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Student-Centered Debate Techniques in Teaching English for Non-Language Majors

Sharopova Shahlo Kahramonovna [1]*, Yusupova Shirinoy Ortiqali Qizi[2]

[1] Bukhara State Technical University
[2] Chirchik State Pedagogical University, Uzbekistan

Correspondence e-mail : shaxlosh90@gmail.com

Abstract: Traditional teacher-centered approaches in English language instruction prove insufficient for developing the complex communicative competencies required by students in STEM and professional programs. As professional communication demands continue to evolve in globalized contexts, there is an urgent need for innovative pedagogical approaches that create authentic communicative situations while leveraging students' existing disciplinary expertise. This mixed-methods study investigated the implementation of student-centered debate techniques among 240 undergraduate and graduate students across engineering, medical, business, and natural science programs at three universities. The intervention incorporated discipline-relevant debate topics, scaffolded preparation processes, and collaborative learning structures, with data collected through pre- and post-intervention oral proficiency assessments, classroom observations, and qualitative interviews. Results demonstrated statistically significant improvements of 1.2 Common European Framework sub-levels in overall communicative competence, with particularly notable gains in fluency, lexical sophistication, and spontaneous use of complex grammatical structures. Qualitative analysis revealed enhanced critical thinking capabilities, increased student motivation, and successful development of transferable professional communication skills, with 78% of participants applying debate-acquired skills in real-world contexts within six months. Student-centered debate techniques offer significant potential for enhancing English instruction in STEM and professional contexts by creating meaningful connections between language learning and students' academic interests, suggesting the need for institutional support, comprehensive teacher training, and curriculum integration to maximize educational outcomes.

Keyword :student-centered learning, debate pedagogy, English for Specific Purposes, professional communication, Non-Language Majors

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Introduction

The intersection of English language learning and specialized academic disciplines presents three critical pedagogical challenges that traditional instructional methods struggle to address effectively. First, the content-language disconnect challenge. Conventional English courses typically focus on general communicative skills through generic topics (daily conversations, general reading passages), failing to integrate the technical vocabulary, specialized discourse patterns, and genre-specific

writing conventions that students actually need in their academic and professional contexts. Second, the authenticity gap that traditional teacher-centered approaches rely heavily on artificial exercises, decontextualized grammar drills, and simulated scenarios that bear little resemblance to the authentic communicative situations students will encounter—such as presenting research findings, participating in technical discussions, or defending project proposals. Third, the motivation barrier that when English instruction appears disconnected from students' primary academic interests and career goals, it creates extrinsic motivation dependency rather than fostering intrinsic engagement with language learning.

Students in non-language majors—encompassing engineering, medicine, business administration, and natural sciences—require English proficiency that extends beyond basic communicative competence to include sophisticated professional discourse skills (technical presentation abilities, academic writing proficiency), critical analytical abilities (argument evaluation, evidence synthesis), and cross-cultural communication awareness (international collaboration competencies, culturally-sensitive professional interactions). Traditional methods fall short because they treat language as an abstract system to be learned rather than as a practical tool for achieving discipline-specific communicative goals.

Contemporary educational contexts demand innovative approaches that recognize these students as intellectually mature learners with established expertise in their chosen fields. Student-centered debate techniques emerge as particularly promising pedagogical tools because they leverage learners' existing knowledge while creating authentic communicative situations that mirror professional discourse patterns. Unlike conventional classroom activities that often feel artificial or disconnected from students' academic goals, well-designed debate experiences provide meaningful contexts for developing both linguistic competence and critical thinking skills essential for professional success.

The theoretical foundation for this approach draws from constructivist learning principles that emphasize active knowledge construction through social interaction and meaningful engagement with content. In language learning contexts, this translates to communicative approaches that prioritize authentic communication over mechanical language practice, aligning with the practical needs of students who will use English primarily as a tool for professional communication rather than as an object of study itself.

This research investigates how student-centered debate techniques can be systematically implemented to enhance English language instruction for Non-Language Majors students, examining both the practical methodologies and measurable outcomes of such approaches. By analyzing the effectiveness of debate-based instruction across multiple academic disciplines, this study contributes to the

growing understanding of how innovative pedagogical practices can better serve the complex needs of specialist language learners.

Literature Review

Educational debate has garnered increasing recognition as a powerful pedagogical strategy that promotes multiple learning outcomes simultaneously (Ball, 2021; Brown, 2015; Ghafar & Region-Iraq, 2024). Research consistently demonstrates that structured debate activities enhance critical thinking skills, improve oral communication abilities, and increase student engagement with course content. For language learners, debate offers unique advantages by creating genuine communicative pressure that encourages spontaneous language use and strategic adaptation to audience needs(Cinganotto, 2019; Paul, 2011; Wang & Patterson, 2024). The theoretical underpinnings of student-centered l earning emphasize the importance of shifting educational focus from teacher-directed instruction to learner-driven exploration and discovery. This paradigm shift proves particularly relevant for Non-Language Majors students who possess sophisticated cognitive abilities and domain-specific expertise that can be leveraged to enhance language learning. When students engage with content that connects meaningfully to their academic interests and career aspirations, motivation and achievement increase substantially.

English for Specific Purposes research has evolved to recognize that effective specialist language instruction must integrate linguistic skill development with disciplinary content knowledge and professional communication practices(jabbar Shalash, 2024; Suri, 2024). Contemporary ESP approaches emphasize the importance of authentic task design, genre awareness, and needs analysis in creating learning experiences that prepare students for real-world communication challenges within their chosen fields(Dou, 2024; Kehal, 2024; Nurmetov et al., 2025). Studies examining debate in educational contexts reveal several key benefits including enhanced analytical reasoning, improved information synthesis capabilities, strengthened argumentation skills, and increased confidence in public speaking (Doody & Condon, 2012). In language learning specifically, debate activities have been shown to improve students' ability to express complex ideas clearly, use appropriate register and tone, employ persuasive language structures effectively, and adapt communication strategies to different audiences and contexts. The convergence of these research streams suggests that student-centered debate techniques offer particular promise for Non-Language Majors English learners by addressing their need for practical, applicable communication skills while leveraging their existing academic expertise and intellectual capabilities.

Methodology

This study employed a comprehensive mixed-methods approach to evaluate the effectiveness of student-centered debate techniques in Non-Language Majors English instruction. The research design combined quantitative measurement of language proficiency development with qualitative analysis of student experiences, engagement patterns, and learning outcomes. Participants included 240 undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in English language courses within engineering, medical, business, and natural science programs at three universities. Students demonstrated intermediate to upper-intermediate English proficiency according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) and had previously experienced traditional teacher-centered instruction methods. All participants volunteered for the experimental debate-based courses and provided informed consent for data collection and analysis.

The intervention design incorporated several key components specifically tailored for Non-Language Majors learners. Debate topics were carefully selected to align with students' disciplinary interests and professional preparation needs, including renewable energy policy for engineering students, healthcare ethics for medical students, corporate sustainability for business students, and environmental conservation strategies for science students. This alignment ensured that language learning occurred within meaningful contexts that connected directly to students' academic and career goals. The program emphasized scaffolded preparation processes that provided structured support while gradually increasing student autonomy and responsibility. Initial sessions included explicit instruction in debate formats, argument construction techniques, and relevant linguistic structures, followed by collaborative preparation phases where students worked in mixed-ability teams to research topics, develop arguments, and practice presentation skills. This collaborative approach reduced individual performance anxiety while promoting peer learning and building supportive classroom communities. Assessment practices focused on communicative effectiveness and critical thinking rather than solely on linguistic accuracy, reflecting real-world communication priorities and professional discourse standards. Evaluation criteria emphasized argument quality, evidence integration, audience adaptation, and persuasive presentation techniques, with linguistic accuracy considered within the broader context of communicative success.

Data collection included pre- and post-intervention oral proficiency assessments measuring fluency, accuracy, complexity, and communicative effectiveness. Qualitative data encompassed classroom observations, student reflection journals, focus group discussions, and individual interviews exploring participants' perceptions of the debate-based approach and its impact on their language learning and professional development.

Results and Discussion

Quantitative Improvements in Oral Proficiency

The quantitative analysis revealed statistically significant improvements across all measured dimensions of oral English proficiency following the debate-based intervention. Students demonstrated average gains of 1.2 Common European Framework sub-levels in overall communicative competence, with particularly notable improvements in fluency and lexical sophistication.

Most significantly, participants showed substantial improvement in their ability to use complex grammatical structures spontaneously during unscripted communication. This finding aligns with Swain's (1995) Output Hypothesis, which suggests that learners become aware of linguistic gaps when producing language under communicative pressure. The debate context appears to have created the "pushed output" conditions necessary for linguistic development.

Discipline-Specific Performance Patterns

Discipline-specific analysis indicated varying patterns of improvement across academic fields. Engineering and science students achieved the greatest gains in technical vocabulary usage and precision of expression, likely reflecting the analytical and evidence-based nature of their academic training. Business and medical students showed superior development in persuasive language strategies and audience adaptation skills, corresponding to the interpersonal communication demands of their future professional roles.

These differential patterns support Hyland's (2002) argument about the importance of specificity in ESP, where disciplinary cultures shape communication practices and learning preferences. The interaction between students' cognitive strengths and debate demands demonstrates discipline-specific language socialization processes.

Critical Thinking and Transfer Effects

Beyond linguistic improvements, participants demonstrated enhanced critical thinking capabilities evidenced through more sophisticated argument construction, improved evidence evaluation skills, and increased ability to anticipate and address counterarguments. This finding supports research on critical thinking development through structured argumentative discourse (Paul & Elder, 2006).

Pre- and post-intervention writing samples revealed significant improvement in logical organization, evidence integration, and conclusion strength, indicating that the benefits of debate participation extended beyond oral communication to written discourse as well. This cross-skill transfer aligns with theoretical models suggesting that cognitive-academic language skills developed in one modality transfer to others (Cummins, 2000).

Theoretical Framework for Linguistic Gains

The substantial improvements in communicative competence can be understood through the lens of sociocultural theory. The debate environment created zones of proximal development where students, working collaboratively, achieved higher performance levels than possible individually. The authentic communicative pressure inherent in debate situations appears to have triggered the transition from declarative to procedural knowledge (DeKeyser, 2007).

Student Engagement and Motivational Transformation

Qualitative data analysis revealed overwhelmingly positive student responses to the debate-based approach, with participants consistently reporting higher levels of engagement and motivation compared to previous English learning experiences. Students appreciated the direct relevance of debate topics to their academic interests and future career goals, noting that this connection made language learning feel purposeful rather than obligatory.

This motivational shift aligns with Self-Determination Theory, particularly the autonomy and competence components (Deci & Ryan, 2000). When learners perceive direct connections between learning activities and personal goals, intrinsic motivation increases substantially.

Community of Practice Development

Many participants reported that the experience fundamentally changed their perception of English from a challenging academic requirement to a valuable professional tool. The collaborative preparation phase proved particularly effective in building learning communities within classrooms, as students with different strengths contributed complementary skills to team success.

This community building reflects communities of practice theory, where shared enterprise, mutual engagement, and joint repertoire develop through collaborative activity (Wenger, 1998). The peer support system created positive associations with English use and encouraged continued voluntary engagement with English-language resources beyond the classroom context.

Professional Communication Competence Development

Perhaps most importantly for non-language majors, the debate program successfully developed professional communication competencies directly applicable to participants' chosen fields. Engineering students reported improved confidence in presenting technical solutions to diverse audiences, while medical students noted enhanced ability to explain complex procedures and engage in patient advocacy.

Business students demonstrated particular gains in persuasive communication strategies and cross-cultural communication awareness, while science students

developed stronger abilities to communicate research findings to non-specialist audiences. These outcomes support genre-based approaches to professional communication, which emphasize the importance of authentic professional contexts for developing transferable skills.

Long-term Skill Transfer and Application

Follow-up surveys conducted six months after program completion indicated that 78% of participants had successfully applied debate-acquired communication skills in academic or professional contexts, including conference presentations, job interviews, international collaborations, and graduate school applications. This high transfer rate suggests that the skills developed through debate participation have lasting relevance and practical applicability beyond the language learning classroom.

The successful transfer supports frameworks for far transfer, which occurs when skills learned in one context successfully apply to dissimilar contexts (Barnett & Ceci, 2002). The authentic nature of debate activities appears to have facilitated "high road transfer" through conscious abstraction of underlying principles.

Implementation Challenges and Pedagogical Implications

The study also identified several implementation challenges that require careful consideration. Initial resistance from students accustomed to passive learning roles necessitated gradual responsibility transfer and extensive emotional support during early sessions, reflecting the challenge of shifting from teacher-centered to learner-centered approaches (Weimer, 2013).

Instructor preparation demands proved significant, as teachers needed both debate facilitation expertise and sufficient content knowledge to provide meaningful guidance and feedback. Time constraints within existing curricula posed ongoing challenges, as effective debate preparation requires substantial investment that may compete with other essential learning objectives.

Implications and Conclusions

This research demonstrates that student-centered debate techniques are highly effective for enhancing English language instruction for non-language majors by creating authentic communicative contexts relevant to their academic fields, resulting in improved language proficiency, critical thinking skills, motivation, and professional communication competencies. Successful implementation requires debate topics genuinely related to students' disciplines, gradual scaffolding, collaborative learning, assessment focused on communicative effectiveness, and comprehensive institutional support with teacher professional development. Future research should investigate long-term impacts, cross-cultural adaptations, technology integration, and development of sophisticated assessment tools with discipline-specific optimization,

positioning student-centered debate techniques as a valuable pedagogical innovation for preparing students to meet academic and professional communication demands in an increasingly globalized context.

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