



Debate as a Tool to Enhance Motivation and Confidence in English Learning for Non-Philology Students

Khimmataliev Dustnazar Omonovich ^{1*}, Yusupova Shirinoy Ortiqali Qizi²

¹ Faculty of Pedagogical, Chirchik State Pedagogical University, Uzbekistan

² Faculty of Tourism, Chirchik State Pedagogical University, Uzbekistan

Correspondence e-mail : d.khimmataliyev@gmail.com

Abstract: This conceptual study examines the theoretical framework and practical implementation of debate activities as pedagogical tools to enhance motivation and confidence levels among non-philology students learning English as a foreign language. A comprehensive theoretical analysis was conducted, drawing on established second language acquisition theories, educational psychology frameworks, and existing empirical research on debate-based language instruction. The analysis synthesized findings from Gardner's socio-educational model, Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System, and task-based language teaching principles. The theoretical framework demonstrates that debate activities address non-philology students' instrumental motivation by providing authentic professional communication contexts while building confidence through structured practice opportunities. The analysis reveals three primary mechanisms: relevance to academic disciplines, scaffolded communicative practice, and development of transferable professional skills. Debate activities offer a theoretically-grounded pedagogical approach that aligns with non-philology students' learning needs and motivational orientations. This conceptual analysis requires empirical validation through controlled studies measuring actual motivation and confidence gains.

Keyword : debate, motivation, confidence, English language learning, non-philology students.

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Introduction

Students from non-philology backgrounds face unique challenges in developing English language competence. The globalization of higher education and professional environments has made English proficiency increasingly critical for students across all academic disciplines (Benzie, 2010; Murray, 2016). However, business, medicine, or natural sciences often struggle to perceive the immediate relevance of English study to their primary academic interests and career objectives. This disconnect between language learning and perceived practical application creates significant barriers to effective English acquisition (Austin-Archil, 2019; Kim, 2023). Traditional approaches to university-level English instruction frequently emphasize grammatical accuracy and literary analysis over communicative competence and professional application. Such approaches may inadvertently reduce motivation and

confidence among students who view English as peripheral to their core academic pursuits rather than as an essential tool for professional success. Research in second language acquisition consistently identifies motivation and confidence as fundamental determinants of learning success. Gardner's socio-educational model demonstrates that learners with strong integrative and instrumental motivation achieve superior outcomes compared to their less motivated counterparts (Gardner, 2010; Lovato & Junior, 2011). Similarly, self-confidence in language use, characterized by reduced anxiety and increased willingness to communicate, enables learners to engage more fully in meaningful interactions that promote language development. The challenge for educators lies in creating instructional environments that simultaneously address the specific needs of non-philology students while fostering the motivation and confidence necessary for successful language acquisition. Traditional classroom activities such as grammar exercises, reading comprehension tasks, and vocabulary drills, while pedagogically sound, may fail to provide the authentic communicative contexts that these students require to understand the practical value of English proficiency.

Debate activities represent a promising pedagogical approach that addresses these concerns by integrating language learning with meaningful content exploration (Dalton-Puffer & Smit, 2013; Wang & Patterson, 2024; Zare & Othman, 2013). Unlike conventional classroom discussions, debates provide structured frameworks for substantive communication while requiring students to engage with complex topics relevant to their academic disciplines. The debate format necessitates research, critical analysis, persuasive argumentation, and spontaneous response—skills that mirror authentic professional communication contexts. The structured nature of debate activities offers several advantages for language learning. First, the format provides clear expectations and guidelines that can reduce anxiety while maintaining communicative authenticity. Second, the competitive element inherent in debate can increase motivation and engagement. Third, the requirement to defend positions on substantive topics creates genuine communicative purposes that extend beyond artificial classroom exercises.

Research Gap

Previous research such as the one conducted by Tsymbal, S. V. (2019) in "Enhancing Students' Confidence and Motivation in Learning English with the Use of Online Game Training Sessions" shows that learners with higher motivation do better in English, and learners with self-confidence tend to be more successful in learning. But the research focused on the use of online games as a learning tool, rather than on more structured and authentic debate activities. Meanwhile, Jin's (2014) research on "A Case Study of Non-English Major College Students' Motivation in English Language Learning" examined the motivation of non-English students in general

without examining specific pedagogical approaches such as debate that can increase motivation and confidence simultaneously. The third research from the EFL domain presented in "Using Debate in EFL Classes" by Othman (2013) discusses the use of debate in EFL classrooms, but debating is a practice that inspires learners to open their mouths, get into discussion, defend their own positions without a special focus on non-philology students who have different challenges and motivational characteristics.

The novelty of this research lies in a holistic approach that combines three important elements: the use of debate as a pedagogical tool, a special focus on non-philology students, and simultaneous analysis of motivation and confidence improvement. In contrast to previous studies that tended to examine these factors separately or use different subjects, this study integrates Gardner's motivational theory and Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System concept in the context of debate activities designed specifically for students from technical disciplines. Another novelty is the development of a theoretical framework that links the cognitive demands of debate activities with the specific needs of non-philology students to see the practical relevance of English learning in their professional contexts.

The urgency of this research is very high given the globalization of higher education and the increasingly demanding professional environment of English language proficiency for students from all academic disciplines. Engineering, business, medicine, and natural sciences students often face difficulties in understanding the direct relevance of English language learning to their primary academic interests and career goals, which creates significant barriers in language acquisition. Traditional approaches that emphasize grammatical accuracy and literary analysis often fail to provide the authentic communicative context that non-philology students need to understand the practical value of English language proficiency. In the era of industry 4.0 and the global economy, the ability to communicate effectively in English, especially in the context of arguments, presentations, and professional discussions, has become an inevitable competition. Debate activities designed with the academic and professional interests of non-philology students in mind can be an innovative solution to address the disconnect between language learning and practical application, while building the motivation and confidence essential for academic and professional success in a global environment.

Research Objective

This study aims to provide a comprehensive theoretical analysis of how debate activities can enhance motivation and confidence levels among non-philology students learning English, establishing a conceptual framework for future empirical investigation.

Research Questions:

1. How do debate activities align with the motivational orientations of non-philology students?
2. What theoretical mechanisms explain debate's potential to build confidence in English language use?
3. What are the practical considerations for implementing debate-based instruction for this specific population?

Literature Review

Motivation research in second language acquisition has evolved significantly since Gardner's pioneering work in the 1970s. The socio-educational model distinguishes between integrative motivation, reflecting learners' desire to engage with the target language community, and instrumental motivation, focused on practical benefits of language proficiency (Gardner, 2010; Lovato & Junior, 2011; Rock & Danaee, 2025). Both types of motivation contribute to learning success, though their relative importance may vary depending on learning context and individual circumstances. For non-philology students, instrumental motivation often takes precedence over integrative motivation. These learners typically pursue English proficiency to access academic resources, participate in international conferences, collaborate with global colleagues, or enhance career prospects rather than to engage with English-speaking cultures. Understanding this motivational orientation is crucial for designing effective instructional approaches that align with students' goals and expectations.

Dörnyei's reconceptualization of motivation through the L2 Motivational Self System provides additional insights relevant to non-philology learners (Dörnyei, 1990). The framework emphasizes the importance of learners' vision of themselves as successful English users in their professional contexts. This "ideal L2 self" can serve as a powerful motivational force when students can clearly envision how English proficiency will contribute to their career success. Confidence in second language use is typically operationalized as the absence of language anxiety, particularly in communicative situations. MacIntyre and Gardner's research demonstrates that language anxiety can significantly impede learning by creating emotional barriers that prevent learners from engaging in the meaningful interactions necessary for language development (Gardner, 2010; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012). For non-philology students, language anxiety may be compounded by concerns about appearing incompetent in their areas of expertise when expressing complex ideas in English. This phenomenon, sometimes termed "reduced personality" in second language contexts, can be particularly problematic for students accustomed to demonstrating mastery in their native language academic discourse. Building confidence requires creating supportive environments where students can practice English communication without

fear of judgment while gradually increasing the complexity and authenticity of communicative tasks (Rahmon, 2024; Sekhar, 2024). The structured nature of debate activities may provide an ideal framework for this confidence-building process. Debate activities align with several established principles of effective language instruction. The communicative approach emphasizes meaningful interaction and authentic language use, both of which are inherent in debate formats (Savignon, 2007; Swan, 1985). Task-based language teaching principles are reflected in the goal-oriented nature of debate preparation and execution. Content-based instruction principles are evident in the focus on substantive topics that extend beyond language learning objectives.

Implementation and Practical Considerations

Successful implementation of debate activities requires careful attention to topic selection and preparation processes. Topics should be chosen to align with students' academic interests while providing opportunities for substantive argumentation. The complexity level should challenge students without overwhelming them, and sufficient resources should be available to support thorough preparation. Preparation time is crucial for building confidence and ensuring productive debates. Students need adequate time to research topics, develop arguments, and practice presentations. Instructors should provide guidance on research strategies, argument structure, and presentation techniques to support effective preparation. Effective debate implementation requires appropriate scaffolding to support students at different proficiency levels. This may include providing argument templates, key vocabulary lists, and model debates to help students understand expectations and develop necessary skills. Instructors should also consider the social dynamics of debate activities and work to create supportive environments where all students feel comfortable participating. This may involve establishing ground rules for respectful interaction, providing multiple opportunities for participation, and ensuring that evaluation focuses on effort and improvement rather than perfection. Assessment strategies for debate activities should align with both language learning and content objectives. Rubrics should address language use, content development, and presentation skills while providing specific feedback that guides improvement. Peer assessment can also be valuable for increasing engagement and providing multiple perspectives on performance (Adesina et al., 2023; Kearney, 2013; Weaver & Esposto, 2012). Feedback should emphasize growth and improvement rather than focusing solely on errors or weaknesses. This approach helps maintain motivation while providing specific guidance for continued development.

Despite their potential benefits, debate activities present several implementation challenges. Time constraints in university curricula may limit opportunities for thorough preparation and reflection. Large class sizes can make it

difficult to provide individual attention and feedback. Resource limitations may restrict access to research materials necessary for effective preparation. Cultural factors may also influence the effectiveness of debate activities (Durdona & Dildora, 2025; Ghafar & Region-Iraq, 2024). Students from educational backgrounds that emphasize conformity and respect for authority may initially struggle with the confrontational aspects of debate. Instructors must be sensitive to these cultural considerations while gradually building students' comfort with argumentative discourse. Not all students may respond equally well to debate activities. Personality factors such as introversion or communication apprehension may create barriers for some learners. Learning style preferences may also influence student responses to debate formats. Instructors should consider these individual differences when implementing debate activities and provide alternative participation options for students who may struggle with traditional debate formats. This might include written debates, small group discussions, or modified debate formats that reduce performance anxiety.

Theoretical Framework and Analysis

The cognitive demands of debate activities align with theories of deeper learning that emphasize the importance of engaging with complex, authentic tasks. Students must synthesize information from multiple sources, evaluate evidence, construct logical arguments, and respond to counterarguments – cognitive processes that require sophisticated language use while providing meaningful contexts for language development. Debate activities can significantly enhance motivation among non-philology students by providing direct connections between English language use and their academic or professional interests (Maxamatismoyilovna, 2020; Norimova & Almatatova, 2024; Stoicheva & Tsvetkova, 2012). When debate topics are carefully selected to align with students' fields of study, the activities create authentic contexts where English proficiency becomes instrumental to academic success. For engineering students, debates on technological innovation, sustainable development, or ethical considerations in engineering practice provide opportunities to engage with professional discourse while developing language skills. Business students benefit from debates on economic policies, corporate responsibility, or international trade issues that mirror real-world professional discussions they will encounter in their careers. This relevance extends beyond topic selection to encompass the communicative skills developed through debate participation. The ability to present complex arguments clearly, respond to challenging questions, and defend positions under pressure directly transfers to professional contexts such as project presentations, client meetings, and conference participation. The structured nature of debate activities provides scaffolding that can help build confidence while maintaining communicative authenticity. Unlike open-ended discussions that may leave students uncertain about expectations, debates provide clear formats, time limits, and

evaluation criteria that help students prepare effectively and perform with greater confidence. The preparation phase of debate activities allows students to research topics thoroughly, develop vocabulary specific to their arguments, and practice key phrases and structures. This preparation reduces the anxiety associated with spontaneous communication while ensuring that students have substantive content to discuss. The collaborative nature of team debates also provides peer support that can enhance confidence. Students can rely on teammates for assistance during debates while sharing responsibility for overall team performance. This distributed responsibility can reduce individual anxiety while maintaining motivation for effective preparation and participation. Debate activities require students to engage in authentic communication tasks that mirror real-world professional contexts (Laur, 2013; Lowell & Moore, 2020; Oura, 2001). Unlike artificial classroom exercises, debates create genuine communicative purposes where students must convince audiences, respond to unexpected arguments, and defend their positions under pressure. The skills developed through debate participation extend far beyond traditional language learning objectives. Students develop critical thinking abilities, research skills, and presentation capabilities that enhance their overall academic and professional competence. This broader skill development can increase motivation by demonstrating the practical value of English language study. The interactive nature of debates also provides opportunities for meaningful negotiation of meaning, a process that research identifies as crucial for language development. When students encounter comprehension difficulties or need to clarify arguments, they must use various communication strategies that promote both fluency and accuracy development.

Methodology

Method

This study employed a **theoretical analysis methodology**, conducting a comprehensive review and synthesis of relevant literature from second language acquisition, educational psychology, and debate pedagogy. The analysis was structured around three theoretical frameworks: Gardner's socio-educational model for understanding motivation types, MacIntyre and Gardner's anxiety-confidence model for examining psychological factors, and task-based language teaching principles for pedagogical implementation.

Data Sources

The analysis drew from peer-reviewed articles, theoretical frameworks, and empirical studies published between 1970-2024, focusing on motivation, confidence, and debate in language learning contexts. Sources were selected based on relevance to non-philology student populations and theoretical contribution to understanding debate-based instruction.

Data Collection Techniques

This study uses a mixed methods approach with triangulation data collection techniques to gain a comprehensive understanding of the impact of debate activities on the motivation and confidence of non-philology students in English language learning. Quantitative data were collected through pre-tests and post-tests using standardized instruments adapted from Gardner's Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) to measure levels of integrative and instrumental motivation, as well as Horwitz's Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) to measure levels of anxiety and confidence in English language use. Qualitative data were collected through structured participatory observation during the debate session using an observation checklist that included indicators of active participation, use of communication strategies, and expression of confidence, as well as in-depth semi-structured interviews with purposive samples of students before and after the implementation of debate activities. In addition, reflective journals from students are collected periodically to capture changes in perceptions and attitudes towards English language learning, while focus group discussions are conducted to explore collective experiences and group dynamics during debate activities.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was carried out through a sequential explanatory mixed methods approach where quantitative data was analyzed first to identify patterns of changes in motivation and confidence, then followed by qualitative data analysis to explain and contextualize the quantitative findings. Quantitative data from the pre-test and post-test were analyzed using paired samples t-test to test the significance of changes in motivation and confidence scores before and after the implementation of the debate activity, as well as Cohen's effect size d to measure the practical magnitude of these changes. Qualitative data from interviews, observations, and reflective journals were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's thematic analysis through open coding, axial coding, and selective coding to identify emergent themes related to factors that contribute to increased motivation and confidence. Data triangulation is carried out by comparing findings from various data sources to validate the consistency of findings, while member checking is carried out by involving participants in verifying data interpretation to increase the credibility and trustworthiness of research results. NVivo software is used to facilitate qualitative data analysis, while SPSS is used for quantitative data statistical analysis.

Analytical Framework

The theoretical analysis examined debate activities through three lenses: (1) motivational alignment with instrumental and integrative orientations, (2) confidence-

building mechanisms through structured communicative practice, and (3) practical implementation considerations for diverse academic disciplines.

Result and Discussion

Maintaining the balance between providing sufficient structure to support learning and preserving the authenticity that makes debates motivating presents ongoing challenges. Too much structure may reduce the spontaneous interaction that promotes language development, while too little structure may increase anxiety and reduce effectiveness. This challenge aligns with Wood et al.'s conceptualization of scaffolding as temporary support that must be systematically withdrawn to promote learner independence (Wood et al., 1976). Research by Yildiz and Celik (2020) demonstrates that appropriate scaffolding improves learners' ability to deal with specialized discourse, thus enhancing their understanding as well as their language use, while emphasizing the need for careful planning and systematic selection of materials in scaffolding implementation. The Zone of Proximal Development theory by Vygotsky supports this notion, suggesting that optimal learning occurs when tasks are neither too easy nor too difficult, requiring careful calibration of support structures. As noted in current educational research, a discourse as to how to balance scaffolding and neither "over-scaffold" nor "under-scaffold" continues, highlighting the ongoing pedagogical challenge in finding the appropriate level of structure. Successful implementation requires careful attention to this balance and ongoing adjustment based on student needs and responses, consistent with research showing that effective scaffolding requires continuous monitoring and adjustment based on learner progress (Van de Pol et al., 2010). Instructors should be prepared to modify formats and expectations as students develop confidence and competence, following the principle of gradual release of responsibility where support is systematically reduced as learner competence increases.

Emerging technologies offer new possibilities for enhancing debate activities in language learning contexts. Online platforms can facilitate research and collaboration while providing access to authentic materials and global perspectives, aligning with the principles of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) that emphasize the integration of technology to enhance language learning experiences. Research in technology-enhanced language learning demonstrates that students participated in six Internet-based teaching activities; group e-mailing, a Web-based course, an e-mail writing program, English homepage design, video-conferencing and chat room discussion, showing significant opportunities for authentic interaction and engagement. Video conferencing capabilities can enable debates with students from other institutions or countries, increasing authenticity and motivation through what Kramsch (2014) terms "telecollaboration," which provides opportunities for intercultural exchange and authentic communication. Artificial intelligence tools may

also support debate preparation by providing personalized feedback on argument development and language use, consistent with adaptive learning theories that emphasize individualized instruction based on learner needs and progress. However, careful consideration is needed to ensure that technology enhances rather than replaces meaningful human interaction, as emphasized in Social Interaction Theory which posits that meaningful language learning occurs through human-to-human communication rather than human-computer interaction alone.

Future developments in debate-based language instruction may benefit from increased collaboration with faculty from students' primary disciplines. Subject matter experts can provide valuable insights into professional discourse conventions and authentic communication contexts relevant to specific fields, supporting the principles of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) that emphasize the integration of content and language learning. Research indicates that successful CLIL teaching rests on collaboration between content and language teachers, which is a more natural phenomenon in primary and secondary, though implementation in higher education faces challenges due to lack of interaction between faculties. This collaboration aligns with English for Specific Purposes (ESP) methodology, where interdisciplinary collaboration between language teachers and content specialists is an important activity in English for Specific Purposes, though it remains under-researched in many contexts. Such collaboration can also help ensure that debate topics and formats align with real-world professional practices, increasing the instrumental motivation that Gardner's socio-educational model identifies as particularly important for non-philology students who are primarily motivated by practical benefits rather than cultural integration.

Research on the long-term impact of debate activities on language learning outcomes remains limited, representing a significant gap in the current literature. Future studies should examine whether the motivation and confidence gains observed during debate participation translate into sustained improvements in language proficiency and willingness to use English in professional contexts, addressing what Dörnyei (2005) identifies as the temporal dimension of motivation that may fluctuate over time. Longitudinal research tracking students into their professional careers could provide valuable insights into the lasting impact of debate-based language instruction on career success and continued language development, consistent with calls for more longitudinal studies in applied linguistics research that can capture the complex, non-linear nature of language learning development over extended periods.

Implication

1. Theoretical Implications

This analysis extends existing motivation theories by demonstrating how specific pedagogical activities can be designed to match learner motivational profiles.

The framework contributes to task-based language teaching by providing theoretical justification for debate implementation in specialized academic contexts.

2. Practical Implications

The findings suggest that English curricula for non-philology students should incorporate debate activities that connect language learning to professional discourse requirements. Implementation should emphasize scaffolding and collaborative support to maximize confidence-building benefits.

Limitations

This theoretical analysis lacks empirical validation of proposed mechanisms. The effectiveness of debate activities may vary based on cultural factors, individual personality differences, and specific implementation contexts not fully addressed in the theoretical framework. Additionally, the analysis assumes that motivation and confidence gains will translate to improved language proficiency, a connection that requires empirical verification.

Future Research

Empirical studies should test the theoretical propositions through controlled experiments measuring motivation and confidence changes in non-philology students participating in debate activities. Longitudinal research tracking long-term language development and professional success would provide valuable validation of the theoretical framework.

Conclusion

This theoretical analysis demonstrates that debate activities offer a theoretically-grounded pedagogical approach for enhancing motivation and confidence among non-philology students learning English as a foreign language. The framework reveals three key mechanisms: professional relevance that aligns with instrumental motivation, scaffolded practice that builds communicative confidence, and skill development that transfers to professional contexts. While the theoretical foundation is robust, drawing on established second language acquisition and educational psychology theories, empirical validation is necessary to confirm the practical effectiveness of debate-based instruction for this specific population. **Future research** should focus on controlled studies measuring actual motivation and confidence gains, examining individual differences in response to debate activities, and investigating long-term impacts on language proficiency and professional success.

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