

ENGLISH DEBATING AT AN ISLAMIC BOARDING SCHOOL: BEYOND SPEAKING SKILL AND CRITICAL THINKING

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ABSTRACT Plenty of studies have investigated English debating as a method to improve students' speaking skill and critical thinking, whereas debating itself requires combination of several skills altogether from preparation to evaluation stage. Each stage in debating requires different skills. This study aims to shed some light on the influence of English debating activities on the progress of English skills and non-English skills of its members. Three students who joined the English debating club at an Islamic boarding school were involved in this study and they represented different length of membership. The data were collected through an open-ended questionnaire and followed by semi-structured interviews. The entire data collection stage was conducted online due to pandemic condition. The data were then coded and analysed using constant comparative method. This study revealed that English debating brought a good progress on both English skills and non-English skills of its members. Not only it improved the students' speaking skill, but it also improved reading, listening, and writing skills. Along with the skills progress, they also confirmed much better vocabulary and grammar mastery. Non-English skills were also well-developed through English debating activities namely critical thinking, confidence, teamwork, and persistence. Team members interactions and coaching from the debating coach contributed a lot toward their progress. This study implies that English debating is suitable to develop all English skills as well as the students' ability of critical thinking, teamwork, confidence, and persistence.

Keywords: English debating, English skills, critical thinking

A. INTRODUCTION

Speaking skill remains as a prominent issue in English language teaching in Indonesia. Several factors contribute to speaking skill development such as vocabulary mastery, confidence, and the ability to build ideas about what to speak. Not only does speaking require the ability to deliver messages fluently in English, but it also requires the ability to construct the idea or the content of the talk. When it comes to higher level of education, the goal of speaking skill is not only to have casual conversational talks but also to deliver ideas in a good way. Speaking is believed as a prominent skill in bringing someone's success in higher education level and highly competitive world of business and profession (Suhendra, 2020). Therefore, speaking skill always becomes one of the major focuses of English learning. To be able to speak in a convincing way and deliver ideas effectively, somebody needs to think critically and logically before he speaks. Therefore, thinking ability is an inseparable element of speaking skill.

As a combination of those two elements of speaking skill and critical thinking, debating is such an activity that is usually implemented in speaking classes, usually in senior high school and university levels (Lestari, 2018). There are several purposes of debating in classroom context, such as using debate as a way of finding the truth, analysing the feasibility of a newly proposed

policy, and practicing debate for fun. Debating enables students to develop critical thinking, reasoning, and sharpening their speaking skills at the same time (Lan & Lam, 2020). In Indonesian context, several studies have reported the positive impacts of debating in improving students' speaking ability (Haryanto et al., 2019; Lestari, 2018; Muthmainnah & Misnar, 2021; Yulia & Aprilita, 2018). All the studies reported that English debating activities in senior high school and university levels could successfully improve students' speaking skill as well as critical thinking.

A debate provides speaking situation in which two opposite point of views are argued and presented through which students are encouraged to build their arguments and deliver it to their opponents (Agustina & Bahrani, 2016). Therefore, debating activity performs mutual interactions among students that will result in better English skills. Debatable topics or issues could be another factor which motivates them to speak, added by the challenge to counter or to decline their opponents' arguments (Pradana, 2017). Determined position as the affirmative or negative team encourages them to look at certain issues from different point of views.

Getting some different points from other speaking activities in class, debating combines many skills altogether namely speaking, reading, listening, and writing (Zahra, 2019). It doesn't stand by itself. Debating is such an English learning activity that practices all English skills along with presentation skill and delivery. It starts from gathering as much as information about the issues/motions from any sources. Then, the ideas are constructed in the state of pro or against, or known as affirmative and negative teams. The idea, then, should be delivered using clear and concise language to provide unbiased arguments to the audiences or opponents. In debate, since there are two teams, the speakers are required to think and analyze certain issue from two different perspectives depending on their position. Debaters need updated information about current issues and concepts of diverse aspects of human life. For this reason, sometimes they need to do research in order to comprehend certain issues from many perspectives. By doing research, their arguments tend to be stronger since they are supported by data, not merely an assumption. After collecting as many as data and evidences, they present it to the audiences and judges. In presenting their argument and logic, debaters need better delivery skills to convince audiences and judges. Therefore, debating makes use of both language and presentation skills (Alasmari & Ahmed, 2012).

English debating often comes up with the newest and controversial motions in life. Debaters can't decline the motions and they should perform as affirmative or negative team toward the motions. English debating requires arguments which are logical and universally acceptable without taking sides with the beliefs of particular religion, ethnic group, or cultural background.

No matter the issues are in contrast with particular religious teaching, for example, speakers should be able to wrap their opinion into general ideas or universal values that is convincing for everybody no matter what their religions or ethnicities are.

Controversial issues often became obstacles for students who study at Islamic institution with tight values of Islamic teachings. Global issues dealing with LGBTQ, prostitution, and sex tourism, for example, are strictly forbidden according to Islamic teaching. However, through logical arguments, those motions can be something normal and beneficial seen from economic, social, or other aspects. Somehow, the debaters from Islamic schools should be able to position themselves both as the affirmative and negative team and build their arguments to convince the judges and eventually win the debate. From this case, it can be seen that indeed, debating requires and develops many skills at the same time. It becomes clearer that debating is not merely about speaking skill and critical thinking. It also involves non-linguistic aspects which help the students perform as good and convincing debaters no matter what the motions are. These non-linguistic aspects haven't been well-explored in the previous studies, but only critical thinking that has received more concern. On the other hand, studies on debating mostly focus on speaking skill development, whereas the contribution of the other skills are still lack of attention.

This study aims to shed some light on how English debating activities at an Islamic boarding school influence the English skills and non-English skills of its members. As previous studies have revealed the benefits of debating to improve students' speaking skill, this study investigates further about what and in what way the English skills and non-English skills are developed through English debating activities. This comprehensive investigation hasn't been well-explored by the previous studies. Islamic boarding schools have different characteristics from public schools, such as tighten schedule for the students and limited access of internet and other media due to strict regulation and time allotment. Therefore, they seem to have less time preparing or focusing on debating activities and in the same time having limited access to the news and information from outside the boarding schools. However, the students still can compete quite well in regional and national levels of debating competitions.

Moreover, several motions in debate are in contrary with Islamic teachings thus they need to think hard finding strong arguments without denying their belief in Islamic teachings. Through all the experiences, the participants who joined the English debating club at an Islamic boarding school were invited to report how English debating club had influenced their English and non-English skills. The novelty of this study lies on the context of the study which takes Islamic boarding school of senior high school level and it considers both English skills and non-English skills as the aspects that are developed through English debating.

B. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Studies on English Debating

English debating has become an issue in English studies and many studies have been conducted in this field. Zahra (2019) examined the students' perspectives on the effects of debate activity on the students' English skills. She collected the data from experienced debaters joining national debating championship for university level. This study reported that through debate trainings, the four skills of English were improved. Reading skill was improved through reading as much as information from various sources as the basis of argument development. Speaking skill was improved in delivering the argument in a convincing way. Writing skill was improved from the case-building stage to make guideline as well as preparing rebuttals in the debate. Listening was also improved since they have to listen intensively to their opponents to get the points and prepare rebuttals.

Rohadi (2020) conducted a classroom action research by implementing English debate technique to improve students' speaking skill and apply knowledge insight in senior high school. Based on the research findings, the debate technique resulted in the improvement of the students' speaking skill in both responding to another's opinion and delivering opinions. Adi et al. (2019) described language learning strategies used by vocational high school English debate teams by conducting interviews to three debaters who had got achievement in Asian level. It revealed that there were several strategies in language learning including self-evaluating strategy and metacognitive strategy. Saidah et al., (2020) investigated the use of communication strategies in an EFL classroom during task-based completion of debating activity. The study reported that the students employed several strategies to solve their communication breakdowns during the short-time debate between speakers. Those strategies were achievement strategies, avoidance strategies, and stalling strategies. There were some benefits of employing those strategies, such as less confusing, time-efficient, and sound trustworthy to lengthen their time to think. It also kept up the discourse at the moment when learners faced the difficulties as well as maintaining the communication channel at hand.

The previous studies on English debating activities mostly concerned on the linguistic aspects, namely speaking skill, although few of the studies have recognized the positive impacts of debating on other skills such as reading, writing, and listening. Further studies taking into account non-linguistic aspects in English debating seemed still rare. English debating is such a group activity that enables the interactions among the debaters as well as with the opponents. A good team doesn't rely on a single speaker, but they work together to win the debate. English skill itself doesn't

seem enough when you are working in a team. Therefore, non-English skill aspects are also developed through English debating and contribute to effective interaction among the team members. It comes up as an interesting issue to discuss.

Required Skills in English Debating

English debating activity does not stand alone by itself. It is a sequence of several learning activities involving various skills. Before performing the debate, a debater must collect and assess as much as information. Reading and critical thinking skills are required to comprehend an issue from diverse points of view as well as to build strong arguments. In debating stage when they already know their position, speaking skill becomes the key element supported by the ability to analyze and evaluate their opponents' argument to prepare rebuttals. It also requires the speakers' confidence in delivering their idea with sufficient evidence they have prepared. After debate, evaluation skill is important to point out their strengths and weaknesses (Wang, 2021).

Another skill required in English debating is teamwork ability. As a team activity, debating involved interaction among the debaters which somehow has positive and negative impacts. A previous study has reported that teammates could provide positive impact by knowledge and mental support through peer tutoring, consultation, sharing ideas. It also gives them peer observation and sense of teamwork togetherness. However, negative impacts could occur such as team overreliance and peer pressure causing discouragement and reducing individual responsibility which affect individual's self-esteem (Sukkaew & Whanchit, 2020).

Each member in the team has his/her own roles. For example, the first speaker of the affirmative team has the role to open and continue speech functions. By contrast, the first speaker of negative team should open, continue, and react to speech functions because they needed to deliver rebuttals of the affirmative arguments (Hadiningrum, 2020). It implies that each team member should be responsible to his roles and at the same time helps the teammates (the next speakers) to prepare rebuttals for the opponents. English debating requires highly effective critical thinking skill to develop the arguments and look for the weaknesses of the opponents in practically short time. Debaters also perform persistence since they cannot give up in any situation for any kind of issue or motion they get.

C. METHOD

This study took the case of an English debating club at an Islamic boarding school in Central Java, Indonesia. The members were in senior high school level. This qualitative study tried to reveal how English debating activities influenced English skills and non-English skills of its members. The English debating club in this school was newly established, not more than 5 years and was

guided by a debating coach. The members of this debating club didn't have any prior experience in English debating before they joined the club. This English debating club had recorded several achievements in regional dan national levels of English debating competitions for individual or team awarding, even though they haven't ever got the first place.

Participants

The participants of this study were three students who joined the English debating club at the Islamic boarding school (Coded as S1, S2, and S3), and all are female. They were recommended by the debating coach and they confirmed their willingness to be the participants. They were chosen to solicit more comprehensive information about their experience in joining English debating club through various length of membership in the club which showed their journey from the beginning. Besides, they were also expected to report the longer effect of their involvement in the English debating club to their life in general beyond the English debating context. All the participants experienced to represent the school in several English debating competitions for senior high school level and made some achievements, such as best speakers and breaking semifinal round of regional and national English debating competitions.

Instruments

The researcher herself performed as the key instrument in collecting and analyzing the data. To elicit more systematic data collection, this study used an open-ended questionnaire (Q) given to the participants through Google form. Then, it was followed by semi-structured interviews (INT) to gather deeper information as well as to confirm the information from the questionnaire.

Procedures

The participants were invited and they confirmed their willingness to participate by completing the open-ended questionnaire. The questionnaire was sent by Google form. After the data from the questionnaire were all collected and coded, semi-structured interviews were conducted to one of the participants who gave much meaningful information on the questionnaire. The interview was conducted by WhatsApp chat which enabled the participant to answer in written form or voice recording.

Data analysis

The data in form of voice recording were transcribed. Then, all data were coded to find the key information of the influence of English debating activities on English skills and non-English skills progress of its members. After data coding were performed, constant comparative method is utilized to analyse the data. This method refers to the process in the qualitative research in which any newly collected data is compared with previously collected data from one or more earlier studies (Febriana et al., 2018). To confirm the validity and reliability of the data, all collected data

were carefully checked and analyzed several times until it came to convincing results. The conclusions were drawn after all data were analysed.

D. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of this study on the influence of English debating activities on English skills and non-English skills of its members. Each finding is then discussed by comparing it to the results of the previous studies or existing theories. Newly found findings are highlighted. Several prominent quotes are also presented to support the findings.

The Influence of English Debating Activities on the English skills of Its Members

Many previous studies on English debating have reported its positive impact on students' English skills, including speaking, writing, listening, and reading, even though they mostly focused on speaking skill. In fact, English debating includes several activities from preparation stage to evaluation stage which require the combination of different skills. English debating combines together the ability to deliver in idea in English and to develop strong arguments as the essential element of debating. Dealing with the English skills progress, the participants reported that English debating helped them improve all English skills as can be seen in the following statements.

“Almost in every aspect (speaking, writing, listening, grammar, critical thinking, and self-confidence” (S2, Q)

The four English skills progressed a lot since they did many activities in English debating club. Before having weekly practice, the students were grouped into several divisions and they were supposed to collect as many as data from available resources about the current issues of economy, social, technology, education, environment, etc. to be reported to the entire club members in their weekly rehearsals. Through this stage, the students reported that their reading skill improved a lot along with their vocabulary mastery since various sources of information amongst divergence topics provide them with new vocabularies each day. Reading also makes them familiar with various forms of English sentence structures and styles through which they improved their grammar mastery.

In this stage usually debaters find difficulties in selecting the data and evidences and building the arguments (Suharsih & Supriatna, 2020), thus they need to discuss with the teammates. However, at the Islamic boarding school they found another difficulty in accessing as much as information they want due to the strict rules of the boarding school. They collected information from newspaper subscription, library collection, and internet sources in a very strict time allotment. As a solution, as they reported, the debating coach provided them with printed materials about

up-to-date global information taken from mainstream media and internet resources. They discussed it in the debating rehearsals.

Listening was also trained a lot through debating. They need to listen to their opponents' arguments carefully to obtain the points and simultaneously prepare rebuttals. As well as listening, their writing skill also showed progress through which they construct their arguments before starting the debate and preparing points for rebuttals while listening to the opponents. The last main skill was speaking by which they delivered their ideas using concise language and in a convincing way. This skill was well-developed through frequent rehearsals. Along with those skills, their grammar mastery simultaneously progressed. It confirms previous study that through English debating, students are able to speak fluently and accurately with few grammatical errors (Suharsih & Supriatna, 2020). Fluency in speaking English is also supported by the ability to utilize several strategies in spoken English such as avoidance strategies, achievement strategies, and stalling strategies (Saidah et al., 2020).

Beyond the English debating context and debating rehearsals, all the participants reported speaking skill and critical thinking as the skills that benefit a lot for them as quoted in the following statement.

“I think, critical thinking and speaking skill turned as the skills that benefit me till today.” (S2, Q)

This fact shows that while all the English skills are trained in debating activities, speaking skill appears as the most beneficial for its members. It can be explained that debating activities which require the complete stages of debating don't necessarily occur in daily interaction, but only in debating or classroom context. Meanwhile, speaking skill is used in all daily interaction among diverse contexts. Furthermore, their improved speaking skill is also supported by confidence which they gain from debating activities. English debating activities provide opportunities for its members to speak their ideas elegantly and diplomatically (Khoirunisa, 2018) and it can be a long-lasting skill as long as it is practiced regularly. English debating if practiced appropriately, its members would learn both presentation skills and English language which contribute to make them confident users of English language (Alasmari & Ahmed, 2012)

The Influence of English Debating Activities on the Non-English Skills of Its Members

Pointing out at non-English aspects, there are several aspects the participants considered showing progress, namely critical thinking, confidence, persistence, and teamwork. Some quotes on non-English aspects development are presented below.

“At first, I joined the debate club to maintain and improve my English skills. But surprisingly, after joining the debate club, I actually learned a lot of lessons

unexpectedly. The lessons include how to think structured and critically, how to build strong arguments, and how to position yourself in various situations.” (S1, Q)

“I think the confidence to speak in public, how to think right, and how to build strong arguments.” (S3, Q)

Debating context encourages debaters to be able to think critically and accurately since they deal with unpredictable motion and ought to prepare their arguments in a relatively short time. It is also forced through self-conscious reflection on the validity of one’s idea (Adi et al., 2019). Critical thinking as a non-English skill that pretty much improved in English debating has been reported by several previous studies (Iman, 2017; Rear, 2017; Wang, 2021). Critical thinking in debate occur in all stages from preparing, performing, and evaluating. It took six-stages starting from clarifying the nature of problems, gathering and organizing relevant information, evaluating the reliability of the information, analyzing the information to draw conclusions, expressing the conclusions persuasively and logically, and eventually appraising their preparation and performance for improvement in the future (Rear, 2017).

Talking about confidence as one of the non-English aspects which was well-developed through English debating activities, it is influenced by many factors. Adequate speaking skill and strong arguments that result in a good presentation skill make them a confident and effective speaker. Their roles as the member of a team as well as an English debating club also promote their confidence through mutual feedback among the members and organizational experience which enables them to know their role and perform the best effort for the team.

The students also confirmed that they could build their persistence in English debating club and especially through debating competitions they joined. Through difficult motions they got in English debating rehearsals and competitions, they tried hard not to give up and look for strong arguments to win the debate. Difficult motions which are in contrary with Islamic teachings often become a tremendous challenge such as the issues of LGBTQ which is strictly forbidden according to Islamic teaching. They, however, should find the solution and cannot quit.

“It is hard for me when I turned into an overthinker after getting some motions that weaken my *aqidah* or when I haven’t understood them from Islamic perspective.” (S3, Q)

Since it seems impossible to literally quote or take Islamic teachings and Quran verses, they usually tried to wrap it as a universal value everyone can agree with. It turned out as a solution since they didn’t want and were not allowed to deny Islamic teachings only for winning a motion.

“For the issue which is actually against my belief, such as LGBTQ, I bring my opinion to health issue. I position myself as a human, not as a citizen of certain country or as a Muslim” (S3, INT)

Wherever possible they included Islamic teachings which were in accordance with common values as their supporting arguments as reflected in the following statements.

“If possible, I will include Islamic teachings to strengthen my arguments (not as the main argument).” (S1, Q)

“Since Quran verses are forbidden to be included in the argument, my teacher taught us to bring the values to argue.” (S3, Q)

As a group activity, English debating requires collaboration among its members to achieve the goal (Cariñanos-Ayala et al., 2021). Therefore, the ability to work in a team turned as the other non-English skill which was well-developed through English debating activities. The interactions among its members became a mutual input which could build their ability.

“Friends really helped me enjoying the learning process at the debate club. They helped me to share information and thoughts, as well as being a cool discussion partner and sometimes can enemies who can tell the weaknesses of my argument as well.” (S1, Q)

“They helped me to improve almost everything, but mostly in speaking and confidence by keep supporting each other and giving feedback.” (S3, Q)

The interaction among teammates in English debating involve discussion about debatable issues and feedback given to their peer-members. Simultaneously, it allows the team members to think critically about certain issues of phenomena and to work together to collect the fact, data, information, and so forth as well as to speak out accordingly and academically (Iman, 2017)

English debating team also represents an organization in which the members play different roles to obtain the goal. It is reported by the participants that English debating brings a good impact dealing with organization.

“Along the time I joined the debate team. I felt the good impact directly that helps me in my organizational life. Since that, I am sure it will be helpful for my future life.” (S3, Q)

This kind of organizational experience could increase the sense of self-confidence (Yusuf & Hilmun, 2021). Each member in the debating club must have strengths and weaknesses. Through a good teamwork they can divide the task based their potentials and maximize their contribution to the team.

E. CONCLUSION

This study has shown the influence of English debating activities on English skill and non-English skills of the members of the English debating club at an Islamic boarding school. English debating is reported to successfully develop the four skills of English, namely reading, listening, writing, and

speaking, along with vocabulary enrichment and grammar mastery. This is as a result of debating rehearsals which include all those skills from the preparation stage to evaluation stage. Furthermore, non-English skills are also well-developed through English debating activities namely critical thinking, confidence, teamwork, and persistence. Team members interactions and cooperation played an important role in the progress of their skills. The non-English skills were also getting better through various motions in debating which were unpredictable and sometimes in contrast with their belief. However, they should be persistent and build convincing ideas to win the debate.

This study implies that English debating is suitable to develop all English skills as well as non-English skills such as critical thinking, confidence, teamwork, and persistence. This study was limited to the English debating club at an Islamic boarding school of senior high school level whose members experienced English debating rehearsals and competition in regional area. Further studies may take different context or education levels as well as investigating the critical thinking level of the students toward diverse motions in English debating.

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