

FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND VIETNAMESE

**AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE EFFECTIVENESS OF
CLASSROOM DEBATE TECHNIQUES IN ENHANCING
ENGLISH-SPEAKING SKILLS FOR MILITARY GENERAL
PRACTITIONER STUDENTS
AT VIETNAM MILITARY MEDICAL UNIVERSITY
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ABSTRACT: This study investigates the effectiveness of debate techniques in enhancing English-speaking skills among military medical students at the Vietnam Military Medical University (VMMU). The research utilized a mixed-method approach, combining pre-and post-tests, classroom observations, and student surveys to assess students' progress and attitudes towards debate techniques. Results indicated significant improvements in fluency, grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary, as well as enhanced argumentation skills, critical thinking, and confidence in using English. While most students expressed positive attitudes towards debate, a minority faced challenges related to limited vocabulary and lack of confidence in public speaking. These findings align with previous research and demonstrate the potential for adapting debate techniques to the context of military education. The study suggests that integrating debate into the English curriculum at VMMU can significantly improve language training quality and better meet the military's communication needs in international contexts. Future research should optimize debate techniques to accommodate students of varying proficiency levels and explore how debate can be combined with other instructional methods to enhance English learning outcomes further.

KEY WORDS: Debate techniques; English-speaking skills; Communicative competence; Critical thinking; Language proficiency.

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1. Introduction

In today's global context, foreign languages, especially English, are vital in accessing advanced scientific and technological knowledge and accelerating national industrialization and modernization. At an individual level, proficiency in foreign languages enhances research capabilities and self-improvement through access to specialized online resources and foreign-language publications. Teaching foreign languages primarily aims to develop communicative competence in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Achieving this requires a learning environment that simulates diverse life-like situations, which teachers must recreate through real-world communication scenarios in the target language.

At Vietnam Military Medical University (VMMU), English is a mandatory subject, where students must reach a Level 3 proficiency equivalent to B1 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Among the four core skills-speaking, listening, writing, and reading-speaking is often considered the most challenging to develop despite its crucial role in effective communication. According to Richards (2008), fluency in speaking English is a top priority for language learners, making it a key indicator of success in language acquisition. Nevertheless, many students at military academies struggle with speaking skills, often completing their language courses without acquiring the ability to handle even essential communication in English.

This challenge is urgent and needs immediate attention. Classroom speaking activities often lack sufficient opportunities for meaningful practice, focusing more on grammatical structures than

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interactive language use. This mismatch between teaching methods and communicative needs highlights the necessity for practical teaching techniques that foster student engagement and active language use. One such teaching technique is debate, which encourages students to think critically, articulate their ideas clearly, and respond to opposing viewpoints. As Douglas (2014) suggests, debate helps students develop the skills necessary for practical verbal expression while honing their ability to think critically and defend their positions logically. In a military setting, where clear communication and quick decision-making are crucial, debate offers a robust framework for fostering these skills. Additionally, debate techniques align well with the military's emphasis on structured argumentation, quick thinking, and effective decision-making under pressure (Smith, 2011).

Thus, the present study, *"An investigation into the effectiveness of classroom debate techniques in enhancing English-speaking skills for military general practitioner students at Vietnam Military Medical University"*, aims to assist VMMU students in improving their English speaking skills and developing critical thinking abilities. The potential benefits of this study could significantly improve English language learning at VMMU, fostering a more confident and proficient student body that is better prepared to meet the communication demands of both academic and professional military environments.

To achieve the aims, the study focuses on addressing the following research questions:

1. To what extent does using debate techniques enhance students' speaking skills?
2. What is students' attitude toward applying debate techniques in learning English?

2. Literature review

2.1. Speaking skills and debate technique

Over the past decade, debate techniques have emerged as one of the most effective teaching methods researchers and educators employ to enhance students' English speaking skills. Debate is a tool for developing the ability to express opinions, fostering critical thinking, and improving presentation skills. Florez (1999) and Thornbury (2005) emphasized that speaking skills are essential in communication and conveying individual ideas. According to their research, learners must engage in dynamic communication scenarios and practice regularly to improve speaking proficiency.

This study, focusing on applying debate techniques in classroom settings at Vietnam Military Medical University (VMMU), builds on previous research. It aligns with the observations of Florez and Thornbury, fostering a learning environment where students are encouraged to practice English communication through debates. These scholars' findings highlight the importance of regular exposure to diverse communication situations, critical for developing strong speaking skills.

Harmer (2007) introduced an essential element by emphasizing that accuracy and fluency are vital speaking skills. Accuracy pertains to correct grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, while fluency refers to the ability to maintain coherence in speech without significant difficulty. Harmer stressed that proficiency in communication requires balancing accurate language use with fluid speech. The current research leverages debate techniques to help students enhance both accuracy in language use and fluency through dynamic and continuous debate activities.

Similarly, Brown (2004) discussed various factors affecting speaking skills, such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency. He argued that comprehensive assessments of speaking skills must consider these interconnected factors to achieve effective communication. This research adopts Brown's approach by incorporating a comprehensive assessment that evaluates students' progress after participating in debate sessions.

Moreover, studies by Mazouzi (2013) and Rodriguez and Barrera (2015) focused on evaluating speaking skills based on four main criteria: accuracy, fluency, turn-taking, and speech length. These factors provide a solid foundation for assessing learners' proficiency and help guide the design of more effective teaching programs. These criteria have been integrated into the current study's design to evaluate the speaking abilities of students at VMMU comprehensively.

2.2. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this study is built upon the concepts of speaking skills and debate techniques. Speaking is one of the four fundamental language skills, often regarded as the most essential for effective communication. Harmer (2007) argues that speaking produces sounds and involves organizing ideas and using language to accurately and fluently convey messages. Speaking requires linguistic ability and the capacity to think quickly and respond flexibly in real-life communication situations. This aligns perfectly with the context of the current research, where learners need to develop English communication skills in both academic and military environments.

In modern education, debate is a powerful tool for developing learners' speaking abilities. Iman (2017) describes debate as a communicative situation where opposing viewpoints are presented and defended. This technique encourages learners' participation and helps them practice critical thinking and argumentation skills. In the context of this study, debate is used to stimulate discussions, thereby improving learners' ability to use English in daily communication and professional military settings.

Furthermore, Scott (2008) and Sanchez (2014) emphasize the importance of debate in education, arguing that it improves learners' speaking skills and develops research abilities, logical argumentation, and analytical thinking. These insights reinforce the choice of debate techniques in the current study, which seeks to help VMMU students improve their speaking skills while also fostering critical thinking and the ability to solve complex problems.

Additionally, debate is an effective method to boost learners' confidence in English communication. Krieger's (2016) research demonstrates that debate is an excellent language-learning activity because it engages learners in diverse cognitive and linguistic ways. This technique aids learners in developing critical thinking and argumentation while improving their practical language use in real-life scenarios. In the current research, debate is employed to create a learning environment where learners acquire the language and think and discuss like professionals.

2.3. Previous studies

- Global context:

Debate has been widely adopted as an effective teaching method to improve speaking skills and critical thinking. Goodwin's (2003) research in the United States demonstrated that debate improved students' verbal expression and helped develop their critical thinking and logical reasoning abilities. Goodwin found that students who participated in debate activities became more confident in language use and were more effective at defending their viewpoints.

Bellon (2000) conducted a comparative study in the UK, evaluating the effectiveness of debate versus traditional teaching methods in developing students' speaking skills. The results indicated that students engaged in debate showed significant progress in verbal expression, quick response-ability, and coherence in argumentation compared to those involved in traditional teaching methods.

In Europe, Kennedy's (2007) research in the UK explored debate's impact on high school students' communication and critical thinking skills. Kennedy found that debate improved students' speaking skills and enhanced their listening, evaluation, and rebuttal of opposing viewpoints, making them more confident and effective communicators.

- In Vietnam:

In Vietnam, the application of debate in English teaching is relatively new but has garnered increasing attention from researchers. Nguyen Thi Thanh Huong's (2014) study at Hanoi National University of Education explored the effectiveness of debate in developing students' English speaking skills. The findings showed that students who participated in debates were more fluent, confident in expressing opinions, and better at countering opposing views.

Similarly, Tran Ngoc Minh (2016) studied the application of debate in English teaching at the University of Foreign Languages, Danang. Tran found that debate helped students develop speaking skills and enhanced teamwork and problem-solving abilities. Debate emerged as an effective teaching method, fostering logical thinking and argumentation.

- Research Gaps:

Despite numerous international and domestic studies on the effectiveness of debate in developing English-speaking skills, several gaps still need to be addressed. First, most international research has focused on Western countries, where debate culture is well-established and widely practised. However, the application of debate in Asian contexts, particularly in Vietnam, where cultural characteristics differ significantly, has not been thoroughly explored.

Moreover, in Vietnam, most research has focused on university students, with limited studies examining the effectiveness of debate techniques for military students at VMMU, who face unique linguistic and cognitive challenges. This research aims to fill this gap by investigating debate techniques to improve the speaking skills of military general practitioners at VMMU, thereby contributing to English language teaching in Vietnam and opening new avenues for enhancing language skills in specialized settings like military education.

3. Methodology

This study investigated the effectiveness of debate techniques in enhancing English-speaking skills among military medical students at Vietnam Military Medical University (VMMU). The methodology comprised the following key components:

3.1. Research context

Recognizing the importance of English in the military medical field, the Party Committee of the Vietnam Military Medical University issued Resolution No. 51 on December 1, 2015, prioritizing foreign language training for all university personnel. This initiative led to the implementation of various measures to improve English teaching methods, explicitly focusing on speaking skills. Despite this emphasis, traditional teaching methods at VMMU remained largely lecture-based, centring on grammar and vocabulary acquisition, with limited opportunities for students to engage in real-life speaking practice. This study addressed these gaps by introducing debate techniques to foster a more interactive and communicative learning environment.

3.2. Research design

The study adopted the "Action Research" model developed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), a cyclical process involving planning, action, observation, and reflection. This approach was selected due to its practical application in educational settings, allowing for the continuous improvement of teaching practices while enhancing student learning experiences. The research occurred during the first semester of the 2022-2023 academic year and involved 40 second-year students at VMMU. These students, who all had similar English proficiency levels (B2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)), participated in the study, which two experienced English instructors facilitated.

3.2. Data collection tools

The study utilized **quantitative** and **qualitative** data collection methods, including pre-tests and post-tests, classroom observations, and student surveys.

- Pre-tests/Post-tests: These tests were administered before and after introducing debate techniques to measure the improvement in students' speaking skills. Each test comprised three sections: social interaction questions, topic presentations, and extended discussions. These sections assessed vital components such as fluency, grammatical accuracy, pronunciation, vocabulary usage, and the ability to defend a viewpoint.

- Classroom Observations: The research team conducted regular classroom observations to gauge student engagement and participation. A standardized observation sheet with six criteria was used to evaluate students' focus, cooperation, behaviour, and instructor interaction during the debate sessions.

- Student Surveys: Likert scale-based surveys were distributed to capture students' attitudes toward the use of debate in English-speaking classes. These surveys measured cognitive and affective responses, including interest levels, confidence, and perceived usefulness of the debate activities in improving their language skills.

3.3. Research procedure

The research was conducted in three phases:

- *Planning Phase (2 weeks)*: During this phase, the research team developed detailed teaching plans and assessed students' initial speaking abilities through preliminary observations. Debate topics were carefully selected to be engaging and relevant to students' interests, including subjects such as "Is winning the most important thing in sports?" and "Should children be allowed to use social media?"

- *Action Phase (5 weeks)*: Debate sessions were held weekly for 45 minutes per session. Each session followed a structured format, with assigned speaking turns, time limits, and specific roles for participants. The debate structure encouraged active participation and critical thinking, with students alternating between supporting and opposing viewpoints to practice defending their arguments effectively.

- *Reflection Phase (1 week)*: After the debate sessions concluded, the research team analyzed the data collected from pre-tests, post-tests, classroom observations, and surveys. This phase aimed to evaluate the overall effectiveness of debate techniques in improving students' speaking skills and identify any challenges faced during the process.

3.3. Data analysis

Quantitative data from the pre-tests and post-tests were analyzed using Excel to compare students' speaking performance before and after the implementation of debate techniques. Statistical analysis focused on improved fluency, grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, and argumentation skills.

In parallel, qualitative data from surveys and classroom observations were analyzed to explore students' attitudes, behaviours, and engagement during debate activities. This analysis provided deeper insights into the students' cognitive and emotional responses and further evaluated the overall effectiveness of debate as a teaching method for improving speaking skills in a military academic setting.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Results

This study evaluated the effectiveness of applying debate techniques to improve the English-speaking skills of military medical students. The research combined pre-and post-tests, classroom observations, and student surveys to comprehensively assess students' progress and attitudes towards this new teaching method.

Regarding the first research question, the pre-and post-test results were a testament to the significant strides the students made in their speaking abilities after the application of debate techniques. The students' average scores saw a remarkable increase, with five students achieving high scores (80-85 points) after participating in the debate sessions, a feat none had accomplished before. The progress was evident in key areas such as fluency, grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, and content, showcasing the students' dedication and the effectiveness of the techniques.

In terms of fluency, students reduced pauses, maintained conversations more naturally, and began thinking in English rather than translating from Vietnamese, demonstrating their ability to think quickly and respond in real-life communication scenarios. Grammatical improvements included fewer errors and more frequent use of complex structures like conditional sentences and idioms, resulting in more convincing speech. Students also showed increased flexibility and logic in vocabulary, selecting appropriate words for varied contexts.

Debate sessions greatly enhanced pronunciation. Before applying this technique, students often mispronounced difficult words, especially final sounds. However, their pronunciation improved significantly through regular debate practice, where clear articulation was necessary to present and defend arguments effectively. Students also began to build more coherent, evidence-based arguments, demonstrating an improved ability to use specific examples and data to support their viewpoints. This

highlights the effectiveness of debate techniques in improving language skills, critical thinking, and logical reasoning.

Regarding the second research question, the survey results were a testament to the positive impact of debate techniques on students' confidence. Over 80% of students reported enjoying the technique, stating that it helped them feel more relaxed and engaged, reducing anxiety and increasing confidence when speaking in front of an audience. This significant boost in confidence suggests that debate techniques have profound psychological benefits for learners, enhancing their comfort and proficiency in language use.

However, around 10% of students found debate stressful and unsuitable for their learning style. These students often had lower English proficiency or lacked confidence in public speaking. This feedback suggests that while debate is broadly effective, its application may need to be adjusted to suit the needs of all learners. Future adaptations include more preparatory time, smaller group settings, or additional support for students with lower confidence levels.

4.2. Discussion

The results of this study align with findings from previous research, such as studies by Goodwin (2003) and Bellon (2000) in the United States, where debate techniques have been shown to improve speaking skills and critical thinking. Goodwin (2003) demonstrated that using debate in the classroom enhanced students' verbal expression and helped them develop critical thinking and logical reasoning skills. Similarly, students at VMMU showed improvement in fluency and complex grammar usage, mirroring these findings.

Bellon's (2000) research also confirmed that debate helps students express themselves and respond quickly, a result echoed in this study, where students developed the habit of thinking and reacting faster during debates. In the UK, Kennedy (2007) explored debate's impact on high school students, finding that it improved speaking skills and enhanced listening, evaluation, and rebuttal skills. The current research reflects similar improvements at VMMU, where students became more confident and effective communicators through debate.

In Vietnam, studies by Nguyen Thi Thanh Huong (2014) and Tran Ngoc Minh (2016) demonstrated that debate could enhance students' speaking skills and teamwork abilities. The current research builds on these conclusions, showing that military students at VMMU actively participated in classroom debates and improved their speaking skills. This suggests that debate techniques, which have proven effective in civilian university contexts, can also be successfully applied in military education environments.

However, this study also identified challenges in implementing debate, particularly for students with limited vocabulary and less extensive social knowledge. Said E.M. (1992) noted that adults often fear making mistakes and "losing face" when speaking in public, which could limit students' confidence in high-pressure environments like the military. To address this, future applications of debate techniques may need to incorporate more preparatory support or smaller group settings to alleviate pressure on less confident students.

Additionally, while most students had a positive attitude towards debate, a minority found it unsuitable for their learning style. These students often had lower English proficiency or lacked confidence in public speaking. However, the adaptability of debate techniques to different learning styles is a strength. To ensure debate techniques benefit all learners, future implementations should adapt to students' varying proficiency levels and learning preferences, such as by providing tiered debate tasks or more collaborative preparation.

The findings of this study not only contribute to the development of more effective English teaching methods at VMMU but also open new directions for research into applying modern teaching techniques in military contexts. The potential of debate techniques to enhance student engagement and language learning outcomes is inspiring. Future research should explore how debate can be

optimized for students with diverse learning conditions and how it can be integrated with other communicative teaching methods to maximize this potential.

5. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated the effectiveness of debate techniques in enhancing English-speaking skills among military medical students at Vietnam Military Medical University. The results indicate that debate techniques significantly improve key language aspects, including fluency, grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary. These improvements also contribute to enhanced argumentation skills, critical thinking, and increased confidence in using English in both academic and real-world contexts.

These findings are in line with previous research both globally and in Vietnam, reinforcing the successful implementation of debate techniques in a military education setting. The technique has not only increased student participation but also improved communication skills and boosted their confidence in using English in real-life situations.

While this study has demonstrated the clear benefits of debate techniques, it has also identified challenges for students with limited vocabulary and those needing more confidence in public speaking. This highlights the importance of ongoing research to refine teaching approaches, ensuring all students can participate and benefit from this method. Flexible adaptations, such as more minor group debates or additional preparation, may be necessary to accommodate different student needs fully.

Overall, these findings show that integrating debate techniques into the English curriculum at VMMU is not just a step, but a leap forward. This positive and impactful approach enhances the quality of language training and better meets the military's demands in the context of international collaboration and integration, providing reassurance and confidence in the effectiveness of the research.

Future studies should explore additional teaching methods to further optimize English learning in military education settings. More research is needed to investigate how debate techniques can be tailored to accommodate students of varying proficiency levels, ensuring that teaching outcomes are maximized for all learners. The potential of combining debate with other instructional methods—such as group work, extended discussions, and language practice in real-world settings—represents a promising area for future research, offering hope for even more encouraging results.

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Nghiên cứu tính hiệu quả của việc áp dụng phương pháp tranh biện trên lớp nhằm nâng cao kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh cho học viên bác sĩ đa khoa quân sự tại Học viện Quân y

Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu này đánh giá hiệu quả của kỹ thuật tranh biện trong việc nâng cao kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh của các học viên bác sĩ đa khoa quân sự tại Học viện Quân y. Nghiên cứu sử dụng phương pháp hỗn hợp, kết hợp giữa kiểm tra trước và sau, quan sát lớp học và khảo sát ý kiến của học viên để đánh giá sự tiến bộ và thái độ của học viên đối với kỹ thuật tranh biện. Kết quả cho thấy sự cải thiện đáng kể về sự lưu loát, ngữ pháp, phát âm và từ vựng, cũng như phát triển kỹ năng lập luận, tư duy phản biện và sự tự tin khi sử dụng tiếng Anh. Trong khi đa số học viên có thái độ tích cực với tranh biện, một số ít gặp khó khăn do hạn chế về vốn từ vựng và thiếu tự tin khi nói trước đám đông. Những phát hiện này phù hợp với các nghiên cứu trước đây và cho thấy tiềm năng áp dụng kỹ thuật tranh biện trong bối cảnh giáo dục quân sự. Nghiên cứu đề xuất, việc tích hợp tranh biện vào chương trình giảng dạy tiếng Anh tại Học viện Quân y sẽ cải thiện đáng kể chất lượng đào tạo ngôn ngữ và đáp ứng tốt hơn nhu cầu giao tiếp của học viên trong bối cảnh hội nhập quốc tế. Các nghiên cứu tiếp theo nên tập trung vào tối ưu hóa kỹ thuật tranh biện cho các học viên có trình độ khác nhau và khám phá cách kết hợp tranh biện với các phương pháp giảng dạy khác để nâng cao hơn nữa kết quả học tiếng Anh.

Từ khóa: Kỹ thuật tranh biện; kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh; năng lực giao tiếp; tư duy phản biện; năng lực ngôn ngữ.