are regarded as a significant advantage that debating activities will provide students with. Students are expected to be precise while arguments and counterarguments are designed and carefully thought through in face-to-face debates. Through the debates, students tend to enhance their vocabulary and reasoning skills and gain knowledge on the proper way to speak. Eventually, they will develop the ability to persuade, persevere, and have confidence in intellectual subjects. Moreover, this skill set would be helpful in academic, professional, and social life.

Moreover, the teaching of taking part in a debating activity perfectly suits language learning as well as aiming for an academic or job environment where critical thinking becomes the top requirement. The level of importance of analytical skills and problem-solving is growing in the market; however, the most seasoned employers still look for someone who profoundly thinks, researches and understands the required job duties. Focusing on analytical abilities in light of public advocacy experience, English majors are more empowered and confident to work in various situations- be it academia, research or the corporate world.

The contribution of the debating activities to the language curriculum is also worth noting. In this regard, the debating exercises encourage active learning and the participation of the students. Debates give students the opportunity to be actively engaged in the course and enable them to develop a sense

of ownership and passion linked to their academy (Zhang, 2023). In addition, debating is a competitive situation that boosts research skills, critical thinking, and collaborative work, which are vital characteristics of pollinating a learning environment that is centered on cooperative work and active understanding and retention of the course materials. In brief, the pedagogical implications for the mixing of debating activities are manifold and of great significance. Through using a debating framework, students can improve critical thinking, polish their speaking skills, and thus help English majors achieve their goals in both welcoming the research work and professional life. By including debating actions in the core curricula, the instructors can thus help the students acquire the ability to be active, engage, and think outside of the box, being therefore able to deal with the growing complexity and interconnectedness of today's world.

7. Conclusion

This qualitative method study shows the important role of debate activities in enhancing critical thinking among English language learners at Vietnamese universities. The findings suggested that the positive characteristics of debating activities which are Developing Logical Reasoning, Enhancing communication skills, and Encouraging research & information literacy improve not only critical thinking skills but also subskills. As the educational landscape continues to evolve, with increasing emphasis on equipping students with the intellectual tools necessary to succeed in an ever-changing world, the findings of this study have pedagogical implications practices and curriculum development in language education have a profound effect. It is through the development of critical thinking that students can navigate the complexities of language and literature with confidence and skill. With more exposure to engaging, enriching, and transformative educational experiences, English learners can position themselves relevantly in an increasingly complex and connected world.

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**Phát triển kỹ năng tư duy phản biện thông qua
các hoạt động tranh biện bằng tiếng Anh cho sinh viên đại học tại Việt Nam**

Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu định tính này khám phá mối quan hệ giữa hoạt động tranh biện bằng tiếng Anh và việc phát triển các kỹ năng tư duy phản biện của sinh viên đại học tại Việt Nam. Số liệu được thu thập trực tuyến và gồm hai phần: câu hỏi điều tra đóng và phỏng vấn sâu với 06 sinh viên đại học đã từng trải nghiệm các hoạt động tranh biện bằng tiếng Anh. Việc phân tích số liệu thu thập được dựa trên ba chủ đề: đánh giá của các sinh viên này về tác động của hoạt động tranh biện bằng tiếng Anh với việc phát triển các kỹ năng tư duy phản biện; mức độ kéo dài của các tác động này và cách thức các sinh viên này thực hiện hoạt động tranh biện giúp phát triển kỹ năng tư duy phản biện. Kết quả phân tích số liệu cho thấy vai trò quan trọng của hoạt động tranh biện tiếng Anh trong việc thúc đẩy năng lực tư duy phân tích, khả năng suy luận biện chứng và khả năng linh hoạt của các đối tượng nghiên cứu. Từ kết quả nghiên cứu, nhóm tác giả đề xuất việc kết hợp các hoạt động tranh biện vào chương trình đào tạo đại học giúp sinh viên phát triển tư duy phản biện hiệu quả.

Từ khóa: Kỹ năng tư duy phản biện; Kỹ năng tư duy phân tích; Kỹ năng suy luận biện chứng; Hoạt động tranh biện; Người học tiếng Anh.