

An Investigation of Educational Value of Debates: A Case of Secondary School Children

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Abstract: Debate is a controlled discussion between two parties to persuade each other about a controversial topic. In order for debate to progress on the right path, some rules must have been established beforehand. The use of debates in educational settings has very positive effects. Students, who normally hesitate to speak, speak much more comfortably by overcoming anxiety in the attractive atmosphere of debate sessions. In addition, students pay attention to other things that should be included in the speech content. In order to determine these, a questionnaire in accordance with the Likert scale was applied to the students we studied. The results of this survey were evaluated, and a conclusion was reached. In general, it can be said that students gain more skills than speaking activities in debate sessions.

Keywords: Debate in Education, Anxiety, Shyness, Speaking

1. Introduction

Speaking activities are quite challenging for students. There are some important reasons for this. First, many students are hesitant to speak because of their anxiety and shyness problem. However, debates offer some very advantageous opportunities in this regard. Especially students with characteristic problems such as anxiety can show outstanding performance with the effect of the controversy element in the debate session. For this, the activities must be adjusted correctly according to the level of the students. This study was conducted to investigate the benefits of debates for students.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Debate

Debate in very general terms means a structured discussion between two opposing groups to convince each other or the audience to accept their opinions about one topic. An important feature of the debate emerges here. Accordingly, debate is not a platform where factual information shared. In order for it to be

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achieved, two separate groups need to come against each other and defend opposing ideas on an issue. In addition, a number of previously agreed rules need to be applied in the debate. Afterwards, defending these ideas orally in a certain order and refuting the ideas of the other party are important elements of the debate (Akerman & Neale, 2011).

According to another definition, a debate is a systematic presentation made orally followed by the discussion of a controversial issue. Debate requires the existence of a complex problem pending solution. There is no debate on a subject that everyone agrees on. Such a situation only brings about the exchange of information because there is nothing to discuss (Roy & Macchiette, 2005).

An important aspect of debate is that all processes must be planned. At the point where debate is handled as two separate groups arguing over a controversial topic. First of all, a controversial topic should be chosen because debate is something different from a normal dialogue. Here, it is necessary to send the message that will make the other party accept their opinion and to receive the dissenting message on the same subject. Thus, it is tried to persuade the other party through the expression of ideas (Walton, 2006).

An important feature of debate is that the issue has already been shared between the two groups, and everyone knows their best defense. However, due to the nature of the debate, it is always possible to add or remove new arguments outside the planned one in the course of the debate (Koklanaris et al., 2008).

The main purpose in this issue is to persuade the other party and the audience by bringing strong arguments and to make them accept your ideas. However, in order for such a controversial debate to continue in a healthy way, the rules and objectives must be determined beforehand. Otherwise, it may go to other points other than the previously determined purpose. While one of the main purposes of debate is to solve the problem that caused the conflict, it can be said that this purpose is mostly not realized. Here only the jury can decide which side has developed the better arguments. It is also one of the aims of the debate to obtain and present new information for both the opponent and the audience (Želježič, 2017).

We can say that the most important element of debate is controversy. A debate session without controversy becomes an informational meeting only, where participants and audiences are likely to get bored. However, in case of controversy, the excitement of both parties will be high, and the possible monotony will disappear from the very beginning. In this case, they can easily overcome the anxiety that the participants are likely to feel (Koklanaris et al., 2008).

2.2 Debate in Education

The debate outlined above is a tool that can be used successfully in educational contexts. Especially for foreign language learners, it can give very useful results because it contains many elements. Speaking is one of the most important problems faced by students in foreign language learning. Since speaking is a productive skill, it is very difficult to develop (Rao, 2019). For this to develop, some environments must be properly prepared. One of the main reasons that prevent students from speaking is anxiety and difficulty speaking in front of others. However, in debate, this problem can be easily overcome according to the flow of the subject. In fact, it has been observed that even very shy students can easily engage in discussion in exciting moments of the subject (Azizifar et al., 2014).

One of the important reasons why in-class speaking activities are difficult is that the necessary environment for students is not created. In addition, it is very difficult to create a natural environment for speaking in the classroom (Medalle & Usinger, 2019). However, in debate sessions, students naturally immerse themselves in the activity. In addition, another factor that enables students to speak comfortably during the debate is the preparations they have made before. Therefore, students both know the subject very well and have rehearsed beforehand. Especially the loss of monotonous atmosphere during the discussion, the desire to convince the other is an encouraging reason for the students. In addition, the fact that the environment is natural and requires conversation is another positive dimension for students. Thus, students try to talk by making use of both what they are studying and the idea that comes to mind at the time. One of the important benefits of debate in educational content is that students learn to be respectful of their opponents. While the students defend their own ideas, on the other hand, they learn to listen to the opinions of others and take the necessary notes (Malloy et al., 2020).

One of the key benefits that debate brings to students is that students learn to research and access resources on their own. In this way, students can conduct free research and learn a subject that they are motivated by without the intervention of their teachers. While learning a subject, they also learn the points to develop counterarguments. Thus, the student's knowledge of the subject increases (Ehrenworth, 2017).

Ideas of speaking and listening are the most basic method of discussion. For this, it is necessary to research, discuss and convey ideas to the other party in the best possible way (Washburn & Cavagnetto, 2013). Debate has the content to provide all this. In addition, the subject of how to dress students can be given through debate. In addition, lessons that will enable students to use their body language in the best way can be given because students are highly motivated to take these lessons (Darby, 2007).

One of the important features of debate is that it teaches students critical thinking. First of all, cross-reference research on a subject allows students to have a lot of information about the subject. In addition, since they will take the subject to discussion environments, they gather different arguments and have an idea about them and evaluate the subject. Since the way they present the subject is important and the aim is to convince the other, they feel obliged to bring convincing answers to the controversial points. That's why students learn to think critically through debate (Snider et al., 2006).

Social communication is of great importance for people's linguistic, mental and character development. Debate sessions, in this sense, have the potential to provide students with the opportunity of social communication at the highest level. It is possible for students to learn to be respectful to each other, to know the rules of communication, to improve their knowledge and speaking skills, with debate (Firth & Wagner, 2007).

3. Methodology

3.1 Design of the Study

This study was created by taking the ideas of the students who are regularly held debate sessions in schools. The students were asked questions in accordance with the Likert scale under different headings and an evaluation was made on the answers of the students. Qualitative and quantitative methods were used together, and the results obtained were statistically analyzed. Afterwards, the data were evaluated with the

descriptive statistics method. The cognitive, affective and performance factors of the students were examined in order to find out what gains the students achieved in the debate. Under these headings, the answers given by the students were evaluated.

3.2 Sample Selection

In this research, students studying in 7th and 8th grades in Ronaki Duhok secondary school were used. The reason for this is that these classes regularly organize debate activities within the school. In addition, while most of the students were active participants in these activities, the others were both listeners and participated in the discussions at the end of the debate session. A total of 30 students were used in this study.

3.3 Data Collection

In this study, a survey was conducted in accordance with the Likert scale. The results obtained from the questionnaire were interpreted with the descriptive statistics method.

4. Findings

Students' ideas on debates, an activity they regularly do, were used in this research. First of all, the students were asked about the cognitive factors related to the debate. In other words, it was revealed how much research and study students did.

In this context, our first question to the students was about whether they did research while preparing.

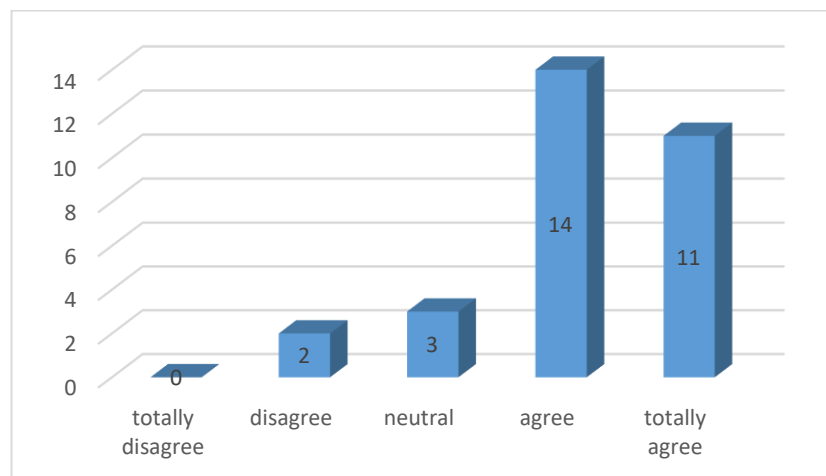


Figure 1: I do research for debate and get ready for it very seriously

Out of the 30 students, 25 (83%) stated that they prepared seriously. Therefore, it is seen that the students have done serious research on the subject they will discuss and have learned important things. In addition, the fact that the rate is so high shows the motivation of the students towards the issue.

One of the best learning methods for students is to learn through their own research on a subject they are motivated. Students preparing for Debate consult many sources and gather different information. To find out what these students did about it, we asked the next question.

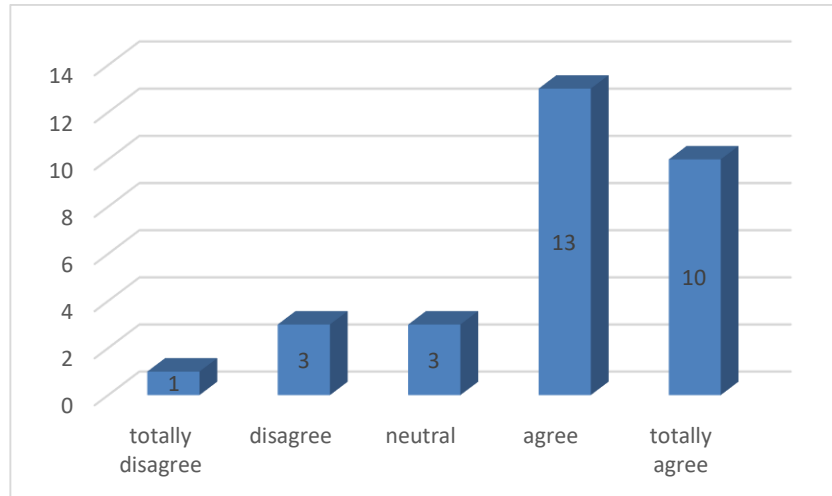


Figure 2: I learn much during my research

A total of 23 students (76%) stated that they learned a lot during their research. The fact that the majority of the students gave this answer shows how effective the preparation before the debate is in learning.

In the next questions, we tried to find out what kind of effects the debates had on the students. Therefore, we will see how the debates address the affective aspects of students in the answers we receive to these questions. In the first question we asked on this subject, the subject of how interesting the students find the debates was examined.

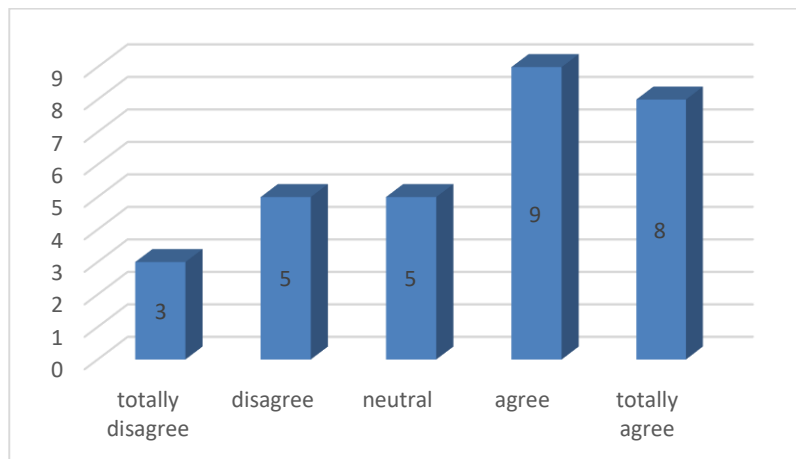


Figure 3: Debates are very interesting

When we look at the results, 17 students (56%) find these activities interesting. The reason for the decrease in positive answers in this question compared to the other questions may be that these activities are carried

out continuously in the school. After a point, students may gradually lose interest in the activity. However, we see that the majority find these activities interesting.

Most of the students can be very shy, especially when speaking in a foreign language. There may be some reasons behind this. For example, some may have anxiety problems, while others may be afraid of their friends' making fun of them. However, in the environment created by debates, students can act more naturally and forget the problems. To determine how true this issue is, we asked them the next question.

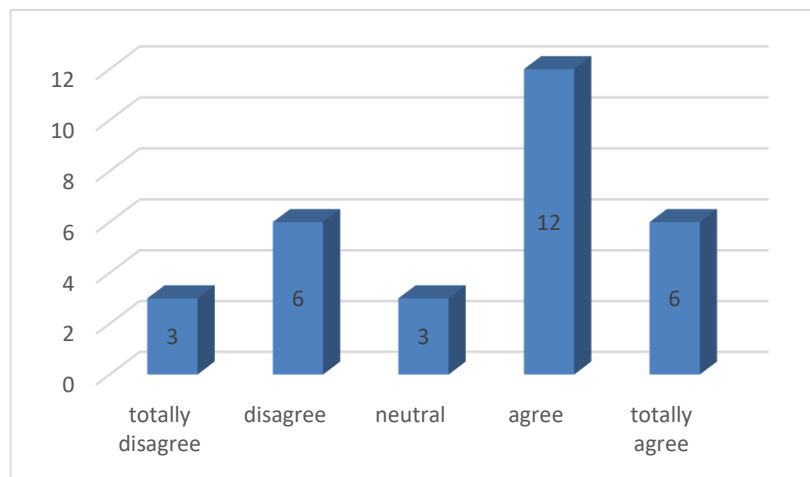


Figure 4: I do not feel shy during the debate and express my ideas freely

Eighteen students (60%) stated that they did not feel shy during these activities and shared their ideas freely. Therefore, it is seen that the majority have overcome the anxiety problem in this regard. This result shows that the debate session gives successful results.

One of the activities that students have difficulty with is speaking activities that they do in the classroom. For students, these activities are often difficult for various reasons. However, when debates are held, it can be said that students feel more comfortable due to the atmosphere they are in. To find out the validity of this, we asked the students the next question.

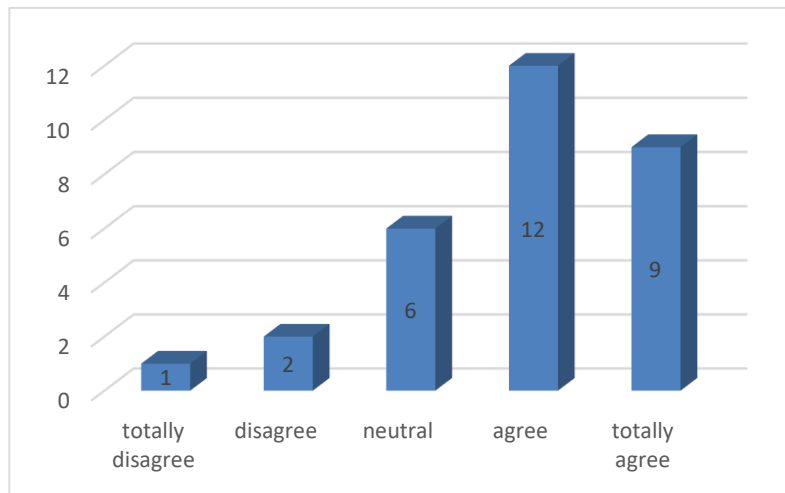


Figure 5: Debates are more interesting than in-class speaking activities

21 students (70%) expressed a positive opinion on this issue. According to these students, debates are more interesting than speaking activities in the classroom. Therefore, preferring debates in a difficult activity like speaking will give more positive results.

It can be said that the most important aspect of debates that prompted the students to talk was the controversy they contain in the discussion. To find out how much this applies to students, we asked the next question.

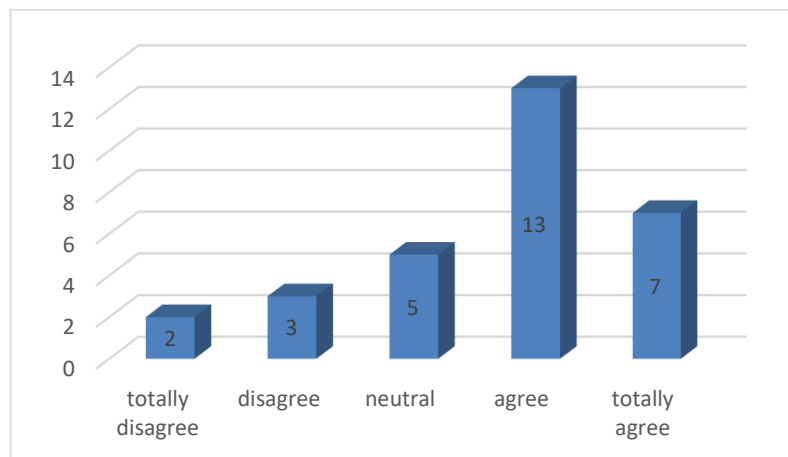


Figure 6: Controversy in debates urge me for more

20 students (66%) stated that the controversy encouraged them to do more. The fact that the majority expresses an opinion in this way shows how indispensable controversy is for debate. We also see here that the controversy motivates the students to a great extent. However, it is not possible to talk about the existence of such elements of controversy in classroom speaking activities.

There are a number of factors that prevent students from speaking in front of their friends. Especially the students who think that their friends will make fun of them in the classroom can be quite hesitant in this regard. However, in debate sessions, students forget this problem aspect and act very comfortably because they are completely immersed in the issue. This is a valid method for overcoming anxiety, which is an important problem in speaking. To find out how effective it was on students, we asked the next question.

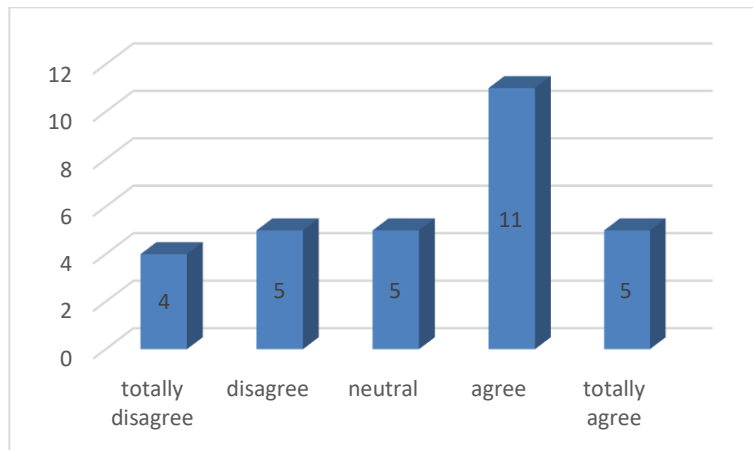


Figure 7: I feel free to speak to my friends in debates

16 of the students (53%) stated that they felt free to speak during the debate. However, we see that the number of people who think negatively has increased. This shows that this problem still continues among students.

In the next section, students' performance factors will be examined. In other words, it will be investigated how high their performance is before and during the debate. For this, students were first asked whether they practiced before the activity.

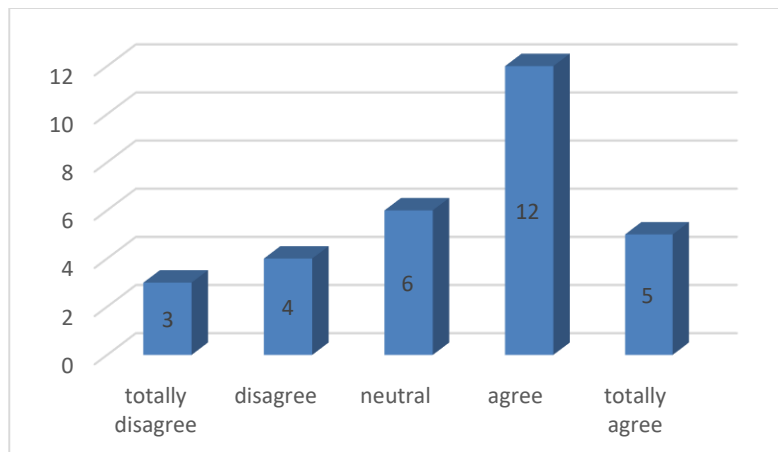


Figure 8: I do much practice before the debates

Considering the answers received, 17 students (56%) stated that they made serious preparations before the activity. On the other hand, it is possible to see that the number of students who gave negative answers increased here. One of the reasons for this may be that debate activities are held at frequent intervals and students lose interest from time to time. The use of gestures and facial expressions by the students while speaking and their constant eye contact with their other friends are generally important components of communication. To achieve this, students need to feel very comfortable during this time. We asked the next question to determine how well the students were able to achieve this.

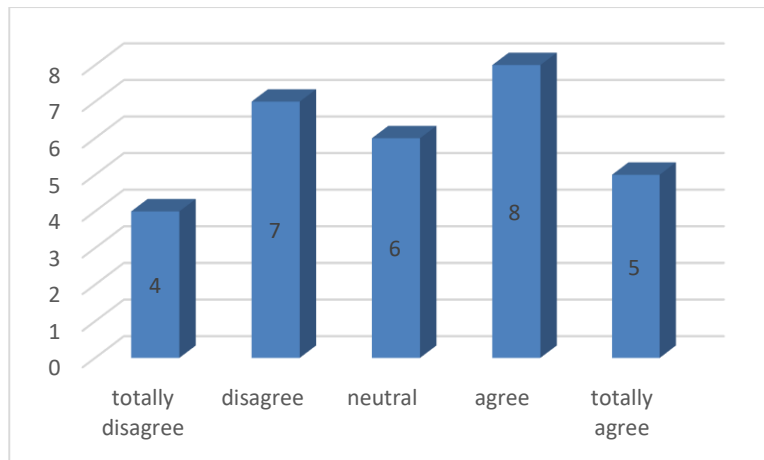


Figure 9: I can use my gestures and eye contact effectively in debates

Thirteen of the students (43%) stated that they were successful in this subject. Therefore, the majority stated that they are not good at eye contact while using gestures and facial expressions. One reason for this may be that students believed that they could perform better in this area. It is seen that the debate does not help some of the students enough on this issue. Preparing written documents for themselves can sometimes lead to negative results. In cases where students feel anxious, they can refer to the written document and read from there. This means that the expected yield from the debate will not be realized. To determine this situation, we asked the students the next question.

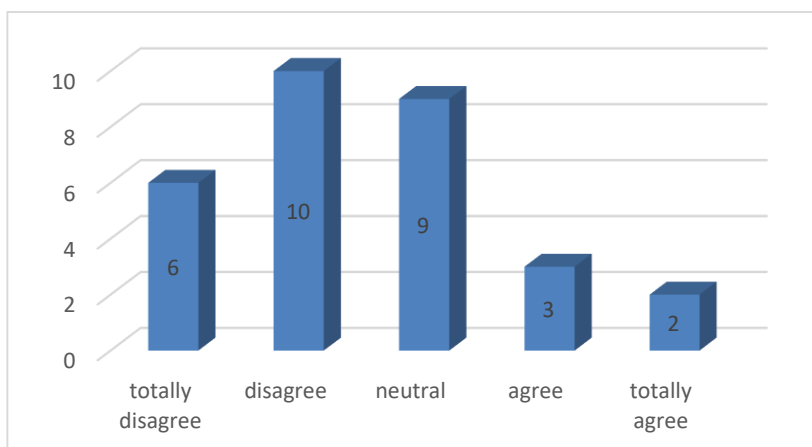


Figure 10: I keep to the written document in debates

Only 5 of the students (16%) stated that they looked at their notes. 16 people (53%) said that they did not look at their grades. The remarkable result here is that a significant part of the students (9 people) is neutral on this subject. We can say that these students look at their notes in some way, although not constantly. However, the fact that the majority of them do not look at their notes shows that the debate created a positive atmosphere for them.

5. Discussion

We can say that debate can significantly improve students' speaking abilities. The implementation of the strategies required for speaking in debate makes it attractive. In addition, the inclusion of the controversy is a very compelling reason for students. In addition, it also encourages students to think critically, as they do research beforehand and learn new things. During these preparations, students obtain information by referring to different sources and seek answers to opposing arguments by bringing them together. Debates have different aspects and positive effects for students. First of all, it contributes to the cognitive development of students. Likewise, they have important contributions to the positive development of students' affective aspects. That is, students who are especially shy can express their ideas more comfortably in a debate atmosphere. In addition, the controversy in the debate is an encouraging factor for students because it is attractive to students. Students often think that debate is more effective than in-class speaking activities. In addition, students say that they can express themselves more easily during the debate session.

Another important aspect of debates is to increase the performance of students. While preparing, students practice and repeat the subject a lot. It can be said that this contributes significantly to the speaking ability of the students. In addition, a significant part of the students stated that they use their gestures and mimics effectively. However, it is difficult to say that they are used effectively in classroom speaking activities. An important part of the students stated that they could speak without looking at the notes they wrote. This is a factor that increases students' self-esteem.

6. Conclusion

In general, debates are of a much more effective and engaging nature than in-class speaking activities. The effective use of this at appropriate times has a multifaceted positive effect on students. However, it should be noted that for an effective debate, students must have a good level of English. In order for students to make the most of it, they should be given an adequately challenging topic, and it should correspond to their levels of intellect. Moreover, the topic should be attractive enough for them. If they are done regularly, it will bring more advantages such that the students will feel more comfortable after every session of debates. However, excessive use of this activity may also cause some undesired results.

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