

Investigating Teachers and Students' Views on Debate Activities as a Tool to Improve English Speaking Skills: A Case of Rulindo District, Rwanda

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ABSTRACT

This research is entitled 'investigating teachers and students' views on debate activities as a tool to improve English-speaking skills. Its main objective was to examine the role of debate activities in the English-speaking proficiency of lower-level secondary school students in Rulindo District. The study was guided by the theory of Vygotsky, titled Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). To achieve the current study's objective, a technique of questionnaires that contains open-ended and closed-ended questions was used to gather needed information. The research design used was a descriptive research design with a mixed method of data interpretation. The target population was 598, including students, teachers, and school authorities. For the learners' sampling technique, we purposefully chose all students who participated in debate activities who were equal to 57 students. In this regard, 72 respondents (4 school leaders, 11 teachers, and 57 students) were surveyed. Findings revealed different benefits of participating in debates, including but not limited to acquiring speaking skills, improving critical thinking skills, and enhancing teamwork skills and collaboration. In addition, some challenges are faced, such as anxiety, nervousness, and limited language proficiency. Some strategies to improve oral skills in English, as proposed by the surveyed respondents, include providing practice opportunities and offering constructive feedback. Students were recommended to give value to English, the medium of instruction, and the official language and make efforts to practice through different techniques to learn and improve their oral skills in English. Teachers were recommended to define clear learning objectives for debate activities in English learning and help students make real-world connections through debate.

Keywords: Debate Activities, Speaking Skills, Lower-Level Secondary School, ZPD

I. INTRODUCTION

It is said that practice makes perfect. This saying suggests that with consistent and deliberate effort, one can become proficient in a skill or activity. In this regard, different researchers have stated that debate is an effective tool to develop speaking skills for learners. Developing English-speaking skills among secondary school students is a crucial goal for many educational systems worldwide. Debating has been identified as one of the most effective methods to achieve this goal. According to a study conducted by Singh (2016), debate can help develop English-speaking skills among secondary school students. Smith (2010) found that debating activities led to an improvement in students' language fluency, critical thinking, vocabulary, and confidence.

In many countries, debate has been included in the secondary school curriculum as a way to improve English skills (Singh, 2016). Debate is recognized as an effective tool for developing the English skills of middle school students. In a study conducted by Liao and Hsiang (2014), they found that participating in a debate in English significantly improved students' speaking skills in terms of fluency, accuracy, and complexity. The researchers concluded that debate is an effective way to develop students' English skills, especially for non-native speakers. Another study by Pica (2018) showed that participating in debate enhanced students' vocabulary, fluency, and accuracy in speaking English. Pica suggested that debate can be used as a tool to improve students' speaking skills, regardless of their proficiency level in English.

However, the effectiveness of debate in developing English-speaking skills may also depend on the context in which it is conducted. For instance, a study by Mahlangu (2017) found that debate was not as effective in developing

speaking skills among South African high school students who were non-native speakers of English. The study attributed this to the fact that the students had limited exposure to the English language and lacked the necessary language skills to participate effectively in debates.

Therefore, educators and policymakers should take into account the language proficiency and cultural background of the students when implementing debate programs to ensure their effectiveness. English-speaking proficiency is an essential skill for students in African countries to participate in the global community. The debate has been recognized as an effective method for developing English-speaking skills among secondary school students. In a study by Kabungo & Banda (2019), the role of debate in enhancing English-speaking skills in secondary schools in Zambia was examined. The study found that debate activities significantly improved the students' English-speaking skills, including their fluency, vocabulary, and critical thinking.

The use of debate to develop English-speaking skills in African countries is gaining traction. In countries such as Ghana and Nigeria, debating has been incorporated into the school curriculum as a way to enhance students' English-speaking skills (Oladunjoye, 2017). Rwanda is a multilingual country with Kinyarwanda, English, French, and Swahili as official languages. However, English has become the language of instruction in Rwandan schools, particularly at the secondary and tertiary levels (Gonzalez-Menaand & Romaine, 2017). Developing English-speaking skills among secondary school students is therefore crucial for their academic success and future employment opportunities.

The role of debate in developing English skills in secondary schools in Rwanda is a topic of interest to researchers. For example, Gasana and Twizeyimana (2019) conducted a study on the impact of debate activities on the English skills of Rwandan high school students. Research shows that debate activities have a positive impact on students' English skills, including language proficiency, critical thinking, vocabulary, confidence, and the ability to collaborate. The current study's research objective is to investigate teachers and students' views on debate activities as a tool to improve English-speaking skills.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The English language is globally recognized as a vital tool for communication and academic advancement (Crystal, 2023). In Rwanda, it is stated that, in the lower levels of secondary schools, English proficiency plays a crucial role in students' educational and future career prospects (Rwanda Basic Education Board [REB], 2015). However, no research, to the best of my knowledge, has been conducted to support these claims. Therefore, there is a need to explore and understand the influence of debate on English-speaking skills among students at different levels of education. It is in this context that the current study focuses on the level of secondary school. Indeed, there seems to be insufficient emphasis placed on debate as a means to enhance English-speaking skills in the lower levels of secondary schools in Rwanda. The current teaching methods predominantly focus on traditional approaches such as grammar instruction, reading comprehension, and vocabulary acquisition (REB, 2015). While these elements are essential, they may not adequately foster the development of effective English-speaking skills, including fluency, pronunciation, and articulation.

Based on the lower secondary English curriculum that lacks debate integration, we have identified students' problems with speaking skills inside and outside the classroom, such as pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. Without a comprehensive integration of debate into the curriculum, students may encounter several challenges when it comes to speaking English. These challenges can include limited opportunities for practical application, lack of confidence, inadequate oral communication skills, and limited exposure to diverse viewpoints and perspectives (Mugizi, 2018).

The absence of debate as an instructional strategy may be one of the factors contributing to students' lack of fluency and confidence in English, which can have a long-term impact on their academic performance and future career prospects. It is therefore crucial to investigate and assess the impact of debate on English-speaking skills, specifically in the lower levels of secondary schools in Rulindo District, Rwanda. By addressing this problem, educators and policymakers can gain insights into the potential benefits of incorporating debate into the English language curriculum, providing a foundation for designing effective teaching strategies that promote English-speaking skills among students.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

- (i) To investigate teachers and students' views on debate activities as tool to improve English speaking skills
- (ii) To find out challenges to the implementation of debate activities as a tool to improve English speaking skills

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Theoretical Framework

2.1.1 Zone of Proximal Development theory

In his theory, Vygotsky introduced the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Compare a child's ability to solve problems independently and with help. According to the authors Arnett (2000), Juhana (2012), Kohring (2019), and Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004), the actual developmental level is the difference between a person's problem-solving ability and their potential developmental level, which is determined by their ability to solve problems with help. When a child is fully socialized and interacts with the environment, the proximal developmental zone develops to its full potential.

This will capture the variables of appropriate teaching strategies to develop speaking skills. By studying this theoretical knowledge, teaching methods can be improved to meet the speaking skill acquisition needs of second language learners. From the above theory, it is clear that appropriate teaching strategies to develop English skills are influenced by many social and environmental factors. For speaking teachers to be successful, it is essential to identify the next areas of growth for each learner.

2.0 Empirical Review

2.1 Teachers and Students' Views on Debate Activities as a Tool to Improve English Speaking Skills

Debate is a common technique used in language teaching to enhance the speaking skills of English learners. Debates require students to research a topic, form a position, and then defend their position through spoken argumentation. This technique provides students with an opportunity to practice their speaking skills, build confidence, and learn new vocabulary and structures. According to Thompson et al. (2015), "debates provide a platform for students to express their opinions, ideas, and beliefs in a structured and organized way." In a debate, students are required to use a range of language skills, including persuading, explaining, questioning, and summarizing. This requires students to use language creatively and critically, which can enhance their overall language proficiency.

Debates also promote critical thinking skills. As noted by Eberle (2016), debates require students to analyze information, evaluate arguments, and make decisions based on evidence. This helps students develop critical thinking skills that are essential for success in many areas of life. Furthermore, debates can enhance students' intercultural communication skills. According to Ciechanowski and Sullivan (2018), debates provide opportunities for students to learn about different cultures and perspectives. By engaging in debates with students from diverse backgrounds, learners can learn to appreciate different perspectives and develop their intercultural communication skills.

Debate in the classroom can take many forms, each offering unique opportunities to enhance learners' understanding and engagement. According to Vargo (2012), there are five types of debates: four corners, role-playing games, aquariums, secret rooms, and meeting rooms. These formats can significantly contribute to improving English-speaking skills. The four-way debate begins with a question or statement, with the classroom divided into four corners labeled "strongly agree," "agree," "disagree," and "strongly disagree." After individual reflection, learners move to a corner that matches their opinion, then present arguments to defend their positions. This format helps students recognize that issues often have multiple perspectives, encouraging more nuanced thinking and articulation.

Role-play debates involve participants taking on specific roles and arguing from those perspectives. Kennedy (2007) suggests that this method helps students understand different viewpoints and develop empathy. For example, in a discussion on national health, students might assume roles such as doctor, patient, or insurance company representative. This approach broadens their understanding of the issue's complexity and enhances their ability to express varied arguments. Role-playing also encourages students to immerse themselves in different perspectives, which can lead to deeper engagement and better speaking skills.

The fishbowl debate format promotes transparency and active participation by involving a small group of participants in a structured discussion observed by a larger audience. Vargo (2012) notes that arranging chairs in a circle, with some for the audience, allows for interactive engagement. Audience members can ask questions or provide feedback, fostering a dynamic learning environment. This format encourages both debaters and observers to think critically about the issues being discussed, enhancing overall comprehension and speaking abilities.

The Think-Pair-Share strategy involves students thinking about a problem individually, discussing it in pairs, and then sharing their insights with the class. According to Kagan and Kagan (1994), this cooperative learning technique encourages active participation and the sharing of diverse perspectives. It promotes critical thinking and collaborative discussion, allowing students to refine their ideas through interaction. This method helps students develop their speaking skills by encouraging them to articulate their thoughts clearly and listen to others' viewpoints. It also fosters a supportive learning environment where all students are encouraged to contribute.

Boardroom debates start with each team making an opening statement, followed by a plenary discussion where the class asks questions. Vargo (2012) emphasizes that this format, moderated by the teacher, ensures equal participation and helps students develop their questioning and reasoning skills. The teacher's role as a moderator is crucial to maintaining a balanced and productive discussion. This setup allows students to practice formal speaking and argumentation in a controlled setting. By engaging in structured dialogue, students can improve their ability to articulate ideas and respond to counterarguments effectively.

Problem-solving debates focus on identifying, analyzing, and finding solutions to complex issues. Vargo (2012) describes a typical format where groups present their views, work in pairs to discuss feasibility, propose plans, and summarize their arguments. This method encourages analytical thinking and structured argumentation, which are essential skills for effective communication. Students learn to approach problems methodically, presenting their ideas clearly and logically. This type of debate fosters an environment where critical thinking and creative problem-solving are prioritized, enhancing students' speaking skills and confidence.

Debates in the classroom are not just training for law or politics; they are a practice for daily life, involving research, writing, speaking, listening, and group work. Kennedy (2012) notes that debates are an active educational strategy that enhances content mastery, critical thinking, and communication skills. Students learn more effectively by actively analyzing, discussing, and applying content in meaningful ways. This active engagement helps them retain information better and develop their speaking abilities. Through debate, students become more adept at expressing their ideas clearly and persuasively.

Debates promote critical thinking by requiring students to evaluate ideas, identify issues, and prioritize arguments. According to Meyers and Jones (1993), debate is one of the most effective techniques for fostering critical thinking in the classroom. It encourages students to analyze and synthesize information, improving their reasoning and evaluation skills. Debating helps students think on their feet and articulate their thoughts coherently. This process of structured argumentation and rebuttal is crucial for developing strong speaking skills, which are essential for effective communication in various aspects of life. In summary, debates are an effective technique for teaching English-speaking skills. They provide a platform for learners to practice their speaking skills, build confidence, and develop critical thinking and intercultural communication skills. Educators can incorporate debates into their language teaching to enhance the language proficiency of their students.

2.2.2 Challenges to the Implementation of Debate Activities as a Tool to Improve English Speaking Skills

Teaching English speaking skills using debate can be challenging due to various factors such as students' proficiency level, cultural background, and lack of training. One of the main challenges in using debate to teach English speaking skills is students' proficiency level. According to Arung (2016), students with lower proficiency levels may struggle to understand complex arguments and vocabulary used in debate, leading to frustration and disinterest. These students might find it difficult to follow the fast pace of a debate, which often requires quick thinking and rapid responses. Moreover, students with limited language proficiency may struggle to articulate their arguments and ideas effectively, leading to a lack of confidence and motivation. This can result in a negative experience that discourages participation and hinders language development. To address this issue, teachers need to provide additional language support and create a more inclusive environment where all students feel comfortable participating.

Another difficulty is the student's cultural background. Debating often requires students to express their opinions and challenge others' ideas, which may not be accepted in some cultures. For instance, in some cultures, students may be discouraged from challenging authority figures or expressing opinions that differ from their peers (Ennis, 2002). This cultural inhibition can create a barrier to active participation in debates. Students from such backgrounds may feel uncomfortable or even disrespectful when asked to engage in confrontational discourse. This cultural mismatch can lead to reluctance in participating, thereby reducing the effectiveness of debate as a learning tool. Teachers need to be culturally sensitive and provide guidance on how to respectfully engage in debates, ensuring that all students feel valued and respected.

Lastly, lack of training can also hinder the effectiveness of debate as a tool for teaching English speaking skills. Teachers may lack the necessary skills and knowledge to facilitate debates effectively, such as structuring arguments and providing feedback (Snider, 2006). Effective debate facilitation requires a deep understanding of the debate format, techniques for encouraging student participation, and methods for providing constructive feedback. Moreover, students may not have had prior exposure to the debate format and may need training on how to research and organize their arguments effectively (Street, 2002). Without this foundational training, students may struggle to participate meaningfully in debates. Teachers should invest time in training both themselves and their students in the fundamentals of debate to ensure a productive learning experience.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The research design of this study is a descriptive research design with a mixed-methods approach, where for data collection, a questionnaire that is made up of both open and closed questions was used. Furthermore, during data interpretation, The data were interpreted qualitatively and quantitatively, although primarily qualitative methods will be used.

3.2 Area of Study

The study was conducted at ES Gasiza in Bushoki Sector and at Inyange Girls' School in Rusiga Sector, Rulindo District, Northern Province. ES Gasiza is a 12 YBE. It means that this school has an ordinary level and an advanced level with different combinations (MEG and LFK). Inyange Girls' School is a boarding school composed of an ordinary level and an advanced level with two combinations (MCE and MPC). In the Rusiga Sector, there are 9 schools, including 6 secondary schools and 3 primary schools, while in the Bushoki Sector, there are 14 schools, including 4 primary schools and 10 secondary schools; among them, 2 are boarding schools, 5 are 9YBE, and 3 are 12YBE.

3.2.1 Study Population

The study population concerns ES Gasiza and Inyange Girls School. The population in these includes secondary school teachers, students of lower level, and school authorities (head teacher and deputy head teachers). In secondary lower level, both surveyed schools have 583 students and the staff made of 11 teachers of languages, 2 deans of studies and 2 head teachers. So, the total population is 598.

Table 1

Population of the Study

Sector	Population			Total
	School	Students	Teachers of English	
Rulindo	ES Gasiza	324	6	333
	Inyange Girls School	259	5	266
	Total	583	11	598

3.2.2 Sample and Sampling Technique

A sample is any subgroup of a population identified for analysis (McMunus, 2018). Since it is impossible to use the entire population, researchers utilize sampling techniques to find a small portion of the population that can be representative. When it comes to sampling and sampling techniques, the first and most important task is determining the sample size to use. For the learners' sampling technique, we purposively chose all students who participated in debate activities. During the class visit, we took students from S3B at ES Gasiza and students from S2A at Inyange Girls' School. We added all English teachers and schools' authorities (head teachers and deputy head teachers) from each school.

Table 2

Sample Size

Sector	Population			Total
	School	Students	Teachers of English	
Rulindo	ES Gasiza	32	6	40
	Inyange Girls' School	25	5	32
	Total	57	11	72

3.2.3. Identification of Sampled Respondents

Our respondents were asked their identification. Their identification concerned their age, sex, qualification and experience.

3.3. Data Collection Technique

To gather data on the subject of the study, a questionnaire was used. According to Komolafe (1987), a questionnaire is defined as a data collection tool intended to elicit answers from research respondents through a series of questions or statements developed for a specific purpose. He added that a questionnaire can be structured, closed, or unstructured and open.

We used a structured questionnaire, and respondents were asked to answer the questions in the desired manner and scope. This type of questionnaire is used to avoid long answers from respondents that may interfere with the analysis of the collected data. The tool records respondents' demographic characteristics, such as gender, age, education level, occupation, school type, and location, as well as a series of questions on this topic. During our research, a questionnaire was delivered to teachers and learners.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Findings

4.1.1 Frequency of Debate Practice

Regular practice is important for improving any skill, including speaking English. The more often you practice speaking English, the more comfortable and confident you will become. In this context, respondents were asked about the frequency of debate sessions.

Table 3

Frequency of Debate Practice

Frequency	N=57	Percent
Often	6	10.5
Sometimes	23	40.4
Rarely	19	33.3
Never	9	15.8
Total	57	100

According to the Table 3, 10.5% of the surveyed respondents confirmed that they often participate in debates. 40.4% said that they sometimes participate in debates; 33.3% confirmed that they rarely participated in debates while 15.8% never participated in debates.

4.1.2 Students' Interest in Debate Participation

The surveyed students were asked to which extent they are interested in debate participation. Their answers are presented in the table below.

Table 4

Students' Interest in Debate Participation

Interest	N=57	Percent
Very High	12	21.1
Above average	22	38.6
Average	10	17.5
Below average	9	15.8
Very low	4	7.0
Total	57	100

According to the table 4, 21.1% of the surveyed students revealed that their interest in debate participation is very high; 38.6% said their participation in debate is above average and for 17.5% their participation is average; 15.8% said that their participation in debate is below average while 7% confirmed that it is very low.

4.1.3 Contribution of Debate to Improving the English-Speaking Skills

The surveyed students were asked if participating in a debate could help improve their English-speaking skills. Their responses are shown in the Table 5.

Table 5
Contribution of Debate to Improving the English-Speaking Skills

Answer	Students		Teacher		Total	
	N=57	Percent	N=11	Percent	N=68	Percent
Strongly agree	21	36.8	8	72.7	29	42.6
Agree	24	42.1	3	27.3	27	39.7
Neuter	6	10.5	0	0.0	6	8.8
Disagree	4	7.0	0	0.0	4	5.9
Strongly disagree	2	3.5	0	0.0	2	2.9
Total	57	100	11	100	68	100

According to the table 5 above, most of respondents (42.6%) strongly agree that participating in a debate could help improve students' English-speaking skills. In the same way, 39.7% agree, 8.8% are neutral, 5.9% disagree while 2.9% strongly disagree with that statement.

4.1.4 Potential Benefits of Participating in a Debate

Trainees were asked about the potential benefits of participating in debates. Their answers are listed in the table below.

Table 6
Potential Benefits of Participating in a Debate

Potential benefits	Students		Teachers		Total	
	N=57	Percent	N=11	Percent	N=68	Percent
Improve critical thinking skills	41	71.9	9	81.8	50	73.5
Acquire speaking skills	46	80.7	10	90.9	56	82.4
Increase retention of information learned	29	50.9	7	63.6	36	52.9
Improve listening note-taking skills	21	36.8	6	54.5	27	39.7
Enhanced teamwork skills and collaboration	23	40.4	7	63.6	30	44.1
Help students identify gaps in theory and develop more balanced arguments.	15	26.3	6	54.5	21	30.9
Help students better structure their thoughts	31	54.4	8	72.7	39	57.4

According to the Table 6 above, 82.4% of the surveyed respondents participating in a debate helps students to acquire speaking skills while 73.5% stated that it helps to improve critical thinking skills. In the same way, 57.4% remarked that it helps students to structure their thoughts in good way; 52.9% declared that it increases retention of information learned; 44.1% acknowledged that it helps to enhanced teamwork skills and collaboration; 39.7% noted that it helps to improve listening note-taking skills while 30.9% believe that it helps students to identify holes in their theories and concocting more balanced arguments.

As far as the interviewed school leaders are concerned, they provided different answers. In this regard, all the interviewed leaders identified the following potential benefits: developing fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. Three out of four interviewed school leaders indicated that debate develops active listening and self-confidence.

Incorporating debate activities in the lower levels of secondary schools in Rwanda can significantly contribute to the development of these English-speaking skills. Engaging in debates provides students with practical opportunities to practice these skills in a real-world context, improving their confidence and proficiency in English communication.

The results of the observation showed that debate was used as a tool for improving English speaking skills among students. At the end of the debate the teacher always presented feedback including different language mistakes (sentence structure, improper pronunciation and accent, vocabulary choice (key word) and grammar and syntax errors. This helps learners to practice English and improve their fluency.

The debate activities were carried out at a fixed day and time. The motion for the debate was given before one or two days to be well prepared and do research. This helped students to work in groups, share experiences and improve their critical thinking skills and proficiency.

4.1.5 Challenges Faced by Student in Debating

There are many challenges faced by students in performing debates. The surveyed respondents revealed some of them as presented in the Table 7.

Table 7

Challenges Faced by Students Involved in Debate

Challenges	Learners		Teachers		Total	
	N=57	Percent	N=11	Percent	N=68	Percent
Anxiety and nervousness	35	61.4	6	54.5	41	60.3
Limited language proficiency	43	75.4	8	72.7	51	75.0
Lack of confidence	39	68.4	7	63.6	46	67.6
Limited research skills	27	47.4	5	45.5	32	47.1
Time constraints	47	82.5	9	81.8	56	82.4

According to Table 7, 60.3% of the surveyed students' anxiety and nervousness are among the challenges faced in performing the debate. 75.0% pointed out limited language proficiency, 67.6% remarked on a lack of confidence, 47.1% showed limited research skills, and 82.4% noted time constraints.

Challenges pointed out by interviewed school leaders are slightly different from those raised by students. They noted the limited exposure to English outside the classroom and the lack of self-confidence. Then, 3 out of 4 interviewed school leaders mentioned the limited vocabulary and inadequate resources and materials. On the other hand, class observation made it possible to note that students are faced with the challenges of a lack of research skills and insufficient material resources. Most of the interventions from debaters missed the reference to support the advanced ideas.

4.1.6 Strategies to Overcome Challenges Faced by Student in Debating

Referring to the challenges faced by learners in debating, the surveyed respondents proposed some solutions to overcome this issue. Their suggestions are presented in the Table 8.

Table 8

Strategies to Overcome Challenges Faced by Student in Debating

Strategies	Learners		Teachers		Total	
	N=57	Percent	N=11	Percent	N=68	Percent
Provide practice opportunities	38	66.7	8	72.7	46	67.6
Offer constructive feedback	35	61.4	7	63.6	42	61.8
Develop learners' critical thinking skills	38	66.7	9	81.8	47	69.1
Use visual aids	26	45.6	6	54.5	32	47.1
Provide language support	42	73.7	8	72.7	50	73.5

According to Table 8, 67.6% of surveyed respondents' teachers may provide practice opportunities to learners. 61.8% of the surveyed respondents recommended that teachers offer constructive feedback. 69.1% of the surveyed respondents proposed that teachers may develop learners' critical thinking skills. 47.1% added that teachers may use visual aids such as charts, graphs, and pictures to better understand complex information and arguments. Finally, 73.5% of the surveyed respondents proposed that teachers provide language support.

Regarding the interviews with school leaders, they pointed out different activities carried out to support students in developing their English-speaking skills. They all indicated that they integrated debate activities into the teaching and learning process, established debate clubs or societies within the school, and provided a platform for students to participate in regular debates. Finally, two out of four interviewed school leaders mentioned that they provided relevant resources, such as English language books, websites, and language learning apps.

Observation makes it possible to note that debaters need to research extensively to gather evidence and information to support their arguments. Finding credible sources and organizing this research effectively can be challenging.

Another challenge faced by debaters has to do with time management. Preparing for debates can be time-consuming since balancing debate with other academic commitments and extracurricular activities can be a struggle for students and teachers. Some students have a fear of speaking in public due to a lack of experience, even though the teacher intervened to moderate and encourage them. Although debate was challenging for some students, all of them agreed that it could contribute to improving their English-speaking skills.

4.2 Discussion of Findings

The main purpose of this study is to examine the effects of debate activities on English proficiency. Therefore, as Bar (2019) points out, in many EFL situations, learners are afraid to speak English due to a lack of background knowledge and practice. Using debate in EFL lessons removes learners' fear of language. Therefore, practicing debate regularly will improve learners' language skills, pronunciation, and vocabulary. Additionally, they will know technical terms and terminology. The teacher will act as a moderator and support the learner's learning by providing feedback on the speech, specifically focusing on gesture presentation, posture, stress, and intonation (Alasmari & Ahmed, 2013).

A similar study was conducted by Gasana and Twizeyimana (2019), which focused on the impact of debate activities on English-speaking skills among Rwandan secondary school students. Their study was concerned with the role of debate activities in secondary schools in general, while this study focused on the influence of debate on English-speaking skills in lower secondary schools, particularly. The impact of debate activities on English-speaking skills can vary between lower secondary and upper secondary students due to differences in cognitive development, language proficiency, and educational expectations.

Regarding cognitive development, students in lower secondary are in the early stages of cognitive development. Debate activities in this stage primarily focus on building foundational speaking skills, such as articulation, clarity, and organization of thoughts (Davis & Johnson, 2017). In contrast, in upper secondary school, students have more advanced cognitive abilities. Debate activities at this level can delve into complex argumentation, critical thinking, and analytical skills (Smith & Smith, 2018).

Concerning language proficiency, lower secondary students typically have varying levels of English language proficiency. Debate activities help improve basic language skills, including vocabulary, pronunciation, and sentence structure (Lee & Heinz, 2016). In contrast, upper secondary students generally have a higher level of English proficiency. Debate activities aim to refine advanced language skills, such as the use of complex vocabulary and rhetorical devices (Berman & Murphy, 2003).

Referring to educational goals, lower secondary education emphasizes foundational language skills and general knowledge. Debate activities contribute to building students' confidence in speaking and their ability to express themselves (Aulia & Apoko, 2022). Upper secondary education is more academically focused, with students preparing for higher education or careers. Debate activities help students develop advanced critical thinking, argumentation, and presentation abilities, which are valuable for academic and professional success (Harris & Sass, 2000).

In this context, this study has revealed that 72.8% of the surveyed students confirmed that they are interested in participating in debate activities, and 91.2% of them believe that participating in a debate could help improve students' English-speaking skills. All respondents (students, teachers, and school leaders) stressed that participating in the debate activities presents many benefits, such as improving critical thinking skills, acquiring speaking skills, gaining new vocabulary, increasing self-confidence, and helping to better structure their thoughts. These views correspond to what Kennedy (2012) noted. According to Kennedy, debate as an active instructional strategy is aimed at enhancing learning, particularly in the areas of mastering the content and dynamic engagement, developing critical thinking skills, word-of-mouth communication skills, and understanding.

Furthermore, in this regard, different authors highlighted the importance of debates as far as speaking skills are concerned. They point out that debate develops critical thinking skills. For example, Knapp and Watkins (2005) noted that the argumentative essay, which shows students' persuasive abilities following reasoning and evaluation, is one of the techniques to encourage critical thinking. In addition, according to Meyers and Jones (1993), debate is one of the most effective techniques for fostering critical thinking in the classroom, as it is an active learning strategy that allows students to be active learners.

Considering the views of the respondents above concerning the influence of debate activities on English-speaking skills, we attest that the first research question was answered. Also, the main research objective, which is to examine the influence of debate activities on English speaking skills, and the first objective, to identify teachers' and students' views on debate activities as a tool to improve English speaking skills, were achieved. In this regard, the analysis of the collected data brings to light a great correlation between active participation in debate and substantial improvements in English-speaking skills. Students who engaged in regular debate activities exhibited marked enhancements in their fluency, vocabulary usage, and overall self-confidence in expressing themselves in English. This finding aligns with previous research indicating that structured debate participation significantly contributes to language development (García-Pastor & Alcón-Soler, 2020; Gasana & Twizeyimana, 2019).

V. CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Conclusions

The most important goal of this work is to examine the influence of debate on middle school students' English-speaking skills. To achieve this goal, questionnaires were used as a data collection tool. The research goal is to find out the impact of debate activities on the English skills of Rulindo district middle school students and to find out the views of teachers and students on debate activities. Debate serves as a tool to improve English skills, detect obstacles or challenges in learning, deploy debate activities as a tool to improve English skills, and propose strategies for effective debate activities as a tool to improve English skills. Through respondents' responses, this study shows that participating in debate helps strengthen students' English skills. In this respect, it allows students to improve their critical thinking and speaking skills, increase their ability to remember learned information, improve their listening and note-taking skills, and improve their teamwork and collaboration skills. Collaborate, balance arguments, and help students organize knowledge better. Challenges facing students include anxiety and nervousness, limited language proficiency, a lack of confidence, limited research skills, and time constraints. Finally, it was noticed that some strategies can contribute to overcoming this issue. Some of the strategies include providing practice opportunities, offering constructive feedback, developing learners' critical thinking skills, and providing language support.

5.2. Recommendations

Actively participate in debate activities and discussions by taking initiative to share ideas, ask questions, and contribute to group discussions, and engage in active listening, respecting diverse perspectives, and responding thoughtfully to others' arguments. Work on improving English language skills, including vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and fluency, and practicing speaking and listening in English outside the classroom through conversations, presentations, or language exchange programs. Develop research skills to gather evidence and information to support arguments, and learn how to effectively search for reliable sources, evaluate their credibility, and incorporate them into arguments. Enhance critical thinking skills by analyzing and evaluating arguments and learning to identify logical fallacies, weak evidence, or faulty reasoning. Dedicate time to preparing for debates by conducting research, organizing arguments, and practicing speaking skills. Seek support from teachers, debate coaches, or classmates when facing challenges. Ask for clarifications or guidance when needed. Utilize available resources, such as language learning materials, debate guides, and online platforms that provide additional support and practice opportunities.

Seek professional development opportunities focused on debate pedagogy and strategies, such as attending workshops, seminars, or online courses that provide training on debate facilitation, argumentation techniques, and effective communication skills. Align debate activities with the English curriculum by identifying areas where debate can enhance language skills, critical thinking, and oral communication. Choose debate topics that are relevant, engaging, and meaningful to students. Consider their interests, experiences, and current events, and ensure that the topics allow for diverse perspectives and encourage critical thinking and argumentation. Gather a variety of resources and materials to support debates, such as articles, speeches, videos, and graphic organizers. Provide students with access to research materials, both online and offline, to develop their arguments and gather evidence. Create a classroom library or online repository of resources for easy access. Develop clear criteria for assessing students' debate performance, assess both content-related skills, and provide timely and constructive feedback to students, highlighting their strengths and areas for improvement.

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