Debate in Communicative Arabic as a Foreign Language Learning

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Abstract

Foreign language learning activities, whether in or out of the classroom, should be varied to maximise the language's influence on students. Debate is an activity that encourages students to speak up, participate in discussions, defend their arguments and positions, and research a wide range of topics. Though debates are often perceived as difficult, particularly for students who struggle with language, frequent and effective training may help students overcome their fear and develop speaking skills. This paper reviews previous research on the use of debate in foreign language learning and the rationale for its implementation in classroom teaching and learning. If well implemented, the debate class module would boost the students' confidence in using Arabic in academics, social situations, and in their careers.

Keywords:

Foreign language teaching and learning, Arabic language, Classroom teaching, Communicative Activity, Debate.

Pengenalan

Teachers typically use one of two approaches to teaching and learning when delivering their lessons: teacher-centred or student-centred approaches. The teacher-centred approach is a time-honoured method of teaching and learning that has been used in classrooms for decades. The teacher takes centre stage in this approach, while the student is merely a spectator. The interaction between them is one-sided, with the teacher doing most of the talking and the student only listening and receiving. Teacher translation of texts, teacher demonstration while students only watch or do a limited repertoire of practice drills, the teacher tells story and students listen without responding are some of the control techniques used in this approach. The students have limited opportunities to express their views or opinions in this teacher-centred approach because they could only listen to what is being said and memorize important exam facts or practice

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limited test-taking strategies. This method prevents students from coming up with their interpretations of the lesson (Azani Ismail *et al.*, 2012).

Efficient communication skills in a foreign language can be taught to students if more opportunities for them to speak in the classroom are created. According to Allwright (1984), practising communication in the classroom is very beneficial to a student's ability to use the learned languages in the real world. Here, communication refers to the exchange of speech between the teacher and the student where they can readily switch roles between a speaker and a listener. A teacher must provide the opportunity for students to learn Arabic as a social language, rather than rote memorization of grammar and words. Toimah (2004) introduced the concept of a communicative situation in which the classroom serves as a training ground, like how a swimming pool serves as a warm-up for wading in the ocean.

For effective language learning, students must be given numerous chances to engage in genuine communicative activities both inside and outside of the classroom. Debate is one of these activities. Debate is a structured interactive method in which participants must defend their positions to persuade the judges and audience. It implements a rhetorical technique in which opposing logic is conveyed to persuade the target audience to reach their conclusions on a contentious issue. Ali Alasmari and Sayed Salahuddin (2013) suggested that debate can be used in a foreign language class as a tool to allow students to practice their language skills in a real-life setting. Quoting a statement by Krieger (2005) as an example:

> Debate is a very good activity to learn language because it involves the student in various cognitive and linguistic ways. In addition to offering listening, speech and writing skills, debate is also effective in developing the skills of defending arguments in speech and persuasive writing (P. 25)

Timothy Stewart (2003) discovered that debate was the most popular student activity among his unmotivated students, with 75% naming it as their favourite. Listening and comprehension skills, as well as official speech/address, were found to be the most significant problems for non-native English speakers at a university in the United States of America for language requirements (Ferris, 1998). Most students, according to Davidson (1995) and Krieger (2005), gained the ability to articulate and defend their ideas through debate training. They could also quickly recognise the flaws in each other's arguments. "Debate is an important educational tool to analyse learning of thinking skills and to force student reflex to be sensitive to the validity of a person's ideas," according to Nisbett (2003). (p. 210). The following are some of the functions of language that are required in all fields of study, according to Chamot and O'Malley (1994): to explain, inform, debate, illustrate, classify, prove, persuade, and assess. All these language functions are utilised in debates hence may prove helpful for the learning of students.

Research Purpose

Even though the Arabic language has long been introduced in the Malaysian educational system, the Arabic proficiency of both secondary and tertiary learners is not satisfactory.

Students are still unable to master the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in the Arabic language (Mohamad Azrien & Mohd Alwee, 2009). According to Naimah and Aini (2005), even after formal learning in schools, students still face problems in communicating in the Arabic language learnt. Ab. Halim (2009) stated that graduates of public universities who majored in the Arabic language have not achieved a good competency level.

The process of teaching and learning is neither static nor rigid, rather it is a dynamic process. Language teaching and learning activities need to be versatile to the needs of an institution and learners. Arabic Language departments ought to be sensitive to current development and should compile and find the best approach in the teaching and learning process of the Arabic language in line with current requirements (Khairuzaman, Suhaila, Khazri, Ummu Hani & Nur Syazwina, 2012).

Students are perceived as overdependent on the teacher in learning and mastering this language, especially during class lessons. Thus, the teacher requires the use of more effective methods, techniques, and learning strategies to help students master the Arabic language. One of the techniques which may be applied by lecturers is to practise debate activity in class.

- What are the past studies related to debate activity in the learning of foreign language?
- How does debate activity help in the building of speaking skills?

The purpose of conducting this research is to answer the research questions as highlighted:

- To identify past research related to debate activity in the learning of foreign language.
- To describe how debate activity helps in building speaking skills of student.

Methodology

This is a qualitative research using content analysis design. Data obtained through certain materials such as books, proceedings, journal articles as well as research dissertations and theses were later collected and descriptively analysed.

Classroom Communicative Activity

There are two types of communicative activity: functional communication activity and social interaction activity (Littlewood, 1981). Functional communication activity is based on responsibility and role-playing by the students to fill an information gap. The principle underlying functional communication activity is that the teacher designs a situation for the students to solve a problem. The stimulus to communicate as well as the measure for the success of the activity is found in the said situation. This activity stresses on the functional aspects of communication for classroom usage. The success of this activity is specifically measured through the immediate ability of the students to fulfil the needs in each situation. Thus, the emphasis of this activity is on functional effectiveness. This is because one of the important aspects of communicative skills is the ability to select the language which can effectively convey the meaning required in certain situations (Littlewood, 1981).

Social interaction activity according to Littlewood (1981) is the language usage in a situation that resembles the usages in real life. Thus, a teacher needs to adopt daily life usages of language in the classroom. This can be achieved by replicating a social environment within the class.

In terms of criteria for communicative activity, Harmer (1983) has underlined six of them as follows:

1. Desire to communicate.
    The activity should give rise to the desire to communicate. The students should feel the need to voice out their opinions.
2. Purpose of communication.
    The activity should involve real communication and not merely for the students to practise the language. Thus, there must be an information or idea gap among participants in communication.
3. Content and not structure.
    In implementing the activity, students must focus on matters which they talk about and not on the manner or method of talking about them. Thus, they must focus on the message to be conveyed and not on the language structures used to convey it.
4. Diversity of language structure.
    The activity should enable students to use diverse language forms or structures. Students will have the freedom to choose whichever form or language structure to use.
5. No teacher intervention.
    The activity enables students to implement it among themselves. The teacher's correction or assessment is toward the outcome of the activity conducted. Assessment must be based on the students' achievement in communication and not on whether the correct form of the language was used.
6. No control over materials.
    The activity shall not control the language used by the students. On other hand, students themselves will choose the language they will use.

Johnson (1982) underlined five criteria or principles of communication as follows:

1. Principle of information transfer.
    Activity that involves the understanding of information received to then transfer the information in another form, such as transfer of information from a graphic form into a written report.
2. Principle of information gap.
    For example, communication exists when person A does not know what person B knows and to obtain information, A will ask B to reduce the information gap between them.
3. Principle of fitting together separated pieces (of jigsaw puzzle).
    Activity that enables the collecting of separated information to complete a task.
4. Principle of task dependency.
    A task may only be done after completion of an earlier task.

5.   Principle of content correction.
       The teacher's assessment is the outcome of the student's language during communication within a task. But at a certain level, the teacher may correct the accuracy of the student's grammar.

       Based on the criteria stated by scholars on the characteristics of communicative activity, debate activity in the class is perceived as in line and conformity with the stated criteria. The teacher may diversify activities in class with debate apart from acting, storytelling and so on.

Literature Review

A debate club in every institute of higher learning has the main objective of helping students to master speaking skills. Khalid as-Syatibi (2008) in his research studied the effectiveness of the Arabic language debate club in IIUM (International Islamic University of Malaysia) based on the following elements: membership, training, and club performance. The research sample involves the entire membership of the debate club. His study used a mixed method whereby the instruments questionnaire and interview were employed. Data were analysed using the SPSS program based on frequency distribution, frequency table, percentage, T-test, and alpha Cronbach. The main research finding showed that most club members agree that the debate club benefits them in improving their speaking skills.

Majdan (2010) in his research studied the skills of letter pronunciation and debate delivery in the Arabic language of university students in Malaysia. The research sample was selected from friendship debate contests between Sultan Zainal Abidin University (UniSZa) and IIUM. Data was taken from an interview with two experts. The research results showed that Arabic consonant letters *ha*, *ain*, *qaf*, *tha*, *dhad*, *kha*, and *sad* need to be given attention. And the mad letters *ya* and *waw* were found to be frequently mispronounced. In the delivery aspect, matters which need to be avoided are the frequent clenching of hands, unserious facial expression, and poor eye contact with the audience.

Debate methodology is perceived as not only being practised outside the class but also used in second language learning classes. Wiwitanto (2009) studied the use of the interactive program of parliamentary debate system in the English language based on the disciplined eclecticism approach. It was conducted on science program students at Semarang State University. Wiwitanto concluded that the debate approach is one of the effective techniques in classroom teaching. It encourages students to explore knowledge and helps develop their speaking skills. The students' pre ad post-test revealed significant improvement in their speaking ability after interventions using parliamentary debate.

Richa Rubiati (2010) in his research of first semester students at the education faculty of IAIN Walisongo Semarang, studied the improvement of student speaking skills through the debate technique. The research objective was to study the extent of student improvement after being taught the use of the debate technique. The research in the classroom was implemented in two stages. Data was collected from observation and test and then analysed quantitatively. Research results showed that student speaking skills improved with an average increased score of 65.3 in the first stage of the test and 76.6 in the second stage.

The debate module used in the second language learning class was studied by Ali Alasmari and Sayed Salahuddin (2013). This working paper tried to unfold the rationale of using the debate technique in learning English as a second language in class and introduced 10 debate modules that may be implemented in class. Ali and Sayed also identified the utility of each module and explained how students may improve mastery of the English language besides the skills of delivery and presentation.

Due to the importance of student improvement in social skills, especially in the learning process, Mohammad, Zohre, Hassanali, and Kamal (2016) tried to introduce one of the learning programs "debate" as a teaching method in Iran University. This research studied learning methodology by debate technique and its effect on the formal education system. This research also considers the concept and background of this method by qualitative and descriptive-analytical approach. This study compares this method with a similar learning module. Research results show that this (broad-based) group and student-oriented strategy has dual functions of teaching and educating such as mastery of learning, continuity in learning, thinking-centred learning, creative learning, improving learning speed, promoting the power of assessment, promoting entrepreneurial skills, promoting mental health, development of oral skills, critical thinking teaching and encouraging social skills.

Debate does not merely focus on activity outside of the classroom but has begun to be applied in second language learning class after many studies found that the debate technique has been proven to empower speaking skills.

Definition of Debate

Debate is a speaking activity whereby opposing views are presented and defended concerning real or simulated issues. Debaters must ensure adequate knowledge of debated issues and interest in defending their views. It involves the process of arbitrating different views and making a judgement (Goodwin, 2003). It may function as a method to convey and defend an idea and is a communicative activity whereby the mode of operation may be oral or written (Snider & Schnurer, 2006).

Function of Debate

Debate is training that necessitates the use of the entire language skills in the presentation and delivery of arguments. The debater must be sensitive and attach importance to current issues in different fields hence requires them to research various issues. In delivering argument and logic, he must be skilled in convincing listeners and judges. In practising debate in a foreign language class, the debate must make the student use the foreign language and his skills in delivery. Ali Alasmari and Sayed Salahuddin (2013) named some of the functions of debate activity in the learning of second language as follows:

i.   Ice Breaking

In a language class, debate can be a method of introduction. An introduction session can be challenging for teachers when a student is apprehensive about speaking a foreign language in class. Some students may be averse or object to speaking Arabic in an Arabic class. Introduction session usually involves having the student come forward and talk which may aggravate the student's fear and develop into a dislike for Arabic. The students may, however, feel motivated to participate if the teacher introduces an easy yet controversial topic for the class to comment on while remaining seated. Here, the teacher plays an important role as the motivator.

ii.   Listening

Through debate training, students may improve their listening skill. Using audio tools such as radio, tape recorder, CD player, and PC, students can listen to audio clips such as dialogue, speech, debate, talkshow, report, and even CD dictionaries. This will help in correcting students' pronunciation and diction. This can also be achieved through video clips of debate sessions, speeches by well-known speakers, round table discussions, reports, and news. Students can also watch selected films, followed up with a group discussion. The teacher will give feedback on the discussion. In the feedback, the teacher needs to focus on sound, pronunciation, dialect as well as technical words and terminology.

iii.   Speaking

Debate may be used to stimulate students to speak Arabic. Training may be conducted in various fun and interesting ways. In learning a second language, most students fear in speaking it. The main factor for this is lack of training and knowledge of the foreign language. The use of debate activity in learning a foreign language will banish students' fear to try speaking, as frequent training in speech and conversing will improve fluency, pronunciation, and vocabulary. Students will get familiar with the language technical terminology covering various fields and issues. The teacher will play the role of moderator and facilitate student learning. Feedback from teachers should be based on the delivery, especially the gestures, body posture, pronunciation, dialect, intonation, emphasis, vocabulary, choice of words, data and information, the relevance of information, and logic of the argument. Thus, through debate training, students will acquire many skills, learn many new words and collect information in various fields. All of these will enrich their vocabulary and transform them into confident speakers.

iv.   Reading

Debate requires knowledge in various interrelated fields involving comprehensive research on socio-economic issues and political theories and concepts. Research in these disciplines will enhance the level of student knowledge, increase their interest in reading, and their vocabulary. If the debate topic is made known earlier, students may gather information and discuss it in groups. Thus, while preparing for the debate, students are at the same time cultivating their reading habits. They refer to many sources for data and information. Teachers also introduce

various sources of information, for example, local and international newspapers, magazines, books, and websites. Through these practices, students prepare themselves to take part in debates.

v.   Writing

Debate training also develops students' writing skills. In writing the debate script, students will practise methodical writing. While preparing the script, they learn to discuss and think systematically about the topic and connect important issues. Moreover, they learn to process and prioritise important points. If students get the topic one or two days before the debate, they usually collect information and write the whole script. Thus, they learn to write essays in defence of their arguments. However, for the finishing touch of the debate script, they only retain the main points, not the lengthy explanation.

Debate Activity in the Classroom

Debates vary in form. In a language class, debate activity may be conducted according to the procedure below:

1.   Divide students into two groups.
2.   Select the debate topic and give it to both groups.
3.   Ensure students are given prior time as preparation for building arguments and gathering supporting data to present in the debate.
4.   Present debate topic and format. An example of a debate format is as follows:

   a.   The first group (government) opens its argument, with three members giving their assertions.
   b.   The second group (opponents) opens its argument, with three members giving their assertions.
   c.   The government group has the opportunity to object.
   d.   The opposing group has the opportunity to object.
   e.   The government group has the opportunity for the second objection.
   f.   The opposing group has the opportunity for the second objection.
   g.   The government group takes time to make conclusions.
   h.   The opposing group takes time to make conclusions.

A debate usually comprises of three members in each team, sometimes four members in each group. Debate activity in a classroom may be changed based on the number of students in the classroom and level of students

The Advantages and Disadvantages of Debate Activity in Language Learning

Each technique used in the learning and teaching process has its strengths and weaknesses. The same occurs with the debate technique. Debate activity however has more advantages for students. Among the advantages are:

1.   Trains students to cooperate with their peers. In debate, the students are trained to work as a team, and they need to cooperate well among themselves.
2.   Trains students to state their views. Opinions are indispensable in the debate process. Students are encouraged to state their opinions and defend their position.
3.   Debates are enjoyable and does not bore the students. Every student plays a role in debate, so they are actively involved in this activity.
4.   Improves student language ability. Speaking skills are automatically enhanced when students practise debate, as they have many opportunities to talk in defending their own arguments.

   Despite the many advantages of debate activity in the learning process, it nonetheless has its weaknesses too. Among them are:

1.   Debate or debate technique may be used for only certain subjects.
2.   Debate requires a long session and thorough preparation. Proper preparations make the debate activity run well. Students are required to prepare arguments before they debate to facilitate attacking the opponents' opinions.
3.   May overwhelm students with emotions in defending their arguments. Students may find managing their emotions while defending their arguments difficult.

Debate Module in the Classroom

Ali Alasmari and Sayed Salahuddin (2013) proposed the following debate modules to be used in class for Arabic learning:

a.   Module 1

Practice: The teacher will give the students a controversial topic. Every student in class will come up with five key points which support the topic and five points against. The teacher will select a student to present his points to the class. Then the teacher will select another student and ask him if he agrees with the points of the first student. The second student will explain logically with supporting data and information the reasons for agreeing or disagreeing with his classmate.

Utility: This practice will motivate students to talk in Arabic. The teacher will introduce this activity in the first class of learning. This will dissolve the student's apprehension and motivate

them to speak in Arabic. The teacher will note their improvement and give responses and feedback to students.

b.   Module 2

Practice: The students will select from a list of topics given by the teacher. They will then take five minutes to discuss and summarize the topic. The students will speak spontaneously without preparation.

Utility: Through this training, the students will learn to speak spontaneously. They also will acquire expeditious discussion techniques and improve their speaking and writing skills.

c.   Module 3

Practice: The teacher will introduce a topic to the students in class and ask them to state their respective views. The students will speak in defence of their argument or opposing argument. The teacher will play the role of a moderator.

Utility: Taking part in open discussions will help students to assert themselves academically and socially. This activity will encourage them to read widely on current issues.

d.   Module 4

Practice: The teacher will write some topics on the board and ask students to select the topic which raises controversy for debate. The students are then asked to write the key points on the topic for the debate which will function as a script for the students to debate on.

Utility: Students will learn to narrow the topic, write an outline and the debate script. It is the most effective strategy for speaking and writing skills.

e.   Module 5

Practice: The teacher and students will watch video clips of debate sessions. After the clips are played, the teacher will explain the strategic points based on the debate viewed. Then, the teacher will ask the students questions.

Utility: Listening skills in Arabic will improve. In watching a good delivery of a debater, students will learn the strategies to build a case, object, summarize, and skill of delivery.

Debate and The Acquisition of Arabic

While most research on debates recommend that debate contributes to language learning, they do not however explain how this happens from the perspective of language acquisition. Nur Adibah (2018) discussed that debate contributes to the acquisition of Arabic because the processes in debate align with the characteristics of pushed output (Swain, 1993, 1985; Swain & Lapkin, 1985) and fluency approach (Nation, 2011, 1989). As such, language learners can well benefit from debate activity because not only do they have to process language input, rather they must engage in orally producing the language within constricted time. All these accelerate the development of language competency particularly listening and speaking.

Conclusion

Debate activity proposes a holistic approach to learning a foreign or second language such as Arabic. It encompasses all four skills of language which are listening, speaking, reading, and writing while also enabling students to master the pronunciation of words, emphasis, vocabulary, and most importantly, the ability to put words together to convey a comprehensible message. On top of that, the need to engage in arguments and logic develops learners' high order thinking skills. It provides the platform for them to use all the essential skills in Arabic while simultaneously gearing them with skills in thinking and public speaking. Thus, implementing debate in the classroom allows learners to adequately practice Arabic in real-life scenarios with genuine audiences.

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