Developing University EFL Learners Debate Speaking Skills through Closed Facebook Groups and Zoom Lessons

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Abstract
Students acquire communicative competence in a variety of ways hence a need for higher education to provide diverse instructional strategies such a debate. Kennedy (2007) advocates that this type of active involvement in the classroom enables content to be learned in meaningful ways rather than passively consuming information. Students therefore, learn more effectively by actively analyzing, discussing and applying content when participating in debate classes. This study reports findings on the pedagogical feasibility of developing students debate speaking skills through the use of closed Facebook Groups and Zoom lessons. The research participants included 25 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners taking Debate classes at a private university in Chiba Prefecture, Japan during the first semester of the academic year 2019-2020. Data was collected from students' critical reflections an in class structured surveys. The findings indicate that notwithstanding the structure and technological limitations, delivering debate presentations through closed Facebook Groups and Zoom lessons may help students develop their English speaking and presentation skills, build their confidence in speaking before an audience, and reinforce their English macro skills such as listening and reading. This paper concludes with the pedagogical implications for EFL teachers, curriculum developers and researchers.

Keywords: Debate Speaking Skills, Closed Facebook Groups, Zoom Lessons, Teaching Debate, University EFL Learners

Introduction

The present global pandemic (COVID-19) has forced the closure of schools globally and has introduced emergency remote teaching and learning as the current norm. This has generated a need for uncovering new channels of communication and collaboration such as digital spaces like Facebook groups and Zoom video conferencing. Online debates stimulate critical thinking and can be a highly effective way to actively engage students in research in an online classroom (Shaw, 2012). Findings from research conducted by Sheeran & Cummings (2018) on communication through social networking sites (SNS) suggests that student engagement increased more in courses with official Facebook groups.

Other pedagogical researchers have elaborated on debates as an active learning tool that promotes critical thinking and triggers higher order learning such as synthesis, analysis and evaluation (Kennedy,2007; Paladino 2009). Moreover, debates can be an educational and valuable life experience (Galloway, 2007). Additionally, there is also evidence that communication through SNS imposes no restrictions through physical space, time or time zones since collaboration can take place asynchronously (Stevenson & Bauer, 2019). Besides, the audience/students are rarely passively reading; they are responding in numerous rhetorical forms. This study reports the findings on the pedagogical feasibility of developing students debate speaking skills through the use of closed Facebook Groups and Zoom lessons.

The Description of Debate Course Activities

Preparation for the debate began with teaching the structure of debate: The topics covered included: Agreeing and Disagreeing, Giving Reasons, Supporting an opinion, Debating an opinion and Deliver Skills, Building confidence Students were placed in teams to discuss and share their opinions. Each week students were given a moot that supported their interaction, critical thinking and reflection skills. Students had to develop their own points of view regarding the topic. With the purpose of informing further practices in an online debate class the researcher sought to describe a range of activities that can be performed inside a closed Facebook group and zoom video conferencing to enhance students' debate skills (formulating an opinion, supporting an opinion, debating an opinion and building confidence).

The course covered the essentials of mastering basic debate skills. The course was taught in a fun, yet challenging online classroom setting. The main goal of the course was to develop student's confidence, critical thinking and speaking skills as they practice understanding argument and basic debate skills. Additionally, it was the aim of the instructor/researcher that students received encouragement and gained confidence as they explored debate topics such as Agreeing and Disagreeing, Giving Opinions and Support, Comparing and Contrasting.

Using Closed Facebook Group

Each week students were given a moot that supported their interaction, critical thinking and reflection skills. Students had to develop their own points of view regarding the topic. After ten weeks of Facebook.The moot was shared as an assignment.

Using zoom meeting

Online instruction differs greatly from traditional in class instruction and does not function at the same speed (Dykman and Davis, 2008). The debate class for this particular course occurred in a synchronous course session where the speakers can be seen and heard by other classmates. For each activity students were placed in groups then assigned to breakout rooms. Active participation among university learners has been regarded as a valuable aspect of conducting online lessons (Santilli & Beck, 2005).

The activities assigned required students to play a specific role, they were either debate leaders (as in Devil's Advocate the advocates are tasked with provoking the discussion, encourage various points of views and ensure the debate continues) or students pose questions (as in the panel discussion where students ask questions and challenge them on their views while presenting alternative views to the topic). This format of assigning specific roles encourages active participation from all students during the debates which is positively linked to their overall performance in the course (Pratt-Phillips, 2011). Furthermore, the format of the lessons allowed collaboration among students. In teams/ groups they had to research a position. This fostered critical thinking and allowed the learning objectives to be met.

Methodology

Participants

The research participants included 25 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners taking Debate classes at a private university in Chiba Prefecture, Japan during the first semester of the academic year 2019-2020. Number= 11 Males 14 Females who are 1st -4th year students.

Instruments

The data gathering tool in the quantitative research was collected from students' critical reflections and in class structured surveys. It consisted of 12 items, 10 open ended questions and 2 closed ended questions.

Procedure

The researcher employed practical action research using a mixed method approach. The purpose of practical action research is a reflective change approach to improving one's practice or social situation through methods of collaborative problem solving in order to improve the situation or produce guidelines for best practices. AR seeks to engage participants equally and fully in the research process while fulfilling its purpose of being a systematic process of inquiry (Stringer, 2014).

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted to analyze themes from the critical reflections. Thematic analysis is characterized as a method to identify, analyze and report patterns of meaning in a qualitative research. It transforms data into rich and data (Braun and

Clarke, 2006). Consequently, the reflections were comprehensively reviewed and then the basic themes were extracted.

Findings

The findings indicate that notwithstanding the structure and technological limitations, delivering debate presentations through closed Facebook Groups and Zoom lessons may help students develop their English speaking and presentation skills, build their confidence in speaking before an audience and reinforce their English macro skills such as listening and reading.

The results of the study showed that the general student feedback on the use of zoom meetings and a closed Facebook group were positive. The students briefly reported their debate experiences after the debate in a reflection format. They mentioned an increase in understanding debate terms. A few mentioned they felt really "engaged" and that had "many speaking chances". One student said, "I enjoyed the online zoom. Although it was only on the screen, it was like a normal school because I could talk before and after class. I think the class was bright and fun. I think that it was good because it was easy to talk because of the online zoom. What I enjoyed was the group sessions. I was able to gain a lot of knowledge by exchanging opinions. I'm glad I could make a strong opinion. The challenges for Facebook were easy to understand. After class, I could study as a review".

While some students reported that they had an increased understanding of the course content others reflection showed an increase in their confidence to express their opinions. Based on student's critical reflections this format of using Facebook groups and zoom meetings has shown to support: interpersonal and teamwork skill development. The interactivity of this format increased student motivation to learn, increasing communicative competence.

Another student reported, "I enjoyed the group work, and I'm glad I did. The reason for this is because I was able to engage with many different people in each class. In actuality, it is difficult to make a group with the same group members or to form a group with people you have never talked to before in a classroom, but ZOOM forces you to form a group, so I had a lot of fun making friends. Also, I was able to put what I learned into practice immediately".

Table 1: Student Responses

Questions	Yes	NO
Which do you prefer: zoom classes or face to face?	68%	32%
Did you enjoy learning debate online via zoom?	76%	24%
Did you enjoy doing assignments on Facebook?	80%	20%

Table 2: Basic themes derived from participant's reflections

Questions	Evidence	Basic Themes
Which do you prefer: zoom classes or face to face?	• Many chances to speak • Online classes were exciting" • Zoom classes allowed me to introduce my opinions and my speaking abilities improved" • I had a chance to communicate with many students" • Speaking activities in the breakout rooms helped me a lot"	**Communication:** Creates opportunities for increase in communicative competence, listening, presenting and public speaking Sharing thoughts ,questions, ideas and solutions
What did you enjoy the most about the zoom classes?	• Group work • Practicing immediately • Engage with classmates and make friends • Speaking in the breakout rooms	**Collaboration:** Promotes teamwork and collaboration
Did you enjoy doing assignments on Facebook? Was it helpful? Explain	• Seeing everyone submit I was prompted to hurry and submit my assignment before the deadline. • Facebook activities were fun • I was surprised I could give my opinion • See the opinion of others helped me in thinking of my own opinion • I had many speaking and listening chances	**Critical Thinking:** Ability to gather, analyze, and interpret information to information Building confidence Looking at problems in a new way
What class activities in the course helped you to improve your speaking ability?	• Sharing ideas in pair work • Working in groups • Warm up activities	**Useful teaching aid**

Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the experiences with teaching this debate course online, it is recommended that educators in higher education use debate in an online format to assist students to develop their speaking proficiency. Online debates are enjoyable for both instructors and students despite the delivery mode. Studies conducted by Sheeran & Cummings (2018) on communication through social media proposes that student engagement improved greatly in courses with official Facebook groups. According to Santilli and Beck (2005) active participation among university learners has been regarded as a valuable aspect of conducting online lessons. However, further research is needed on students' perceptions and experiences.

The pedagogical implications for EFL teachers, curriculum developers and researcher are as follows:
• This is a significant contribution to the field of research on instruction techniques and online learning, especially in a pandemic.
• Gain insights into the merits of online debate classes as a teaching strategy to improve speaking skills.
• Encourage EFL teachers, curriculum developers and researchers to take the step to teach debate online.
• Online debates are innovative and enjoyable for students

Acknowledgement

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