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THE IMPACT OF DEBATE METHOD ON MALAGASY UNDERGRADUATE EFL STUDENTS' VOCABULARY MASTERY AND THEIR PERCEPTIONS

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Abstract: Improving EFL students' English vocabulary mastery always presents an excellent challenge for both EFL teachers and students. The purposes of this study are to investigate the effectiveness of the debate method on EFL students' vocabulary improvement and explore their perceptions of the implementation for mastering vocabulary. The researchers employed a pre-experimental design integrating mixed-methods, combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The study involved 20 undergraduate students from the English departments at the University of Antananarivo,

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Madagascar, in semester 5 in the 2025 academic year. Data were collected through vocabulary tests, questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews. The results indicate a statistically significant improvement in both vocabulary knowledge size, measured by the Vocabulary Level Test (VLT) with average score rising from 29.25 to 31.60, and productive vocabulary knowledge with average score increasing from 18.50 to 21.90, measured by the Productive Vocabulary Test, both with ($p < 0.05$). Beyond enhancing undergraduate EFL students' vocabulary, the debate method is perceived as an effective, engaging, and motivational pedagogy that promotes self-confidence. The findings suggest that the debate is an effective strategy for teaching vocabulary mastery among undergraduate EFL students and is perceived as an engaging, confidence-building pedagogical approach.

Keywords: *undergraduate EFL students, debate, perceptions, vocabulary mastery*

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary mastery is a crucial part of language development, including the ability to understand and use a diverse array of words within different contexts. Mastery of vocabulary is essential for undergraduate EFL students, since it profoundly influences their language proficiency and academic achievement (Sohail, 2026). Mastering vocabulary involves both receptive and productive skills, such as knowing and using words effectively in speech or writing. However, mastering English vocabulary is a major challenge for EFL students, particularly at the undergraduate level. Some undergraduate EFL students utilize their own method encompassing rote memorization; discovery strategies, including guessing words' meanings and consulting bilingual and English dictionaries (Yue & Mohammed, 2024); others apply strategies like inferring word meanings from context and dictionary use (Tahmina, 2023) which limit them to the practice opportunities. Furthermore, limited exposure to

English outside the classroom, insufficient vocabulary-teaching/learning strategies, and a disparity between receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge (Kumar & Dhanavel, 2018) are major challenges for undergraduate EFL students in learning vocabulary.

Moreover, in reality, mastering vocabulary is an important issue for undergraduate EFL students. Mohammed (2023) highlights that the strategy for teaching vocabulary should be more frequently addressed, as this is associated with insufficient vocabulary learning among students. In addition, Melaku and Kibru (2020) argue that vocabulary instruction in English language teaching is sometimes neglected; nonetheless, English teachers should utilize several methods to teach vocabulary effectively. However, language proficiency depends on vocabulary knowledge. Vocabulary mastery is like fuel for language learning. It fuels the engine to achieve proficiency in the four language skills (Meung & Htut, 2021). Therefore, vocabulary is worth paying close attention to, as it plays a significant role in language learning. The mastery of English vocabulary is crucial for EFL students to bridge to other important skills (Rustamova, 2026).

According to the literature, debate method has demonstrated a substantial enhancement in vocabulary and speaking skills among university EFL students. It develops oral fluency and critical thinking, as well as active involvement in the learning process. According to Murodulloyeva et al. (2026), debate promotes undergraduate EFL students' English proficiency by fostering communicative competence, critical thinking, and active engagement. A study was conducted by Dipta et al., (2023) with 15 undergraduate EFL students in English Department of Darussalam Gontor University to evaluate the effect of debate method on promoting high order thinking skill. The results suggested that debating builds higher-order thinking skills, enabling students to analyze, evaluate, and construct arguments, which are crucial for academic achievement. In addition, Waluyo and Abrar (2024) have conducted a systematic review of 11 papers by different authors related to the practice of British parliament debate for promoting English speaking proficiency. They found that exposure to

diverse language inputs during debates increases students' acquisition and retention of unfamiliar terms and vocabulary.

Some debate-related studies have been previously mentioned, but the most highlighted ones have investigated the impact of debate on critical thinking and speaking skills. Suhendra et al. (2025) have studied the effect of British Parliamentary (BP) classroom debate on university EFL students. The study reports that the debate mechanism creates a cycle of input-processing-output-mediation. When students debate, they make fewer self-repairs, use more precise language, and employ discourse markers more strategically, rather than just repeating themselves. Furthermore, the debate method has been shown to significantly improve the vocabulary and speaking skills of university EFL students. Pham (2024) discovered that debate motivates students to explore different topics, necessitating the acquisition of new vocabulary to articulate arguments effectively. The study shows that using debate techniques in English language teaching greatly improves university EFL students' vocabulary and speaking skills, in line with Putri and Rodliyah (2021), who investigated EFL students' perceptions of the use of debate in the speaking classroom in tertiary education. Moreover, El Majidi et al. (2021) investigated the effects of in-class debates on argumentation skills in L2 education. They observed that the implementation of debate positively influenced several structural elements and qualitative features of written and oral communication skills. The findings suggested that engaging in in-class debate enhances EFL students' argumentative skills.

In the Malagasy context, English is taught and used as a third language (Narovana et al., 2026) behind French, the official language, and Malagasy, the national language. English teaching often prioritizes grammar, reading, and writing, frequently within a framework of limited resources (Ambinintsoa, 2022). Improving EFL students' vocabulary mastery has always been an excellent challenge for teachers, given that English is the third language, and EFL students have limited exposure to English vocabulary outside the classroom. Furthermore, teachers are encouraged to promote autonomy by building on students' prior knowledge and interests

(Razafindratsimba, 2023). In the tertiary level, teachers often integrate the teaching of English vocabulary into English speaking classes; however, there is no clear strategy to address students' needs in terms of vocabulary proficiency. Some teachers employ face-to-face discussions in the English academic speaking class, which is designed to evaluate the speaking skills and vocabulary proficiency of undergraduate EFL students. However, no study has investigated the effectiveness of this debate method on specific language skills, including speaking skills or vocabulary mastery, in the Malagasy undergraduate EFL teaching/learning context. Furthermore, due to limited research on English language education in the Malagasy context, there is a lack of literature exploring the teaching of language skills, including vocabulary mastery, in the EFL context.

Based on the above discussion, the researchers are interested in shedding light on the use of the debate method to enrich undergraduate EFL students' vocabulary mastery. Debate is acknowledged for enhancing speaking fluency and critical thinking, yet there is a lack of empirical evidence on whether it can significantly improve vocabulary mastery among undergraduate EFL students. Furthermore, none of the recent relevant studies cited above have focused on enhancing vocabulary mastery among undergraduate EFL students through the debate classroom method, particularly at the University of Antananarivo, Madagascar, leaving a significant gap in this study.

The primary focus of this study is to investigate the impact of the debate method on Malagasy undergraduate EFL students' vocabulary mastery and their perceptions. Thus, researchers intend to seek the answers to the following specific questions:

1. Is there any difference in vocabulary knowledge size and productivity among students before and after implementing the debate method?
2. What are undergraduate EFL students' perceptions of the implementation of debate to master vocabulary?

METHOD

Research design

This study used a pre-experimental design with a one-group pre-test and post-test. Due to the potential validity issues associated with pre-experimental design (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000), an embedded mixed-method research design was proposed, wherein "more meaningful information results when the qualitative second phase of this study builds on significant predictors rather than on simple group comparisons" (Creswell & Clark, 2017). In the quantitative phase, the researchers conducted a one-group pretest-posttest model. According to Bonate (2000), a one-group pretest-posttest design involves assessing a single group's performance before and after an intervention. The test was used to measure the effect of an intervention by comparing results from the same group before and after the intervention. The test was designed to address RQ1. Furthermore, a closed-ended questionnaire was distributed to participants to enrich the quantitative data. In addition, in the qualitative phase, the researchers used open-ended questionnaires, which were supported by semi-structured interview data from a select group of participants, and analyzed the data using thematic analysis. Qualitative research methods, such as thematic analysis, investigate beliefs, viewpoints, and experiences, yielding profound contextual insights (Saunders et al., 2023). The qualitative data were used to answer RQ2.

Subjects of the study

The study involved 20 undergraduate students in semester 5, divided into 4 groups (debaters) from the English department of a public university in Madagascar. The students were assigned to groups based on their preliminary test scores, despite negligible differences in vocabulary levels. The debate was implemented as a contest between selected students from the two different classes of ongoing semester 5 students in the academic year 2025.

Treatment Procedures

The treatment was completed in roughly five weeks, covering both the treatment and data collection phases within nine weeks. In the first week, students took the pre-test. In the following four weeks, they explored the four topics. In the sixth week, students filled in the questionnaires. In the eighth week, the researchers administered the post-test. Then, the interview took place in the ninth week.

The researchers planned two clear phases to implement the debate as a primary tool for teaching vocabulary mastery.

Debate preparation procedures

In this phase, the researchers delivered the debate topics and themes to the participants. The students addressed four random topics during the word battle that relate to Madagascar. The researchers selected the topics related to a very common social problem in the Malagasy context. The purpose was to improve students' vocabulary knowledge and terminology, and to help them master English vocabulary related to the common issues they encounter in their everyday lives. Six topics were proposed, and the students selected four. Thus, the selected topics were as follows.

Topic 1: Mob justice, are you against or for? Based on Madagascar 'context

Topic 2: Is physical punishment towards students necessary?

Topic 3: Is it safe or not safe for young people to post private life on social media like Facebook, TikTok or Instagram?

Topic 4: Being multilingual or holding a higher education degree: Which one is crucial to a job search?

The participants received instruction on the debate structure and were guided in the vocabulary research they employed during the debate. During this event, the researchers divided the participants into four groups of five each, which remained unchanged throughout the intervention. There were four groups, with two against the motion, each composed of five people, and an equal number in favor to maintain balance between both sides. Each group was required to

submit at least ten lists of relevant terms for use in the debate three days before the debate performance. The shared relevant terms must include their definitions, phonetic transcriptions, and synonyms.

Debate performance procedure

In this study, a student-student debate style was employed based on the British Parliamentary Debate (BPD) genre, in which two teams share the same position on the given topic, and the other two are allies. Still, they also had to distinguish themselves from one another. Based on the debate style employed, one student was appointed as the moderator, who introduced the motion, the teams, and the judges (Researchers) within two minutes, ensuring the debate followed the rules, presented the topic of the day and the speakers, and stayed within the timing. Furthermore, the proposition teams (Pro) support the motion; 3 or 5 speakers from each team have 3 to 8 minutes (two teams on the same side). In turn, the opposition (Con) opposes the motion; 3 or 5 speakers from the team had 3 to 8 minutes each (two teams on the same side). In addition, there was a time for a reply speech. Each team was allocated a four-minute speech by the first or second speaker of the opposition, followed by a reply from the first or second speaker of the proposition. Each team was given a final persuasive appeal within two minutes. After that, the moderator brought the debate session to a close. The researchers provided feedback on the terminology the debaters used during the performance after the session.

Research Instruments

This study utilized three main instruments: vocabulary level test (to measure vocabulary knowledge size and productive), questionnaires and interview questions.

Vocabulary Mastery Test

The researchers used the Vocabulary Level Test (VLT), adopted from the version 2 developed by Schmitt et al. (2001), and a productive vocabulary test based on the proposed debate topics. The VLT used in this study involved connecting terms to their meanings and testing

knowledge at the 2000-, 3000-, and 5000-word levels, as well as at academic English vocabulary levels, to measure vocabulary mastery. The productive vocabulary test was based on the four debate topics/themes to measure students' mastery of productive vocabulary. The test contained 43 multiple-choice questions with three words of choice, including thirty (30) items based on the VLT by Schmitt et al. (2001) and thirteen (13) items based on the topics/theme of the debate. Each question had three possible meanings or definitions, and students were asked to choose the correct one. The VLT format by Schmitt et al. (2001) was modified and retyped in Microsoft Word to help students provide their answers on printed paper and to facilitate response delivery and test time management.

Survey questionnaires

The questionnaire contained 24 items consisting of 20 closed-ended and 4 open-ended questions, which were adapted from (Zare & Othman, 2015; Saputra & Lumba, 2024; Husna, 2024), and two EFL experts assessed the questionnaire's content validity before being used in the study. After the EFL experts examined the questionnaires, the closed-ended one was reduced to 18, which were validated, and 2 open-ended questionnaires were rebuilt based on the feedback." The researchers used 18 closed-ended Likert-scale surveys (ranging from strongly disagree to agree strongly) to measure the questionnaire. The questionnaires were designed to break down students' perceptions of the vocabulary mastery aspects of the debate method.

Interview questions

The researchers used the interview questions as a follow-up to gather more information about undergraduate EFL students' experiences and deeper understanding of their perceptions. The interview guide was examined and validated by EFL experts before being utilized in the study.

Data Collection

Data were gathered over nine weeks utilizing vocabulary tests, questionnaires and interviews. In the first week before the debate session, participants took the pre-test. The pre-test was used to assess participants' vocabulary knowledge and the size of their vocabulary related to the topics before implementing the debate method. In the sixth week, after completing four debate sessions with four proposed topics, the questionnaires were distributed to the participants. The questionnaire was given to all students after the last debate. The questionnaire examined students' perceptions of using the debate method to master English vocabulary. In the eighth week, all participants took the post-test. Pre- and post-tests are used to assess knowledge gain and student performance before and after an intervention, such as a course, according to Damayanti et al. (2017) and Tesch (2016). The students took both pre-test and post-test within 15 to 20 minutes.

Then, in the ninth week, a semi-structured interview using 18 items was conducted as a follow-up to the closed-ended questionnaire, to investigate further their experiences and perceptions regarding classroom debate in EFL learning to improve English vocabulary mastery. Nine students participated in semi-structured interviews: four face-to-face and five online via WhatsApp, each lasting approximately 20 to 45 minutes. The interview selection procedure was detailed based on participants' agreement and their indicated availability for the interview, which was confirmed in the Messenger group discussion and the questionnaire consent form.

Data Analysis

The pretest and post-test results was analysed by using a paired-samples t-test, which is often applied by calculating the same test items' results for both pretest and post-test in a single-group design (Field, 2024). The productive vocabulary consisted of 13 items, each worth 2 points. The VLT contained 30 items with various word-level. The 2000 word-level contained 7 items, which were worth 0.5 points each; the 3000 word-level with 8 items, 1 point each; the 5000 word-level with 7 items, worth 1.5 points each; and the academic word

list with 8 items, worth 1.5 points each. The objective was to evaluate if a statistically significant difference exists between the two sets of scores. The objective was to evaluate if a statistically significant difference exists between the two sets of scores. While the two associated metrics' means were compared using a paired-samples t-test. Cohen's "d" for paired samples was calculated to enhance the reliability of the significance test and assess the magnitude of the effect. It consistently measures the magnitude of the effect, making it understandable regardless of sample size. Cohen's (1988) criteria define small, medium, and large effects as 0.2, 0.5, and 0.8, respectively. In addition, then, the effect size for paired pretest and posttest will be identified by checking the Sig '(2-tailed)' p-value in the SPSS as well.

If $p < 0.05$, the change is statistically significant.

If $p > 0.05$, the change is statistically insignificant

The quantitative data from the questionnaire was analyzed by using SPSS to treat the statistical data. The researchers used 18 closed-ended surveys, adopting a 4-point Likert scale (ranging from strongly Disagree to Agree strongly) to measure questionnaire results. A Likert scale is a measurement instrument used to evaluate opinions by providing respondents with statements and a spectrum of agreement options (Yaska & Nuhu, 2024). The descriptive statistics was used to describe a dataset from the survey questionnaire in order to explore more meaningful conclusions of the study aligned with the qualitative data.

The open-ended questionnaire and interview data were analysed using the thematic analytic method as a follow-up to the closed-ended questionnaires. Thematic analysis is a prevalent qualitative analytical technique for detecting, interpreting, and reporting patterns in data. It systematically organizes and thoroughly elucidates the dataset (Nowell et al., 2017). The researchers carefully adhered to the qualitative data analysis process based on thematic analysis, including understanding the data, creating initial codes and finding themes, reviewing themes, naming themes, and compiling data for qualitative insights (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The coding method was

carried out manually to enable researchers to engage directly and thoroughly with the qualitative data.

FINDINGS

This section discusses the research's findings in relation to the research questions. The results of the survey are outlined based on the two research questions as follows: (1) Is there any difference in vocabulary knowledge size among students before and after implementing the debate method? And (2) What are undergraduate EFL students' perceptions of the implementation of debate to master vocabulary?

RQ1: Is there any difference in vocabulary knowledge size among students before and after implementing the debate method?

The study involved 20 undergraduate EFL students as a sample in a one-group pre-experimental design. Thus, the two stages of data collection, namely, pre-test and post-test, were designed to answer the question above. To answer RQ1, participants completed two types of vocabulary mastery tests: the Vocabulary Level Test (VLT) and productive vocabulary mastery.

Table 1.
Descriptive Statistics

Vocab type	Test	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
VLT	Pre-	20	29.25	2.66	25	34
	Post-	20	31.60	1.47	32	34
Productive	Pre-	20	18.50	3.24	8	24
	Post-	20	21.90	2.10	18	26

Table 1 presents the statistical analysis of SPSS 27 data from a pretest and posttest administered to 20 participants. The VLT pretest and posttest results are comparable, as evidenced by mean scores of 31.60 and 29.25, respectively. It indicates significant performance improvement after the debate intervention. At the same time, there is also a substantial improvement on the productive vocabulary test, with

a mean score of 21.90 in the posttest compared to 18.50 in the pretest. The score ranges demonstrate consistent performance among individuals for both vocabulary types.

It is not enough to say the improvement without supporting evidence from deep statistical analysis. The researchers conducted independent-samples t-tests, using Cohen's d as the effect size, for both vocabulary types to analyze improvements. The result is presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2.
Independent sample t-test result

Vocab types	Test	Mean	Std Dev	t- value	df	p- value	Effect Size (Cohen's d)
VLT	Pre-	29.25	2.66				
	Post-	31.60	1.47	-4.736	19	<0.001	1.06
Productive	Pre-	18.50	3.24				
	Post-	21.90	2.10	-4.421	19	<0.001	0.99

In Table 2, the result of Paired-samples t-tests showed a substantial improvement on both VLT and the productive vocabulary test. The VLT scores increased substantially with mean score $M=31.60$ for posttest and $p < .001$), and a large effect size (Cohen's $d = 1.06$). Likewise, productive vocabulary scores showed a substantial improvement with mean score $M=21.90$ for posttest, $p < .001$, and $d = 0.99$.

Furthermore, paired-sample t-tests were conducted to compare the mean differences between the pre-test and post-test of both the VLT and the productive vocabulary test. The results are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3.
Paired- Sample T-test

Vocab types Comparison	Mean Difference	t- value	df	p- value	95% CI for Mean Difference
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VLT	-2.350	-4.736	19	<0.001	[-3.388, - 1.312]
Productive	-3.400	-4.421	19	<0.001	[-5.010, -1.790]

In Table 3, the results of Paired-samples t-tests show a substantial improvement on both the VLT and the productive vocabulary test. The t-test analysis still supports the hypothesis (H1). It rejects the null Hypothesis (H0), indicating a statistically significant difference between the pretest and posttest scores on students' vocabulary mastery. This suggests that the intervention with the debate method was highly effective in fostering undergraduate EFL students' vocabulary mastery and expanding their vocabulary knowledge.

The findings showed a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test for each vocabulary type. This means that the debate method worked better. Figure 1 shows the difference between pre-test and post-test scores for the two types of vocabulary.

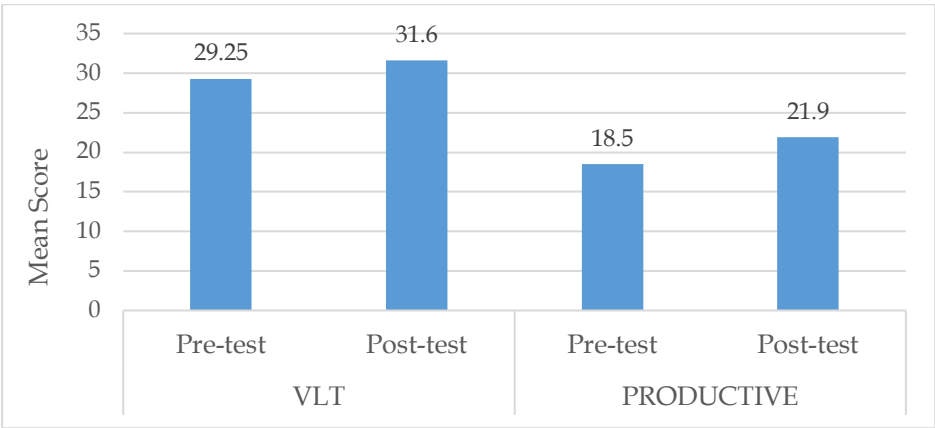


Figure 1. The comparison of the scores of the pre-test and post-test of the two types of vocabularies

RQ2: What are undergraduate EFL students’ perceptions of the implementation of debate to master vocabulary?

A questionnaire was used to collect perception-based data after participants completed all the debate topics followed by semi-

structural interview. Two types of data were collected from the questionnaire. The quantitative data from the questionnaire were analyzed to determine the mean score for each dimension by counting the frequency of the four Likert-scale items to address the research question (RQ2). Moreover, the qualitative data were collected from students' responses to open-ended questionnaires.

Table 4.
Perceived Effectiveness of Debate in Vocabulary Mastery

Item	Statement	N	Frequency (%)				Mean	SD
			SD	D	A	SA		
1	Participating in debates improves my ability to use newly learned words in meaningful context	20	0%	0%	40%	60%	3.60	0.50
2	Debate activities motivate me to expand my vocabulary	20	0%	0%	55%	45%	3.45	0.51
3	Debate fosters my vocabulary proficiency in English	20	0%	5%	70%	25%	3.20	0.52
4	Debate increases my competency in words meaning and use	20	5%	0%	50%	45%	3.35	0.75
5	I feel that engaging in debate helps me to master English Vocabulary orally	20	5%	5%	45%	45%	3.30	0.80

The result in Table 14 shows that the highest mean score is for item 1 (3.60), indicating that 100% of the participants feel they improved in using the newly learned words in debate. The second-highest core is for item 2 (3.45), with 100% of participants agreeing that the activity helps expand their vocabulary. However, the lowest mean score is shown by item 3 (3.20), which indicates that debates improve participants' vocabulary proficiency. When it comes to the percentages, items 3 and 4 are similar, with 95% of participants agreeing with them. Participants find that the debate method enhances their vocabulary

proficiency and increases their competence in word meaning and use.

The results from close-ended questionnaire were supported by students' answers in open-ended question. Some participants' opinion by replying this question are presented below.

P#10: "Learning vocabulary through debate is critical and personally beneficial for me. I have learned many new words and understood their use in sentences and context."

P#6: "I learned a lot of vocabulary and knowledge based on the topics we covered. Also, experience in public speaking, even though I didn't speak much during the debate, especially in vocabulary mastery, because I am not used to using sophisticated language vocabulary in everyday life, but now I've experienced how delicious it is to use unusual vocabulary."

Qualitatively, the findings from the semi-structured interviews closely aligned with those from the open-ended questionnaires, indicating that participants emphasized the effectiveness of the debate method for learning English vocabulary. Undergraduate EFL students perceived that the exchange among group during preparation and performance play an important role of the effectiveness of the debate method on vocabulary aspects. They shared the following details:

"Debate is more effective for improving vocabulary mastery when searching for vocabulary related to topics during preparation and sharing it with friends to make the process more interactive, compared to the traditional method of learning language." (Excerpts 5, Student 1)

"I learned a lot of new vocabulary from my teammates and the opposing teams. The latest words I remember most are "Circumvent, Digital literacy, cyber harassment, and impunity". These vocabularies I collected from different topics." (Excerpts 2, Student 3)

On the top of that, a participant also highlighted that the debate method is effective to enhance overall English proficiency apart from vocabulary mastery.

"...I want to specify that learning vocabulary through debate is more effective than traditional methods. Why? It's because all the vocabulary we use during the debate

has a purpose. My language skills can be further developed and refined." (Excerpts 6, Student 5)

Table 5.
Benefits of Debate on Vocabulary Development

Item	Statement	N	Frequency (%)				Mean	SD
			SD	D	A	SA		
6	Debates expose me to new vocabulary in meaningful contexts	20	0%	0%	60%	40%	3.40	0.50
7	I significantly improved my pronunciation using the debate method	20	0%	30%	45%	25%	2.95	0.76
8	Debate increases my self-confidence in using new words	20	0%	15%	60%	25%	3.10	0.64
9	Preparation for debate (research and argument construction) enhances my vocabulary development.	20	0%	5%	50%	45%	3.40	0.60

As shown in Table 15, the highest mean score is achieved by items 6 and 9 (3.40), indicating that students feel that debate exposes them to new vocabulary in meaningful contexts and that debate preparation improves vocabulary development. 100% of the students agreed with item 6 and 95% with item 9. However, the lowest mean score is for item 7 (2.95), indicating that some students did not feel any improvement in their pronunciation during the debate performance. 30% of the students did not agree with the statement.

The results from the closed-ended questionnaire were strengthened by students' answers in the open-ended question. Some participants' opinions on answering this question are shown below.

P#2: *"Some specific benefits I have experienced in vocabulary learning through debate are my knowledge broadened, I feel more confident speaking in public, and I feel more fluent in English."*

P#18: *"Learning vocabulary through debate is critical and personally beneficial for me. I have learned many new words and understood their use in sentences and context."*

Qualitatively, the findings obtained from the interviews corresponded consistently with those from the open-ended questionnaires, indicating that participants highlighted the benefits of the debate method for mastering English vocabulary. The pronunciation aspects were mentioned. They shared the following details.

"As a student, I feel more confident when I learn new vocabulary and expressions in a debate context. Debate sessions are an effective way of improving my vocabulary. It helps me to differentiate between regular and sophisticated words."
(Excerpts 4, Student 16)

"Sure, pronunciation really matters when it comes to speaking skills. I have checked the phonetic script of all the related terms and pronounce them out loud. I feel more confident when I speak fluent and pronounce words perfectly in debate."
(Excerpts 8, Student 5)

An additional excerpt from a participant suggested that the debate method helps her confidently use new words and expressions by identifying the sophistication of the word level.

"As a student, I feel more confident when I learn new vocabulary and expressions in a debate context. Debate sessions are an effective way of improving my vocabulary. It helps me to differentiate between regular and sophisticated words."
(Excerpts 4, Student 16)

Table 6.
Perceived Challenges Faced Before and After Debate Activities

Item	Statement	N	Frequency (%)				Mean	SD
			SD	D	A	SA		

10	I find that debate is not helpful to learn new English words in context	20	75%	20%	5%	0%	1.30	0.57
11	I feel anxious about making vocabulary mistakes while debating	20	5%	0%	85%	10%	3.00	0.56
12	The debate topics are sometimes too difficult for my current vocabulary level	20	10%	55%	35%	0%	2.25	0.63
13	Time pressure in debates limits my ability to use new words correctly	20	5%	5%	45%	45%	3.30	0.80
14	I struggle to find appropriate vocabulary during debate preparation	20	0%	60%	25%	15%	2.55	0.76

As shown in Table 16, the highest mean score is for item 13 (3.30), indicating that the debate speech time limit prevented students from using vocabulary correctly. 90% of the students agreed with the statement. However, the lowest mean score is for item 10 (1.30), indicating that the debate method helps learn vocabulary in context. The statement was presented in the negative, indicating that 95% of the students disagreed with it.

However, students reported the challenges they faced during the debate session in answering the open-ended questions. The most highlighted challenge was time pressure and word recall during the debate performance. The report is as follows.

P#18: “During the debate, I focused more on the argument than on the words I should use. The most challenging aspect of using the debate method to improve vocabulary is remembering vocabulary. I forget the right words for my arguments, and I get blocked.”

P#20: “During the debate sessions, I find it hard to use all the vocabulary I was supposed to use because the time for the speech was limited. I managed to share an idea about the topic, but did not use the relevant vocabulary.”

Qualitatively, the results from the semi-structured interview showed trends similar to those stated in the open-ended questionnaire regarding the encountered challenge. The interview results highlighted problems related to words memory. For example, some students reported that:

“It was hard for me to remember several technical terms and use them correctly in my argument. Another challenge is saying those words right. During the debate, I sometimes forget what to say.” (Excerpts 21, Student 16)

Furthermore, a participant claimed that public speaking hinders her ability to express herself correctly. It can be observed as a fear of public.

“I find positive energy in using the vocabulary I have learned through debate participation. It is not only about knowing the words, but also about using them in honest communication and in context. However, public speaking is still an obstacle for me, even though my classmates are the attendees.” (Excerpts 22, Student 16)

Table 7.
Motivation and Engagement

Item	Statement	N	Frequency (%)				Mean	SD
			SD	D	A	SA		
15	I discuss and share new vocabulary with my colleagues when preparing for a debate	20	10%	5%	45%	40%	3.15	0.93

16	I feel a sense of accomplishment when effectively employing new words in disputes.	20	10%	0%	35%	55%	3.35	0.93
17	I always look for words and their definitions during my research for a debate	20	5%	5%	40%	50%	3.35	0.81
18	I feel more motivated to learn vocabulary when using the debate method compared to traditional methods	20	0%	10%	40%	50%	3.40%	0.68

According to the results in Table 17, the highest mean score is shown by item 18 (3.40), indicating that the debate method makes students feel more motivated to learn vocabulary than the traditional method. 90% of the students agreed with the statement. However, item 15 has the lowest mean score at 3.15. 85% of the students confirmed to share new vocabulary with their teammates. In addition, items 16 and 17 have similar mean scores. It is 3.35 on average, with 90% of the students agreeing with the two statements.

These statements in the closed-ended questionnaire were strengthened by students' answers to the open-ended question. Their opinions indicated that the debate method makes them engaged in teamwork and motivated to master English vocabulary before the debate performance. Some participants' views, as reflected in their replies to the open-ended question, are presented below.

P#11: "While preparing for the debate, I research the topics and take notes on related vocabulary. Then, as it is teamwork, we collaboratively share all our studies and discuss them together."

P#2: In general, I watch debate sessions online. For this debate contest, particularly, I had to make research on specific frameworks and then use the vocabulary I found, and the ones that I already know, to structure my arguments. I also had to use memory cards in order not forget the appropriate words."

The qualitative results from the semi-structured interviews aligned with those from the open-ended questionnaires, indicating that participants emphasized the motivation to master English vocabulary and to defeat the opponent team during both the preparation and performance phases. The student engagement focused on diverse techniques of terminology search and individual or collective learning. They shared details as follows.

"In my experience and my team perspective, we use more advanced words in order to put our opponent team at hardship. Therefore, debate encourages me to utilize advanced academic in order to win the public and jury 's points." (Excerpts 11, Student 6)

"When it comes to the rebuttal, I use more advanced vocabulary because then I want to strike my opponent team." (Excerpts 12, Student 11)

DISCUSSION

The Impact of the Debate Method on Undergraduate EFL Students' Vocabulary Knowledge size and Productive

According to the results, the debate method is effective and productive for undergraduate EFL students' vocabulary knowledge. The findings show a statistically significant improvement in both vocabulary knowledge size, measured by the Vocabulary Level Test (VLT), and productive vocabulary knowledge, measured by the Productive Vocabulary Test (PVT). The results of the paired-sample t-test presented that scores after the test were much higher than before for both measures ($p < .001$) across the two types of vocabulary the researchers sought to measure. This can be interpreted as the alternative hypothesis (H1), which posits that the debate method significantly enhances students' vocabulary knowledge. Whereas the null hypothesis (H0), which posits no significant effect, is rejected. The large effect sizes, Cohen's d (1.06) for VLT and d (0.99) for PVT, indicate that the debate method had a significant impact on vocabulary learning in practice, beyond mere statistical significance. According to recent vocabulary mastery research, active engagement with words through argument construction, rebuttals, and spontaneous responses

enhances both form-meaning connections and retrieval strength. This finding aligns with the study by Rico González (2025), which found that engaging in academic debate significantly enhances vocabulary among students. This is because of very careful debate preparation, planning, and effective argumentation; participants improved their vocabulary.

The significant improvements in vocabulary scores can be ascribed to the participatory, meaning-centered aspect of debate as a learning activity, which enhances the enjoyment of learning. Debate also encourages students to constantly use, analyze, and apply the new vocabulary they learned during preparation in conversational situations. This helps them process words better. This finding supports Rico González '(2025) study, which suggests that active engagement in academic debate enhances EFL students' vocabulary mastery. It is considered that they learned new words due to the students' thorough preparation and the challenging arguments they constructed, which challenged their peers. At this point, debate serves as a cognitively challenging activity that promotes enduring language acquisition.

Additionally, the improvement in productive vocabulary was slightly more pronounced in terms of mean score increase, suggesting that debate is particularly effective for fostering active vocabulary use. According to Aclan and Aziz (2015), debate technique fosters the use of an extensive vocabulary as students formulate and articulate arguments, necessitating their comprehension and contextual application of new terms. This type of learning is essential for remembering and using words. In addition, the debate technique has been shown to enhance vocabulary acquisition in English language instruction, with students exhibiting greater fluency and confidence in using new terminology (Pham, 2024). Overall, the results show that the debate technique is a good way for undergraduate EFL students to learn new words through experience. Thus, the classroom debate improves undergraduate EFL students' vocabulary mastery.

Undergraduate EFL students' perceptions of the implementation of debate to master English vocabulary

The results showed that debate implementation is an effective method for learning and teaching undergraduate EFL English vocabulary mastery, as perceived by the undergraduate EFL students. Therefore, both questionnaires and interview data strongly support the positive perceptions of debate's effectiveness for vocabulary mastery. Kulak (2025) and Yusupalieva (2024) found that communicative tasks, such as debate, require active retrieval and vocabulary use to enhance lexical networks and help transitions in vocabulary understanding from recognition to fluent application. Moreover, according to Marhatin and Triyogo (2024), debate scaffolds enhance lexical development through contextualized, content-based learning, in which vocabulary is encountered and applied with a clear communicative purpose. Overall, the triangulation of findings, both quantitative and qualitative, shows that the debate method engages learners in meaningful and purposeful language use, an essential element in the processing of complex vocabulary.

Qualitative data from both open-ended responses and interviews strengthen understanding by highlighting the factors that underpin these statistical findings. Students showed increased confidence and perceived competence, with benefits that go beyond fundamental vocabulary improvement to include pragmatic and sociolinguistic competence. In line with Nation (2019), who claims that effective vocabulary acquisition involves both understanding a word's definition and developing the confidence to use it in a given situation.

The study explored students' experienced challenges using questionnaire data and follow-up interviews. The findings highlight that, while debate is perceived as effective and beneficial for acquiring contextual vocabulary, significant practical challenges hinder its optimal use. The results of the study on the challenge dimension show that time pressure in debate practice limited the application of correct vocabulary and the use of memory sources for the new words learned. Recent cognitive load theory by Kwong (2021) and Brinda & Ardiyanto (2025) claim that time pressure hinders vocabulary use, as the simultaneous demands of constructing arguments, organizing speech, and memorizing specific lexical items exceed the constraints of limited

working memory resources. Moreover, the fear of making mistakes, an increasingly common obstacle, can trigger affective filters that hamper lexical access for EFL learners and discourage risk-taking, crucial to vocabulary integration and use, in line with previous studies (Alarcon et al., 2025; Mera et al., 2025). Thus, to get the most out of debate's vocabulary benefits, teachers can add activities that help students feel more confident, refine their pronunciation, and learn how to handle cognitive load.

Moreover, the students' shared answers emphasize the critical role of debate as a teaching strategy in increasing EFL learners' desire and interest in learning new words. The favorable reception of the debate technique, as indicated by student answers, corresponds with current research highlighting the significance of interactive, student-centered learning environments. According to Ellis (2017) and Sánchez Franco & Pérez Ortega (2024), environments foster intrinsic motivation by incorporating language acquisition into meaningful, goal-oriented tasks. Apart from that, working together was an integral part of the students' preparation for the debate, as they used the exact phrases and vocabulary. This collaborative technique aligns with Vygotsky's social constructivism, in which knowledge is co-constructed through discourse and interaction. According to Gedikli and Başbay (2020) and Jing et al. (2024), collaborative pre-task activities in communicative language learning contexts considerably enhance EFL learners' confidence and reduce anxiety, creating a supportive environment that encourages risk-taking with the new language.

Furthermore, the findings showed that the student recommendations in the debate method are very similar to recent research on second language acquisition (SLA), which shows that meaningful, output-oriented engagement is essential for lexical development. According to Bryfonski and McKay (2019), continuous involvement in communication activities that require meaning negotiation and result in enhanced output significantly expedites vocabulary acquisition and automatization. Debate necessitates that students utilize both high-frequency and sophisticated vocabulary under immediate communication strain, thereby reinforcing lexical

networks (Rousse-Malpat et al., 2022). Overall, integrating debate into EFL classroom offers a dynamic, communicative approach that supports both linguistic development and undergraduate EFL students' motivation and engagement.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study show that debate is an effective method for improving undergraduate EFL students' vocabulary knowledge and productive mastery. The results clearly revealed a significant difference in the use of the debate method in EFL students' vocabulary mastery. This vital improvement can be attributed to the rigorous thinking and engagement of the argument. Instead of rote memorising, debate requires students to discover topic-specific language, build arguments, and use it spontaneously during rebuttals and persuasive speeches. This approach enables students think more deeply, enhances the linkages between form and meaning, and most importantly, moves vocabulary knowledge from the receptive to the creative domain. The need to retrieve and employ words in meaningful, communicative situations to achieve a clear, convincing goal helps EFL students learn new words and use them with confidence. The results suggest that the debate method is highly effective and beneficial for expanding undergraduate EFL students' vocabulary, due to its contextual and purposeful aspects. In a word, this study conclusively reveals that the classroom debate method is an effective pedagogical intervention for considerably enhancing the vocabulary mastery of undergraduate EFL students, both receptively and productively.

However, the study also has certain limitations. First, the use of a pre-experimental one-group pretest and post-test design without a control group may limit the ability to attribute all improvement to the debate intervention. Second, the use of a small sample (N=20) from a single university can limit the generalizability of the findings to broader EFL populations. Based on the research findings, several

suggestions are put forth. First, for practitioners, structured debate modules should be incorporated into English-speaking and vocabulary-oriented courses. Second, for curriculum designers, debate should be recognised as a core activity for achieving lexical learning objectives, with topics carefully selected to be relevant and engaging to students' lives or issues related to students' interests. Lastly, future researchers need to investigate the enduring retention of vocabulary acquired through debate and to use a large sample size, comparing two or more different debate formats and utilising a control group.

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DECLARATION OF AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES

In the development of this work, the authors utilized Quillbot and Grammarly to enhance language, grammatical accuracy, and readability. The writers have scrutinized and revised the text as necessary and assume all responsibility for the publication's content following the utilization of this tool/service.

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