

DEBATES IN THE EFL CLASSROOM: A SOCIOCULTURAL APPROACH TO LANGUAGE ACQUISITION, EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE, AND PEER COLLABORATION

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ABSTRACT

Aim. The current study aims to investigate the dual impact of debates on cooperative learning and foreign language anxiety (FLA) among Thai EFL students.

Methods. This study employs a qualitative research design, involving eleven students from different disciplines. The students were participating in the debate club for ten weeks. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from the students. The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis (TA).

Results. The findings provide compelling evidence that debates are an effective pedagogical tool for enhancing cooperative learning, which includes peer support

and collaborative learning, observation and participation-based learning, motivation and accountability within teams, and the development of friendships and community. Furthermore, debates have the potential to alleviate foreign language anxiety (FLA) among students, as they can reduce anxiety through peer encouragement, team dynamics acting as a buffer against anxiety, fear of comparison and intimidation, and anxiety related to language proficiency.

Conclusion. This research adds depth to our understanding of how debates impact learners by emphasising the interplay between peer support, accountability, and motivation. It also sheds light on the complex role of heterogeneous ability groups, illustrating both their potential to inspire learners and the risks of heightened anxiety.

Cognitive value. The findings of this study offer several important implications for language educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers aiming to enhance language learning through cooperative activities such as debates. It indicates the transformative potential of debates in language education, offering a roadmap for educators and researchers seeking to enhance learning outcomes in increasingly diverse and dynamic classrooms.

Keywords: anxiety, cooperative learning, debates, English learning, Thai students

INTRODUCTION

Debates, characterised as a structured process for presenting arguments to substantiate one's beliefs while refuting opposing perspectives through logical reasoning, necessitate a higher level of cognitive engagement compared to activities such as discussions or public speaking (Kennedy, 2007). Widely acknowledged for their pedagogical benefits, debates are instrumental in fostering critical thinking, enhancing communicative competence, and promoting rational analysis among students (McMonagle & Savitz, 2023; Salvador-Garcia, 2023). In Western educational systems, debates are extensively employed across various disciplines to cultivate the ability to construct well-articulated arguments and approach multifaceted issues from diverse perspectives without being influenced by personal biases. Nevertheless, cultural norms and classroom management challenges often complicate the incorporation of debates in Eastern contexts, where differing social dynamics may present significant obstacles (Wang & Wu, 2023). For instance, traditional gender hierarchies and the confrontational nature of debates frequently create barriers to participation, reflecting the cultural tensions associated with introducing such practices into educational settings that emphasise harmony and conformity (Al-Mahrooqi & Tabakow, 2015).

Scholarly investigations have consistently demonstrated that debates serve as an effective pedagogical tool for enhancing students' clarity in communication, the articulation of complex ideas, and the development of critical thinking and analytical skills (Meschi et al., 2024; Rodriguez-Dono & Hernández-Fernández, 2021).

Within the context of Thai English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, research has primarily explored the role of debates in advancing argumentative writing, speaking proficiency, and general communication skills while simultaneously fostering critical thought. Yet, studies have seldom addressed the unique interactional dynamics fostered through debate activities, particularly their role in cultivating interactional competence and grammatical precision, which are often overlooked in alternative EFL methodologies (Pekarek Doehler, 2018). The capacity of debates to simulate real-time communication and create opportunities for nuanced language use highlights their potential to address specific pedagogical gaps in conventional language education, suggesting their broader applicability as a transformative educational practice.

Recent research emphasises the collaborative nature of debates and their strong alignment with cooperative learning principles, which prioritise shared responsibility and mutual engagement among learners. Debates function as a dynamic platform for fostering critical thinking, enhancing problem-solving abilities, and cultivating interpersonal skills by requiring students to engage in structured exchanges that involve the articulation, defence, and refinement of ideas (Campo et al., 2023; Dyhrberg O'Neill, 2024). The interactive nature of debates allows students to scaffold each other's understanding, collaboratively construct knowledge, and develop confidence through collective effort (Bavelas, 2022). Such a framework not only facilitates cognitive growth but also nurtures essential interpersonal competencies and fosters a sense of community, which are crucial for promoting meaningful learning experiences in diverse educational contexts.

The potential of debates to alleviate foreign language anxiety (FLA) further accentuates their value as a pedagogical tool in language learning. Anxiety, often caused by fear of judgment, the possibility of errors, or feelings of inadequacy, serves as a significant barrier to effective communication. By incorporating debates into a supportive, low-stakes environment where the emphasis is on team-based collaboration rather than individual performance, teachers can create conditions that encourage risk-taking and active participation. Peer support and shared accountability reduce the psychological burden often associated with language production, thereby empowering learners to build confidence and resilience in using English. Such findings are consistent with studies demonstrating that cooperative learning strategies not only mitigate anxiety but also foster emotional well-being and encourage sustained engagement in language acquisition (Yan & Horwitz, 2008; Zarrinabadi et al., 2022). By integrating debates within a cooperative learning framework, teachers can address both cognitive and affective dimensions of language learning, ultimately facilitating a more holistic and effective educational experience.

Debates necessitate a profound understanding of the subject matter prior to engagement, which sets them apart from conventional presentations and other less interactive activities (Chen et al., 2022; Joughin, 2007). By requiring participants to critically evaluate information, construct coherent arguments, and anticipate counterarguments,

debates foster the development of higher-order thinking skills and communicative competence. In the Thai EFL context, however, learners often encounter persistent challenges in mastering English communication. Limited exposure to authentic English interactions, low levels of motivation, inadequately trained teachers, and a predominant focus on rote memorisation and grammatical accuracy have collectively hindered the acquisition of communicative competence (Apridayani et al., 2024; Baker, 2016; Chulee et al., 2023; Imsa-Ard, 2020; Karnchanachari, 2019; Ulla, 2018). Consequently, these systemic limitations not only impede language proficiency but also restrict students' ability to cultivate critical thinking, an essential skill for effective and meaningful communication.

Despite extensive scholarship emphasising the benefits of debates in improving English proficiency, argumentative skills, and critical thinking, there remains an insufficient exploration of their role in enhancing cooperative learning and mitigating foreign language anxiety (FLA) within the Thai EFL context. The cultural and educational complexities unique to Thailand warrant a deeper investigation into how debates, when implemented intensively with expert facilitators and students from varied educational backgrounds, might address these challenges. The present study seeks to examine the dual impact of debates on fostering cooperative learning and reducing FLA among Thai EFL learners. By addressing the question of how debates contribute to the enhancement of cooperative learning and the alleviation of anxiety, the study aims to provide insights into the transformative potential of debates as a pedagogical approach capable of overcoming both cognitive and affective barriers in language education. The following research question guides the study: To what extent do debates enhance Thai EFL students' cooperative learning and alleviate their foreign language anxiety (FLA)?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Sociocultural Theory (SCT), a theoretical framework introduced by Lev Vygotsky (1978), serves as a critical underpinning for the present study, particularly in its emphasis on the central role of social interaction in both cognitive and linguistic development. SCT posits that learning is inherently a socially mediated process, wherein knowledge is co-constructed through collaborative engagement between individuals (Alkhudiry, 2022; Fahim & Haghani, 2012). The theory's application to second language acquisition (SLA) is particularly significant, as it underscores the importance of interactive environments in which learners actively engage with peers to negotiate meaning and enhance linguistic proficiency (Lantolf, 2006). In relation to this study, SCT provides a robust framework for examining the dual benefits of debates in fostering cooperative learning and mitigating foreign language anxiety (FLA), suggesting that the social, interactive nature of debates facilitates not only cognitive development but also emotional support, which is crucial for language learners' success.

A key concept within SCT, the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), refers to the cognitive space between what learners can achieve independently and what they can accomplish with appropriate guidance or support (Eun, 2019). In the context of language learning, the ZPD is facilitated through scaffolding, where more proficient peers or instructors provide targeted assistance that enables learners to achieve tasks they could not complete autonomously (Walqui, 2006). Approaches such as Dynamic Assessment and Mediated Development leverage the ZPD to enhance second language instruction by aligning learning activities with learners' developmental potential (Infante & Poehner, 2019). Debates naturally align with the principles of the ZPD, as they inherently promote collaborative learning, with more proficient students providing linguistic support to their peers. Through such interactions, students with greater language proficiency can model correct usage, offer corrective feedback, and suggest alternative linguistic structures. This reciprocal support not only bolsters cooperative learning but also alleviates language anxiety by enhancing the confidence of less proficient students, thus fostering both cognitive and affective growth in the second language acquisition process.

Another central principle of SCT is the concept of mediation, which asserts that learning is facilitated through cultural tools, with language and social interaction serving as primary mediators. Mediation entails the use of symbolic artifacts, such as language, to regulate cognitive processes and support learning, enabling individuals to engage in higher-order thinking (Albusaidi, 2019; Lantolf, 2006). The theory contends that higher mental functions are internalised through social interactions, where language functions both as a communicative medium and a cognitive tool shaping thought and understanding (Gutiérrez, 2006). In the context of SLA, mediation frequently occurs through collaborative dialogue, whereby learners co-construct knowledge through meaningful interaction (Poehner & Leontjev, 2018). Debates, as a structured form of interactive dialogue, represent a potent mediational tool that allows students to articulate their ideas, negotiate meaning, and assimilate new knowledge through social engagement. The meaningful use of language within the framework of debates not only promotes higher-order cognitive skills, such as critical analysis and evaluation, but also facilitates academic and linguistic growth. Furthermore, the inherently collaborative nature of debates fosters a sense of interpersonal connection, which reduces feelings of isolation and enhances students' willingness to communicate, thereby addressing the challenges associated FLA.

SCT also stresses the inherently social nature of knowledge, positing that learning is a collaborative process in which understanding is co-constructed through dialogue and peer interaction (Swain et al., 2002). This perspective challenges traditional individualistic paradigms of education, highlighting the importance of interaction as a means of fostering cognitive and linguistic development. Collaborative learning models informed by SCT have demonstrated significant efficacy in improving student achievement and promoting critical skills such as information literacy

in language classrooms (Wang, 2007). In debates, students actively engage in cooperative problem-solving, critically interrogate each other's assumptions, and collaboratively construct arguments, embodying the principles of socially mediated learning. This interactive process not only reinforces mutual respect and shared responsibility, which are vital to cooperative learning, but also creates a supportive environment where students can develop confidence in their language abilities. By cultivating a sense of community, debates reduce the fear of negative evaluation, which is a core component of FLA, thus enhancing both the cognitive and affective dimensions of language learning.

SCT, by elucidating the intricate relationships between the ZPD, mediation, and social interaction, offers critical insights into the mechanisms through which debates foster cooperative learning and alleviate FLA. Within the context of debates, learners are provided with opportunities to engage in authentic communication, wherein they can not only receive peer support but also develop increased confidence in their linguistic capabilities, all within a socially supportive and collaborative environment. Such dynamics are substantiated by empirical studies that demonstrate the dual impact of cooperative learning activities in promoting both cognitive development and emotional well-being, as students can negotiate meaning and co-construct knowledge in a low-anxiety setting (Apridayani & Waluyo, 2022; Mercer, 2000; Thoms, 2012). In this regard, SCT serves as a comprehensive theoretical lens through which the educational and psychological benefits of debates in language learning can be examined, offering a nuanced understanding of their potential to enhance both academic achievement and emotional resilience in the classroom.

PREVIOUS STUDIES

A substantial body of research has examined the impact of debates on students' cooperative learning experiences and their management of FLA. Cooperative learning, which promotes positive interdependence among students, has consistently been associated with enhanced academic performance and improved social skills, as students collaborate to achieve common objectives (Gillies, 2014; Johnson & Johnson, 2014; Sánchez Prieto et al., 2021). By working together, learners develop mutual support systems, engage in shared problem-solving, and collectively address challenges. Within this framework, methods such as academic controversy, which emphasise structured discourse and critical engagement, have been shown to strengthen both critical thinking and argumentation abilities (Jacobs, 2010). As a collaborative activity, debates naturally align with the principles of cooperative learning, compelling students to engage intensively in teamwork to prepare arguments, predict counterarguments, and refine their reasoning, thus fostering both cognitive and interpersonal growth.

The use of structured debates in educational settings has consistently demonstrated their capacity to improve student engagement, foster collaboration, and cultivate higher-order thinking skills, such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Cariñanos-Ayala et al., 2021; Chikeleze et al., 2018; Deliana & Ganie, 2025). In addition to enhancing active learning, debates contribute to the development of argumentative essay writing skills, reflecting their broader impact on students' academic success (Mokhtar et al., 2020). Research also highlights the mediating role of collaborative learning in strengthening the relationship between teaching quality and educational outcomes, emphasising the critical importance of peer interaction in achieving meaningful learning (Awang-Hashim et al., 2023). Furthermore, studies have underlined the importance of debate structure, with more formalised formats yielding superior outcomes in terms of learning effectiveness and skill development compared to less structured approaches (Tessier, 2009). By integrating debates into cooperative learning frameworks, teachers can harness their potential to address both cognitive and affective dimensions of learning, ultimately enhancing academic achievement and reducing anxiety.

Moreover, empirical evidence highlights the efficacy of English debates in reducing FLA while simultaneously enhancing learners' confidence and proficiency in speaking. Debate training has been found to significantly improve oral performance by fostering fluency, accuracy, and coherence, while also alleviating communication apprehension among students (Kassem, 2021; El Majidi et al., 2021; García-Sánchez, 2020). Structured interventions in debate settings provide opportunities for learners to engage in meaningful language use, which supports linguistic and cognitive development (Tang, 2024). Furthermore, the incorporation of targeted strategies, such as assigning speaking tasks to learners (Jin et al., 2020) and cultivating a supportive classroom atmosphere that encourages risk-taking and collaboration (Tymbal, 2017), has proven effective in addressing the emotional challenges associated with language learning (Han, 2024). Research also identifies the role of debates in fostering emotional resilience, which has been linked to increased engagement, well-being, and the ability to navigate the psychological demands of language acquisition (Apridayani et al., 2023; Yan & Horwitz, 2008; Zarrinabadi et al., 2022). By promoting resilience and mitigating anxiety, debates contribute to a comprehensive and supportive learning environment that enhances both linguistic and emotional development.

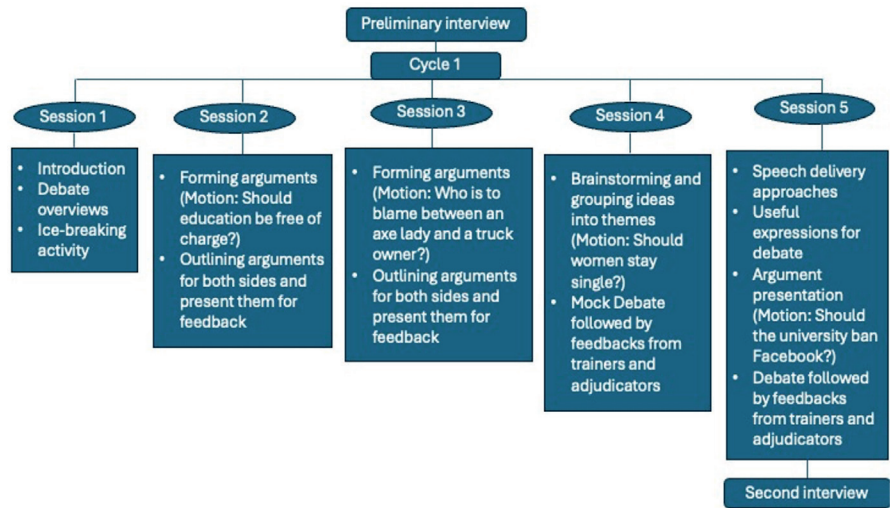
METHODOLOGY

The present study utilised a qualitative research design. It examined the extent to which participation in debates enhances students' cooperative learning and alleviates foreign language anxiety (FLA), based on the participants' perceptions and experiences after engaging in a debate club for ten weeks, with two-hour sessions per week.

The study involved eleven participants from diverse academic disciplines, including nine undergraduate students majoring in English from the School of Liberal Arts and two master’s students from the School of Sciences, all enrolled at a university in southern Thailand. The debate club was facilitated by a team of lecturers from Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia, each possessing extensive experience as debaters, adjudicators, and debate coaches. All participants were provided with comprehensive information regarding the study’s objectives, the non-credit nature of the training, the procedure, and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage. To protect participants’ confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to all individuals involved in the research.

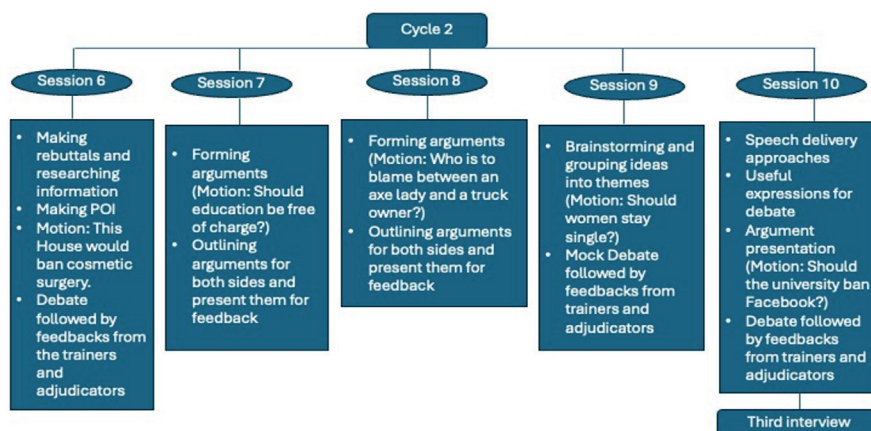
Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method, with each participant being interviewed three times: prior to the first training session, after the fifth session, and following the tenth session. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. The interview schedule was divided into two sets of questions. The first set was used during the preliminary interview to gather information on participants’ prior experiences with English learning, their understanding of the purpose of the English debate club, their motivations for joining, and their expectations. The second set of questions was specifically designed for the follow-up interviews, focusing on the participants’ reflections regarding the debate club’s impact on their cooperative learning and its potential in reducing FLA. To ensure the authenticity of the qualitative data, all interviews were conducted in Thai, allowing for a more accurate capture of participants’ thoughts and feelings. The data collection procedure is further detailed in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1
Cycle 1



Source. Own research.

Figure 2
Cycle 2



Source. Own research.

The interview data were analysed using a thematic analysis framework, which employs a rigorous, multi-phase methodology to ensure a systematic and comprehensive examination of qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process began with the transcription of the interviews, allowing for an in-depth familiarity with the content, followed by the generation of initial codes to identify significant patterns and features within the data. The codes were then systematically organised into preliminary themes, which underwent a meticulous review and refinement to ensure internal consistency and alignment with the study's research objectives. In the final stage, the themes were thoroughly developed and synthesised into a coherent narrative, facilitating a detailed and nuanced interpretation of the participants' experiences and perspectives. This analytical approach ensured that the findings were grounded in the data while maintaining a high level of analytical rigour and interpretive depth.

RESULTS

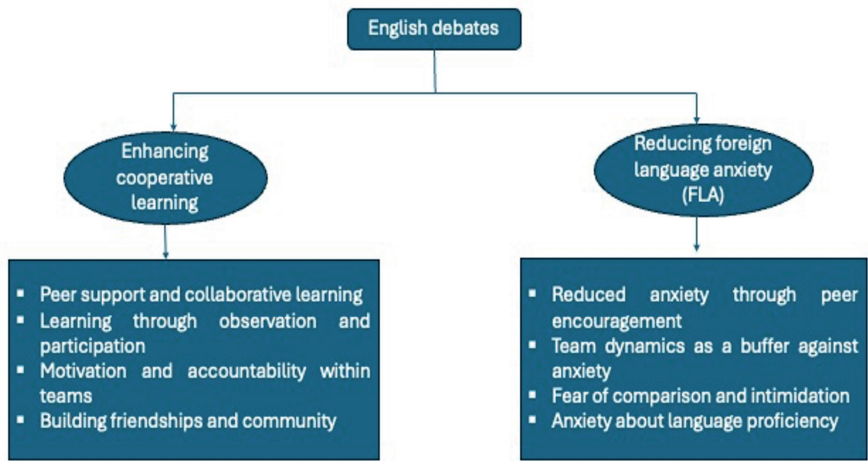
The preliminary interviews indicated that most participants had experienced English learning that predominantly relied on rote memorisation, a practice that began in primary school and continued through senior high school. Instruction in this context focused primarily on the memorisation of isolated grammar rules and vocabulary, with minimal emphasis placed on authentic communicative interaction, particularly with native speakers. Such an approach reflects the limitations of traditional educational models, which often prioritise grammatical accuracy over meaningful language use, thereby inhibiting the development of practical language skills. However, two participants, Student 2 and Student 3, shared contrasting experiences that offered more com-

municative opportunities. Student 3’s experiences were mainly confined to the classroom, where interactions with both Thai and native-speaking teachers facilitated some level of language use, while Student 2’s experiences extended beyond the classroom, incorporating more dynamic exchanges with Thai and international English speakers. These experiences, which align with the principles of Sociocultural Theory (SCT), suggest that authentic social interactions play a critical role in language acquisition, as they provide opportunities for collaborative engagement and scaffolding, which are essential for cognitive and linguistic development (Vygotsky, 1978).

Despite their limited prior exposure to English debates, most participants expressed a strong desire to improve their English communication skills, indicating a clear motivation to overcome the deficiencies in their previous learning experiences. The interviews revealed that participants valued learning environments characterised by support, flexibility, and a focus on fostering engagement rather than adhering to the rigid structures of traditional classrooms. They identified the presence of approachable and helpful instructors, who could provide immediate assistance, as essential in creating a safe and supportive learning environment. This preference for a supportive, non-threatening atmosphere is consistent with the principles of SCT, which emphasise the importance of mediation and social interaction in promoting cognitive development and emotional well-being (Lantolf, 2006).

The thematic analysis further disclosed that the debate club’s collaborative and interactive structure significantly contributed to improving cooperative learning and reducing FLA, as illustrated in Figure 3. Such findings align with SCT’s assertion that social interaction within supportive environments facilitates not only linguistic competence but also emotional resilience, thereby fostering both cognitive and affective growth in language learners.

Figure 3
The Results of the Thematic Analysis



Source. Own research.

Debates to Enhance Students' Cooperative Learning

Peer Support and Collaborative Learning

Debates, as a structured collaborative activity, fostered a culture of peer support that significantly enriched the educational experience by encouraging interdependence and shared responsibility among participants. The debate setting transformed the classroom into a communal learning environment where students actively supported one another in addressing challenges related to vocabulary, grammar, and debate preparation. Such interactions not only clarified complex linguistic concepts but also enhanced students' confidence and understanding through reciprocal engagement. The process of relying on and contributing to peers aligns closely with SCT, which emphasises the co-construction of knowledge through collaborative interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). Student 5 articulated this dynamic by stating, "The girl from the English major who sits beside me consistently inquires if I encounter difficulties with grammar or vocabulary," illustrating the proactive nature of peer support. Similarly, Student 10 observed, "Upon meeting her, I typically inquired if she had prepared. She would share several ideas with me," highlighting how collaborative efforts not only advanced academic learning but also strengthened interpersonal relationships. By fostering a mutual support system that addressed immediate academic needs while cultivating a sense of accountability and collective engagement, debates effectively embodied the principles of cooperative learning as described in SCT.

Learning through Observation and Participation

The process of observing peers during debates provided students with practical, contextually relevant models of linguistic and cognitive problem-solving that traditional lectures or passive learning methods often fail to deliver. Watching classmates engage in real-time debates allowed students to internalise strategies for addressing challenges, thereby facilitating a deeper understanding of the material through relatable and attainable examples. Such observational learning resonates with SCT's principle of mediation, wherein social interactions serve as tools for cognitive development (Lantolf, 2006). Student 5 expressed this dynamic by noting, "Watching friends was different from watching a YouTube video. It is like we share similar issues and struggles. I learned a lot from watching them," suggesting that shared experiences among peers enhanced the authenticity and relevance of the learning process.

Furthermore, debates required active participation, compelling students to move beyond observation into direct engagement, which heightened their sense of accountability and cognitive involvement. Student 2 remarked, "I didn't get to think much, but when I am a part of the team, I need to contribute," illustrating how participation demanded greater intellectual effort and collaboration. By integrating the benefits

of observing relatable peer models with the demands of active contribution, debates effectively combined social and experiential learning principles, making them a powerful mechanism for fostering both skill development and knowledge acquisition.

Motivation and Accountability within Teams

The team-based structure of debates fostered a heightened sense of responsibility and accountability among students, compelling them to address personal challenges such as procrastination and engage more deeply in the learning process. Unlike individual activities, the collaborative nature of debates created a strong sense of interdependence, wherein each participant's preparation and performance significantly influenced the overall success of the group. Such a dynamic encouraged students to actively contribute, take pride in their work, and view their efforts as integral to the collective outcomes. From the perspective of SCT, this collaborative engagement aligns with the concept of co-constructed knowledge, where social interactions and shared responsibilities facilitate both cognitive and emotional development, enabling learners to operate within their ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978).

The reflections of participants further illustrate the transformative impact of team-based accountability. Student 11 remarked, "It is the worst feeling when all the others have prepared well, and you have not, so I fight against my laziness," demonstrating how the expectations of teammates served as a catalyst for personal discipline and commitment. Similarly, Student 4 highlighted the collective accountability inherent in team settings, stating, "Unlike public speaking, I speak on behalf of my team. I don't want to let them down," emphasising the importance of shared goals in driving individual performance. These insights indicate how the team dynamic shifted the focus from individual challenges to collective objectives, fostering a powerful incentive for students to excel. By linking personal effort to group success, debates created a learning environment that not only promoted academic rigour but also strengthened interpersonal relationships and mutual trust. Such a setting embodies SCT's principles, as it accentuates the critical role of collaboration in fostering both intellectual growth and emotional resilience through meaningful social interactions.

Building Friendships and Community

The collaborative and interactive framework of debates fostered a supportive and inclusive environment, enabling students to form meaningful connections that alleviated feelings of isolation and enhanced their sense of belonging. By working closely with peers from diverse academic and social backgrounds, students established common ground, which is essential for promoting both emotional well-being and academic engagement. The debate platform allowed participants to extend their social networks beyond their usual circles, encouraging the development of relation-

ships that transcended the classroom setting. Such interactions align with SCT, which emphasizes the significance of social engagement in fostering cognitive and emotional development, as well as creating opportunities for collaborative knowledge construction and mutual support (Vygotsky, 1978).

The reflections of participants illustrate the profound social impact of debates on their learning experience. Student 3 noted, “This training helped me develop friendships with other English major students, besides my close friends,” underscoring how debates encouraged interactions with peers outside their immediate social groups. Similarly, Student 5 remarked, “All the lovely things, junior students, and coach have become another community for me,” highlighting how the activity cultivated a broader sense of community that included not only fellow students but also instructors and mentors. These experiences demonstrate how debates extend beyond the development of academic skills by addressing critical social and emotional needs, thereby fostering a network of support that enriches the overall learning experience. By integrating academic engagement with social interaction, debates serve as a mechanism for building cohesive and inclusive communities, ultimately promoting both intellectual growth and emotional resilience in accordance with the principles of SCT.

Debates to Reduce Students’ FLA

Reduced Anxiety through Peer Encouragement

Peer encouragement emerged as a critical mechanism for mitigating anxiety during debates, as supportive teammates contributed to the establishment of a safe and reassuring environment that facilitated greater engagement in the learning process. Such encouragement not only alleviated immediate fears but also served to bolster students’ confidence, enabling them to participate more actively and effectively in debate activities. Through both verbal affirmations and non-verbal forms of support, teammates played an instrumental role in transforming potentially intimidating situations into opportunities for cognitive and emotional growth. This dynamic aligns with the principles of SCT, which emphasises the importance of social interactions in mediating cognitive and affective development, with peer support acting as a form of scaffolding that enhances learning outcomes and emotional resilience (Vygotsky, 1978).

The experience shared by Student 10, who stated, “I was really worried, but my team told me that I did better than the last time,” exemplifies how constructive feedback from peers can foster a sense of progress and self-assurance, ultimately reducing anxiety and encouraging continued engagement. Similarly, Student 1’s description of the comforting effect of non-verbal cues — “When I was out there, my team smiled and nodded at me. That was really comforting” — illustrates the importance of supportive gestures in conveying solidarity and validation. Such interactions, which extend beyond mere

verbal praise, point out the role of peer encouragement in enhancing students' emotional well-being and fostering a sense of belonging within the learning environment. By facilitating emotional support through both verbal and non-verbal means, peer encouragement not only alleviates anxiety but also strengthens students' willingness to take risks, engage in the learning process, and ultimately develop both academically and emotionally, in accordance with SCT's focus on the collaborative nature of learning and personal development.

Team Dynamics as a Buffer against Anxiety

Team dynamics proved to be an effective buffer against anxiety, offering students a safety net that alleviated the pressure associated with individual performance while cultivating a supportive and collaborative atmosphere. The collective nature of teamwork shifted the focus from personal limitations to shared objectives, thereby fostering a sense of security and mutual reliance among peers. Such a collaborative environment effectively mitigated feelings of isolation, enabling students to approach challenging tasks with heightened confidence and emotional resilience. This aligns with the tenets of SCT, which underlines the role of social interactions in promoting both cognitive and emotional development, positing that collaborative learning contexts are essential for facilitating academic growth and emotional well-being (Vygotsky, 1978). The interdependence inherent in team dynamics serves as a form of scaffolding, allowing students to navigate complex tasks with greater ease.

Reflections of respondent 2, "I think I am less nervous because I have my team. It is better than doing it alone," encapsulates how the presence of a supportive team offers emotional reassurance, thereby reducing anxiety and encouraging more active engagement in the debate process. Similarly, Student 5's comment, "When Wednesday was approaching, I would get worried. My teammates always told me not to worry. That is what keeps me coming," illustrates how the constant encouragement and solidarity provided by teammates not only alleviated feelings of anxiety but also played a crucial role in maintaining consistent participation and motivation. The reinforcement of emotional support through collaborative interactions thus contributed to sustained involvement, demonstrating the significant impact of peer support in fostering both academic perseverance and emotional resilience. Such experiences exemplify the key role of team dynamics in shaping a learning environment that supports both cognitive development and emotional security, as advocated by the principles of SCT.

Fear of Comparison and Intimidation

The fear of comparison and intimidation emerged as a prominent source of anxiety for some students, particularly when in the presence of high-achieving peers. While exposure to more proficient classmates can serve as a source of inspiration for some,

for many students, it heightened feelings of inadequacy, leading to reluctance in engaging fully or participating in discussions. Such dynamics illustrate the complex and dual-edged nature of heterogeneous ability groups within collaborative settings, where the presence of more skilled peers can simultaneously act as both a motivating factor and a source of anxiety, depending on the emotional and cognitive states of individual learners. This interaction reflects the principles of SCT, which suggests that while social interactions can stimulate cognitive development, they also have the potential to amplify emotional challenges, particularly when social comparison dominates the learning environment (Vygotsky, 1978).

Student 11's statement, "It is like having a super good student in class like Student H makes me stressed," highlights how the presence of highly proficient peers can generate stress rather than encourage improvement. Similarly, Student 1's reflection, "For those performing much better, I was afraid to talk to them. They will know right away that I am not that smart," emphasises how the fear of judgment inhibits meaningful interaction and reinforces feelings of insecurity. These responses demonstrate the psychological barriers that can emerge in environments that emphasise comparison over collaboration, undermining the collaborative ethos central to SCT. According to SCT, collaborative learning environments should focus on mutual support and shared goals to reduce the negative emotional effects of comparison, thereby fostering both cognitive and emotional growth. In this regard, educators must create supportive environments that mitigate feelings of inadequacy and promote equal participation, ensuring that all students feel empowered to engage in learning without the fear of judgment.

Anxiety about Language Proficiency

Anxiety surrounding language proficiency represented a significant challenge for students, as the fear of making mistakes in vocabulary and grammar often led to hesitation, inhibiting their ability to fully express themselves. Such anxiety was primarily driven by concerns over peer judgment or the perceived inadequacy in meeting the linguistic demands associated with debates, which created a psychological barrier that restricted active participation and limited opportunities for practice. From the perspective of SCT, this phenomenon aligns with the notion that social interactions, particularly in collaborative learning environments, can both foster cognitive development and influence emotional well-being (Vygotsky, 1978). In this context, language anxiety can be mitigated through supportive peer interactions, which not only encourage greater participation but also provide emotional scaffolding essential for overcoming psychological barriers to language learning.

Student 7's observation, "Some English words are very difficult to memorise, but when I hear my friends use it over and over again, they have somehow become easier," highlights the crucial role of contextual exposure and repetition in reducing anxiety related to unfamiliar vocabulary. Repeated encounters with language in authentic

contexts allowed students to observe its usage, thereby gradually diminishing the apprehension associated with new words and increasing their confidence in using them. Similarly, Student 6's account of receiving reassurance from a peer — "When I misused vocabulary, the younger student from the English major told me not to worry. She said, 'It is okay. She had similar problems'" — demonstrates how supportive peer interactions contribute to normalising mistakes as an inherent part of the learning process. Such exchanges fostered a more inclusive and empathetic environment, where students felt encouraged to take risks with language use, ultimately facilitating both cognitive and emotional growth. By creating an environment where linguistic errors were not stigmatised, debates provided a platform for reducing anxiety and promoting language development through collaboration, thus exemplifying the principles of SCT.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study offer strong evidence supporting the efficacy of debates as a pedagogical tool for enhancing cooperative learning and mitigating foreign language anxiety (FLA) among students. Drawing on Sociocultural Theory (SCT), the study emphasises the critical role of social interaction, peer support, and mediation in fostering both cognitive and emotional development within language learning contexts. By highlighting the collaborative nature of debates, the research demonstrates how these interactions create a learning environment that not only facilitates linguistic proficiency but also supports emotional resilience, allowing students to engage more confidently with the language. In particular, the study suggests the significant contributions of peer support and teamwork, which align with SCT's focus on the importance of social collaboration in the learning process (Vygotsky, 1978).

The study's findings are consistent with existing research that suggests debates promote cooperative learning by encouraging interdependence and peer support (Gillies, 2014; Johnson & Johnson, 2014). Students consistently reported that collaboration within debate teams helped them overcome linguistic challenges, in line with the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) concept, where learners are guided by more proficient peers to achieve tasks they could not complete independently (Walqui, 2006). This supports George Jacobs' (2010) findings on academic controversy, which highlight how structured interaction fosters critical thinking and collaborative learning. However, the current study uniquely emphasises the relational dimension of peer support, illustrating that students not only exchanged knowledge but also built meaningful interpersonal connections that enhanced their sense of accountability and team cohesion. Additionally, the dynamic of learning through observation and participation, central to the students' experiences, extends the SCT concept of mediated development (Poehner & Leontjev, 2018). Although earlier studies such as Marzni Mohamed Mokhtar et al. (2020) have emphasised the cognitive benefits of debates in developing higher-order

thinking, the present study broadens the discourse by focusing on how peer relatability during debates provides an authentic and attainable learning model. This relational dynamic appears to deepen student engagement and foster a stronger sense of community—an aspect that has often been underexplored in prior research on debates.

The present study also makes a significant contribution to the existing literature by demonstrating how debates serve as an effective mechanism for mitigating FLA through peer encouragement and the creation of supportive team dynamics. Previous research, such as Hassan M. Kassem (2021), has established that structured debates help reduce communication apprehension and enhance oral performance; however, the current study further elucidates the role of non-verbal cues and peer affirmations in fostering a psychologically safe environment that enables students to overcome anxiety. This finding is consistent with the assertion by Jackie Xiu Yan and Elaine Kolker Horwitz (2008) that emotional resilience is critical in alleviating language anxiety. Furthermore, the study uncovers a nuanced dual effect of heterogeneous ability groups, where exposure to high-achieving peers served as an inspiration for some students while exacerbating anxiety for others. These results echo Nourollah Zarrinabadi et al.'s (2022) findings on the complex influence of peer interactions on FLA, thus highlighting the importance of carefully balancing the composition of debate teams in order to maximise peer support and minimize feelings of intimidation.

In addition to confirming prior research on the cognitive and emotional benefits of debates, as outlined by Abid el Majidi et al. (2021) and Soraya García-Sánchez (2020), the present study introduces a novel emphasis on the interplay between accountability and motivation in collaborative learning environments. Whereas Jack T. Tessier (2009) focused on the cognitive benefits of structured debate formats, particularly in enhancing critical thinking and knowledge acquisition, the current findings highlight how debates also foster interpersonal accountability, which in turn promotes both academic and emotional growth. Moreover, the study challenges Svitlana Tsymbal's (2017) claim that a supportive atmosphere alone is sufficient to alleviate anxiety, suggesting instead that the active involvement of peer mediation plays a pivotal role in cultivating an inclusive and effective learning environment. By emphasising the central role of peer support, both verbal and non-verbal, the study advances a more comprehensive understanding of how debates can be utilised not only to enhance language proficiency but also to build emotional resilience and reduce anxiety in language learners.

Furthermore, the findings of the study present critical implications for language teachers, curriculum designers, and policymakers aiming to improve language learning through cooperative activities such as debates. The results highlight the necessity of integrating structured debates into language curricula to simultaneously promote cognitive and socio-emotional development. By engaging students in debates, teachers can create learning environments that prioritise collaborative learning, foster critical thinking, and address emotional challenges, including FLA. Debates provide an authentic context for communication, offering students a balance between challenges

that stretch their capabilities, and the scaffolding required to navigate complex tasks effectively. Such an approach aligns with the principles of the ZPD, where students can achieve higher levels of competence through guided support from peers and instructors, thereby enhancing both linguistic proficiency and emotional resilience.

The study also emphasises the importance of fostering a supportive classroom culture that empowers students to take linguistic risks without fear of judgment or failure. Peer encouragement and team-based dynamics emerged as pivotal factors in reducing anxiety and building confidence, suggesting that teachers should actively train students to offer constructive feedback and emotional support to their peers. Teachers can reduce the psychological barriers that impede student engagement and participation by fostering an inclusive environment that emphasises collaboration and mutual respect. A safe and supportive learning atmosphere not only reduces FLA but also enhances students' willingness to communicate, which is essential for effective second language acquisition. Furthermore, such an approach reinforces the collaborative ethos of language learning by integrating cognitive and affective dimensions, ultimately promoting both individual and collective growth within the classroom setting.

The study further points out the necessity of carefully managing group composition during debates to ensure their effectiveness as a pedagogical tool in language education. While heterogeneous groups provide opportunities for scaffolding and exposure to advanced language models, they can also increase anxiety for less proficient students, potentially inhibiting their participation. Teachers should aim to achieve a balance by forming teams that are inclusive and supportive, enabling all students to feel both valued and capable. Providing sufficient scaffolding within such groups can help mitigate the challenges faced by less confident learners, ensuring that they are able to engage meaningfully in the activity. Furthermore, teacher training should emphasise the importance of identifying and addressing signs of FLA during debates, equipping teachers with strategies to create a psychologically safe environment. By fostering a supportive team structure and addressing emotional barriers, debates can become an inclusive and effective method for enhancing both linguistic proficiency and emotional resilience.

From a broader educational perspective, debates align with the core objectives of 21st-century learning, which emphasise the development of critical thinking, collaboration, and emotional resilience. Policymakers and educational institutions should prioritise the integration of debate-based activities into language education curricula by allocating resources for comprehensive teacher training and the creation of specialised instructional materials. Such initiatives would ensure that educators are well-equipped to facilitate debates effectively, maximising their cognitive and socio-emotional benefits for students. Besides, the value of debates extends beyond the classroom, offering significant potential for professional development by cultivating advanced communication and collaborative skills in workplace contexts. By embedding debates within both educational and professional frameworks, institutions can harness their transformative potential to foster essential skills, contributing to individual growth and collective progress in a variety of settings.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the findings of the study emphasise the dual benefits of debates as a pedagogical tool, highlighting their capacity to cultivate a collaborative learning environment where students actively support and learn from one another while simultaneously reducing anxiety through the creation of a supportive and inclusive atmosphere. By extending prior research, the study provides a nuanced understanding of how debates influence learners, particularly by elucidating the interplay between peer support, accountability, and motivation. Additionally, the research explores the multifaceted role of heterogeneous ability groups, illustrating their potential to inspire less proficient students through exposure to advanced language models while acknowledging the associated risk of heightened anxiety. These insights offer crucial guidance for educators in designing debate activities that maximise their benefits by fostering collaboration and mitigating challenges arising from differences in proficiency levels.

Future research should investigate the long-term impacts of debate participation on language proficiency, anxiety reduction, and interpersonal skill development, with particular attention to how varying cultural and educational contexts shape these outcomes. Exploring the efficacy of diverse debate formats and incorporating technological innovations into debate activities could provide further insights into optimizing their pedagogical potential. By illuminating the transformative role of debates in language education, the study provides a roadmap for educators and researchers to enhance learning outcomes in increasingly diverse and dynamic classrooms. A continued focus on refining and expanding debate practices in education will allow practitioners to leverage debates as a powerful tool for fostering both cognitive and emotional growth among language learners.

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