

SPEAK UP! USING DEBATES TO ENHANCE SPEAKING SKILLS IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

VORBEȘTE! UTILIZAREA DEZBATERILOR PENTRU DEZVOLTAREA COMPETENȚELOR DE VORBIRE ÎN CADRUL ORELOR DE LIMBA ENGLEZĂ CA LIMBĂ STRĂINĂ

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Abstract: *This study investigates the development of speaking skills in the EFL classroom and examines debate as an effective pedagogical strategy. The theoretical framework highlights the central role of speaking in language learning and identifies major challenges such as limited exposure, low interaction, anxiety, and unequal participation. The practical part of the study combines textbook analysis, proposed teaching activities, and a questionnaire administered to English teachers. A comparative analysis of Moldovan textbooks and international EFL textbooks reveals that while local materials include speaking tasks, they provide limited opportunities for structured argumentative interaction, such as debate. In contrast, international textbooks place a stronger emphasis on communication, critical thinking, and opinion-based tasks. Based on these findings, several debate formats are proposed, including mini debates, fishbowl debates, and team debates, adapted to lower-secondary learners. These activities are designed to be integrated into common textbook topics such as school life, technology, and social issues. The study concludes that integrating debate into EFL instruction can significantly enhance fluency, interactional competence, and learner motivation, contributing to a more dynamic and student-centered learning environment.*

Keywords: *EFL, speaking skills, debate, textbook analysis, teaching strategies, student engagement*

Rezumat: *Acest studiu analizează dezvoltarea competențelor de vorbire în cadrul orelor de limba engleză ca limbă străină (LES) și explorează dezbaterile ca strategie didactică eficientă. Partea teoretică evidențiază rolul esențial al vorbirii în procesul de învățare și identifică principalele dificultăți, precum expunerea limitată la limbă, nivelul scăzut de interacțiune, anxietatea și participarea inegală a elevilor. Partea practică a cercetării include analiza manualelor, propunerea unor activități didactice și aplicarea unui chestionar adresat profesorilor de limba engleză. Analiza comparativă a manualelor din Republica Moldova și a manualelor internaționale arată că, deși manualele locale conțin activități de vorbire, acestea oferă puține oportunități pentru interacțiune argumentativă structurată, cum este dezbaterile. În schimb, manualele internaționale pun un accent mai mare pe comunicare, gândire critică și exprimarea opiniilor. Pe baza acestor constatări, sunt propuse mai multe tipuri de dezbateri, precum mini-dezbateri, fishbowl și dezbateri în*

echipă, adaptate nivelului gimnazial. Aceste activități pot fi integrate în teme uzuale precum viața școlară, tehnologia sau problemele sociale. Studiul concluzionează că integrarea dezbaterii în predarea limbii engleze contribuie semnificativ la dezvoltarea fluenței, a competenței interacționale și a motivației elevilor, favorizând un mediu de învățare dinamic și centrat pe elev.

Cuvinte-cheie: *LES, competențe de vorbire, dezbateri, analiză de manuale, strategii didactice, implicarea elevilor.*

In the contemporary context of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL), the development of speaking skills represents one of the most significant educational priorities. Speaking is not only a linguistic skill, but also a means through which learners express ideas, emotions, attitudes, and personal opinions. The ability to communicate effectively in English contributes to academic achievement, social interaction, intercultural communication, and future professional opportunities. Nevertheless, despite its importance, speaking remains one of the most challenging skills to develop in the EFL classroom. Many learners experience difficulties related to limited vocabulary, grammatical insecurity, fear of making mistakes, low self-confidence, lack of exposure to authentic communication, and insufficient opportunities for meaningful oral interaction during lessons.

The thesis entitled *“Speak Up! Using Debates to Enhance Speaking Skills in the EFL Classroom”* investigates the role of debate as an interactive pedagogical strategy for improving speaking skills among lower-secondary learners. The study is based on the assumption that debate activities create authentic communicative situations in which learners are encouraged to express opinions, defend arguments, negotiate meaning, and participate actively in oral interaction. Unlike traditional speaking exercises that often focus on reproduction and short responses, debates require learners to use language creatively and purposefully, thus contributing to the development of fluency, interactional competence, critical thinking, and communicative confidence.

The theoretical framework of the thesis highlights the central role of speaking in foreign language acquisition. Speaking is viewed as a productive and interactive competence that combines linguistic knowledge with communicative ability. Effective oral communication requires vocabulary knowledge, grammatical accuracy, pronunciation, discourse organisation, listening comprehension, and the ability to respond spontaneously in real-life situations. Therefore, modern EFL methodology increasingly promotes communicative and student-centered approaches that encourage learners to interact actively rather than simply memorise language structures.

The first chapter of the thesis analyses the main difficulties encountered in the development of speaking skills. Among the most common problems identified are limited classroom interaction, low student participation, anxiety related to speaking in front of peers, overreliance on teacher-centered instruction, and the lack of communicative tasks that encourage spontaneous speech. In many classrooms, students complete controlled exercises and scripted dialogues, but they rarely engage in argumentative interaction or extended oral communication. As a result, learners may possess theoretical grammatical knowledge while lacking confidence and fluency in authentic speaking situations.

In response to these challenges, the thesis presents debate as an effective pedagogical strategy capable of increasing learner participation and improving oral communication skills. Debate activities encourage students to express and justify opinions, listen carefully to opposing viewpoints, formulate arguments, provide examples, and react spontaneously to ideas presented by others. Through participation in debates, learners develop not only speaking fluency and pronunciation, but also critical thinking, cooperation, problem-solving

abilities, and interactional competence. Debates also support learner autonomy because students become active participants in the learning process rather than passive recipients of information.

Particular attention is given to debate formats suitable for lower-secondary learners in grades 8 and 9. The study proposes several adaptable debate types, including mini debates, fishbowl debates, pair debates, role-based debates, team debates, and problem-solution debates. These formats were selected because they can be adjusted according to learners' language proficiency and classroom needs. Simpler formats such as mini debates and opinion corners are more appropriate for grade 8 learners, who may still require vocabulary support and controlled interaction. More complex formats such as team debates and problem-solution debates are recommended for grade 9 learners, who are generally capable of sustaining longer speaking turns and more developed arguments.

The proposed debate activities are connected to common textbook themes and real-life issues relevant to adolescents. Topics such as school rules, social media, online learning, environmental protection, healthy lifestyles, technology, cultural traditions, and social problems provide meaningful contexts for oral interaction. These topics encourage learners to express personal viewpoints, compare ideas, agree and disagree respectfully, and support arguments using examples and explanations.

The methodological chapter of the thesis describes the research design and the methods applied during the study. The research combines qualitative and comparative approaches in order to examine both the pedagogical value of debate and its practical integration into EFL teaching. Several research methods were used throughout the study.

Theoretical documentation was applied to establish the conceptual and methodological basis of the research. Academic sources related to speaking skills, communicative competence, classroom interaction, and debate-based learning were collected and analysed. This method contributed to the development of the theoretical framework and helped identify the educational principles supporting communicative and interactive teaching strategies.

Another important method used in the research was comparative textbook analysis. The study examined Moldovan EFL textbooks for grades 8 and 9 alongside international EFL coursebooks designed for lower-secondary learners. The purpose of this analysis was to identify speaking tasks, communicative situations, and textbook themes suitable for debate integration. The analysis focused on several criteria, including topic openness, opportunities for argumentation, communicative interaction, language scaffolding, pair and group work opportunities, and the suitability of activities for structured discussion and debate.

Questionnaire-based research also formed an important component of the study. A questionnaire entitled “*Questionnaire on the Use of Debates for Developing Speaking Skills in the EFL Classroom*” was distributed through Google Forms to English teachers and education-related respondents. The questionnaire included closed-ended questions, multiple-choice items, and open-ended questions in order to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. Fifty responses were collected, of which forty-eight respondents identified themselves as teachers of English as a foreign language.

Quantitative analysis was applied to process the closed-ended responses through percentages, diagrams, and frequency counts. This method made it possible to identify tendencies related to teachers' use of debates, the frequency of implementation, the perceived usefulness of debates, and the speaking skills associated with debate activities. Qualitative interpretation was used to analyse the open-ended responses and identify recurring pedagogical themes. Teachers highlighted several benefits of debate activities,

including increased student motivation, improved fluency, greater classroom participation, and enhanced critical thinking. At the same time, respondents mentioned certain difficulties, such as limited lesson time, mixed proficiency levels, learners' fear of speaking publicly, and the need for additional preparation and classroom management.

The results of the textbook analysis demonstrated that Moldovan EFL textbooks include speaking tasks and discussion activities; however, these are often based on simple questions, short dialogues, or controlled speaking exercises. Opportunities for structured argumentation and debate are relatively limited and usually require teacher adaptation. In contrast, international EFL coursebooks provide more communicative and interactive tasks focused on opinion exchange, problem-solving, collaboration, and critical thinking. These materials frequently include functional language for agreeing, disagreeing, expressing opinions, and defending arguments, which facilitates the integration of debate activities.

Based on the obtained findings, the thesis proposes several methodological recommendations for integrating debate into English lessons. These recommendations include selecting topics relevant to students' interests, providing lexical and functional language support before debates, organising learners into pairs or small groups, gradually increasing task complexity, and creating a positive and supportive classroom atmosphere. The research also emphasises the importance of preparation stages before debate activities in order to reduce anxiety and encourage equal participation among learners.

The practical chapter of the thesis includes concrete examples of debate activities and classroom applications adapted for grades 8 and 9. Suggested formats include mini structured debates, fishbowl discussions, role-based debates, pair debates, and problem-solution debates connected to textbook units and thematic lessons. These activities aim to develop speaking fluency, vocabulary use, interactional competence, confidence, critical thinking, and argumentative skills.

The research demonstrates that debate represents an effective pedagogical strategy for developing speaking skills in the EFL classroom. Debate activities contribute to the creation of an interactive, student-centered learning environment in which learners actively participate in communication, collaboration, and problem-solving. Through debates, students practice English in authentic and meaningful situations, which supports the development of communicative competence and self-confidence.

The thesis highlights the importance of promoting communicative and interactive strategies in English language teaching. The findings confirm that debate activities can significantly improve speaking performance, learner engagement, motivation, and classroom interaction. Furthermore, the study supports the inclusion of debate-oriented activities in both textbooks and teaching practice, demonstrating that debates can become a valuable pedagogical tool for enhancing speaking skills and encouraging active participation in the process of learning English as a foreign language.

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