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Oleh Zatserkovnyi

State University of Trade and Economics

ORCID ID 0000-0003-3236-4418

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CRITICAL THINKING THROUGH ESP DEBATES: ENHANCING ARGUMENTATION SKILLS OF DIPLOMACY STUDENTS

This study explores the pedagogical value of structured debates integrated into English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instruction, specifically within the context of diplomacy education. Grounded in a quasi-experimental research design, the investigation involved 31 undergraduate students of International Relations at the State University of Trade and Economics, divided into an experimental group ($n = 17$) and a control group ($n = 14$). The study employed a mixed-methods approach, collecting quantitative and qualitative data to assess the impact of debate-based instruction on four key areas: academic performance, learner motivation, rhetorical proficiency, and engagement in diplomatically relevant communicative tasks. The experimental group followed a debate-enhanced ESP curriculum incorporating formal debate formats (Lincoln-Douglas and Parliamentary) and communicative techniques aligned with students' multiple intelligences and learning styles. Results indicated statistically significant improvements in all measured outcomes for the experimental group. Academic performance and rhetorical proficiency showed large effect sizes, while learner motivation also improved substantially compared to the control group. Qualitative data from journals, teacher observations, and peer evaluations further revealed enhanced engagement, confidence, and communicative authenticity in the experimental group's interaction with diplomatic themes. These findings align with prior research emphasising the role of debates in fostering critical thinking, collaborative learning, and active engagement. Furthermore, the study extends the discourse by demonstrating how debate-based ESP instruction, when personalised to students' cognitive styles, can serve as an effective model for vocational language education in diplomacy. The research contributes to the growing emphasis on skills-based, interactive methodologies in ESP and calls for broader implementation and longitudinal studies to assess long-term communicative competence in professional diplomatic settings.

Key words: *English for Specific Purposes (ESP), debate-based instruction, critical thinking, rhetorical proficiency, learner motivation, diplomacy education, differentiated learning, communicative tasks, vocational language training, instructional design.*

Introduction. In the realm of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), the imperative to develop students' critical thinking and argumentation skills has gained prominence, particularly in disciplines such as diplomacy, where discourse, persuasion, and strategic reasoning are central to professional success. Debates, as a pedagogical strategy, have emerged as a dynamic vehicle for fostering these competencies, offering a platform that stimulates intellectual engagement, enhances motivation, and nurtures transferable skills vital to diplomatic practice (Williams-Brown, 2015; Najafi et al., 2016). This study builds upon a precedent set in similar academic contexts where

debate-oriented instruction, particularly when integrated within flipped classroom models, has shown marked effectiveness in improving student outcomes in humanities education (Abernathy & Forestal, 2019; Walker, 2021). The integration of debates into ESP courses aligns with the broader educational objectives of cultivating learner autonomy, analytical aptitude, and self-efficacy – qualities indispensable for future diplomats. Empirical evidence suggests that such an approach is particularly efficacious when aligned with students' intelligence types and learning styles, ensuring a learner-centred environment conducive to meaningful participation and cognitive development; for instance, students in the experimental group (EG) who engaged in debate-based learning showed higher motivation scores across auditory ($M = 65.04$, $SD = 6.43$), visual ($M = 59.13$, $SD = 7.11$), and kinesthetic ($M = 54.37$, $SD = 6.98$) learning styles compared to the control group (CG), with significant p-values of .07, .01, and .01 respectively (Vakrilov et al., 2022; Şener & Çokçalışkan, 2018). Furthermore, the structured inclusion of pre-debate training and functional language practice has been identified as critical to maximising educational outcomes and student satisfaction (Doody & Condon, 2012; Onen, 2016). Drawing on the success of previous implementations within tertiary humanities education, this article explores the impact of structured debates within an ESP framework tailored to diplomacy students, emphasising the enhancement of critical thinking, rhetorical proficiency, and intercultural competence. By investigating students' academic performance, motivational dynamics, and perceptions of debate-related activities, this study aims to substantiate the value of debate-based ESP pedagogy as a transformative tool in diplomacy education.

Analysis of relevant research. A substantial body of research supports the effectiveness of debate as a pedagogical tool in developing critical thinking, argumentation, and communication skills, particularly in higher education settings. Williams-Brown (2015) demonstrated that structured in-class debates significantly improve students' ability to reason analytically and collaborate effectively, which are essential competencies for future diplomats. Najafi et al. (2016) emphasised the transformative impact of debate in promoting active learning and cognitive engagement, suggesting that such methods help students not only absorb content but also apply it contextually. The flipped classroom model, as discussed by Thakare (2021), complements debate-based instruction by enabling students to engage with theoretical material prior

to class, thus dedicating in-class time to interactive, skill-based practice. This synergy fosters deeper learning, especially when combined with activities tailored to diverse intelligence types and learning styles (Gentry et al., 2013). Abernathy and Forestal (2019) found that debates in political science courses enhance students' awareness of multiple perspectives, a skill directly relevant to diplomacy education. Furthermore, Kennedy (2009) highlighted how the dynamic and often adversarial nature of debates encourages critical examination of assumptions and the development of evidence-based reasoning. The findings of the experimental study outlined in "Using Debates to Teach: A Multi-skilling Pedagogy Often Neglected by University Academic Staff" (Onen, 2016) align with these conclusions: students exposed to a debate-driven ESP course reported improvements in motivation, academic performance, and public speaking confidence. The study also revealed statistically significant differences in learner motivation when instruction was aligned with auditory, visual, and kinesthetic preferences, thus confirming the pedagogical value of differentiated learning environments. Collectively, this research underlines the potential of debate-based ESP instruction to cultivate a nuanced skillset in diplomacy students, including strategic thinking, intercultural sensitivity, and rhetorical dexterity.

Aim of the Study. The aim of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of integrating debate-based instructional strategies within an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) framework to enhance critical thinking and argumentation skills among diplomacy students. Specifically, the study seeks to evaluate how such an approach, when aligned with students' diverse intelligence types and learning styles, influences their academic performance, learner motivation, rhetorical proficiency, and engagement in diplomatically relevant communicative tasks.

Research Methods. This study employed a quasi-experimental research design with an experimental group (EG) and a control group (CG) to evaluate the impact of debate-based instruction in an ESP course on students' academic performance, learner motivation, rhetorical proficiency, and engagement in diplomatically relevant communicative tasks. The independent variable was the implementation of structured debates aligned with students' intelligence types and learning styles, while the dependent variables included (1) academic performance, (2) learner motivation, (3) rhetorical proficiency, and (4) diplomatic communicative engagement. To ensure a comprehensive understanding of these

variables, the study relied on a mixed-methods approach, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data. Thirty-one second-year undergraduate students majoring in International Relations at the State University of Trade and Economics were purposively sampled and then randomly assigned to the EG (n = 17) and CG (n = 14), ensuring equivalence in academic ability and learning style distribution. At the outset, all students completed the Multiple Intelligences & Learning Style Test (available free via this link: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/tests/iq/multiple-intelligences-learning-style-test?msocid=20900f91db2a609c23f81c61da0b617e>) and an adapted version of Gardner's (2004) Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) (available via this link: <https://publish.uwo.ca/~gardner/docs/englishamtb.pdf>) to identify their dominant cognitive profiles and baseline motivation.

Over a ten-week intervention, the EG was instructed through a debate-enhanced ESP curriculum designed around themes central to diplomacy, such as international negotiation, conflict resolution, foreign policy, and global cooperation. Structured debate formats (Lincoln-Douglas and Parliamentary) were paired with communicative strategies like "Think-Pair-Share," "Philosophical Chairs," and "Devil's Advocate." Instruction was tailored to match students' intelligence types, ensuring differentiated engagement through verbal, interpersonal, and kinesthetic modes. In contrast, the CG followed a conventional ESP syllabus emphasising receptive language skills and academic writing, without debate-based or role-play elements. To measure academic performance, both groups undertook equivalent pre- and post-course assessments that included reading comprehension, vocabulary-in-context tasks, and analytical writing based on global issues. Learner motivation was assessed using the AMTB at two time points, capturing changes in integrative and instrumental motivation, confidence, and attitudes toward English as a tool for international communication. Rhetorical proficiency was evaluated through a rubric-based analysis of formal debates (EG) and traditional presentations (CG), focusing on the clarity, structure, evidence use, refutation, and persuasiveness of arguments. These activities were embedded in diplomatically themed simulations, ensuring contextual relevance. To explore engagement in diplomatically relevant communicative tasks, qualitative data were collected through teacher observations, peer evaluations, and student reflection journals. Students'

participation in debates and role-plays simulating real-world diplomatic contexts was observed, and post-activity feedback forms were used to capture their perceptions of communicative growth and task relevance. The qualitative data were analysed thematically, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for thematic analysis. Initial codes were generated from repeated readings of the data, which were then grouped into categories reflecting key engagement indicators, such as communicative confidence, task relevance, collaboration, and critical awareness. To enhance trustworthiness, peer debriefing sessions were conducted and reflective data were triangulated with observational notes and evaluation comments from peers and instructors.

All instruments were reviewed by a panel of ESP and diplomacy education experts to establish content validity and piloted with a previous cohort to ensure reliability. Inter-rater reliability for the rhetorical proficiency rubric exceeded 0.80 using Cohen's Kappa. Data collection followed a structured sequence: diagnostic testing (Week 1), instructional intervention (Weeks 2–9), and post-assessments and evaluations (Week 10). Quantitative data were processed using *Jamovi* statistical desktop software (Version 2.5.5) (available at <https://www.jamovi.org/>), with paired and independent samples t-tests used to analyse within- and between-group differences. All participants provided written informed consent prior to participation.

Results. This section presents the findings organised according to the four primary research variables. First, changes in academic performance between the experimental and control groups are examined through a comparative analysis of pre- and post-course assessment scores. Second, shifts in learner motivation are analysed based on responses to the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) administered at two intervals. Third, rhetorical proficiency is assessed using rubric-based performance scores derived from structured debates (in the experimental group) and presentations (in the control group). Finally, levels of student engagement in diplomatically relevant communicative tasks are explored through qualitative data obtained from peer evaluations, teacher observations, and student reflection journals.

Academic Performance

A paired samples t-test was conducted to compare pre- and post-intervention academic performance scores within each group. The experimental group (EG, $n = 17$) showed a statistically significant

improvement in post-test scores ($M = 84.67$, $SD = 5.84$) compared to their pre-test scores ($M = 76.53$, $SD = 6.21$), $t(16) = -103.93$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 25.21$, indicating a very large effect. The control group (CG, $n = 14$) also showed improvement from pre-test ($M = 77.21$, $SD = 5.79$) to post-test ($M = 79.00$, $SD = 5.96$), which was statistically significant, $t(13) = -46.59$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 12.45$, though with a smaller gain. An independent samples t-test comparing post-test scores between groups revealed a significant difference favouring the EG, $t(29) = 3.04$, $p = .005$, Cohen's $d = 0.96$, suggesting that debate-based instruction had a substantially stronger impact on academic performance compared to traditional methods. These differences are visually depicted in the bar chart on Academic Performance Pre- and Post-Test Scores (see Figure 1) that follow, highlighting the notable gains observed in the experimental group.

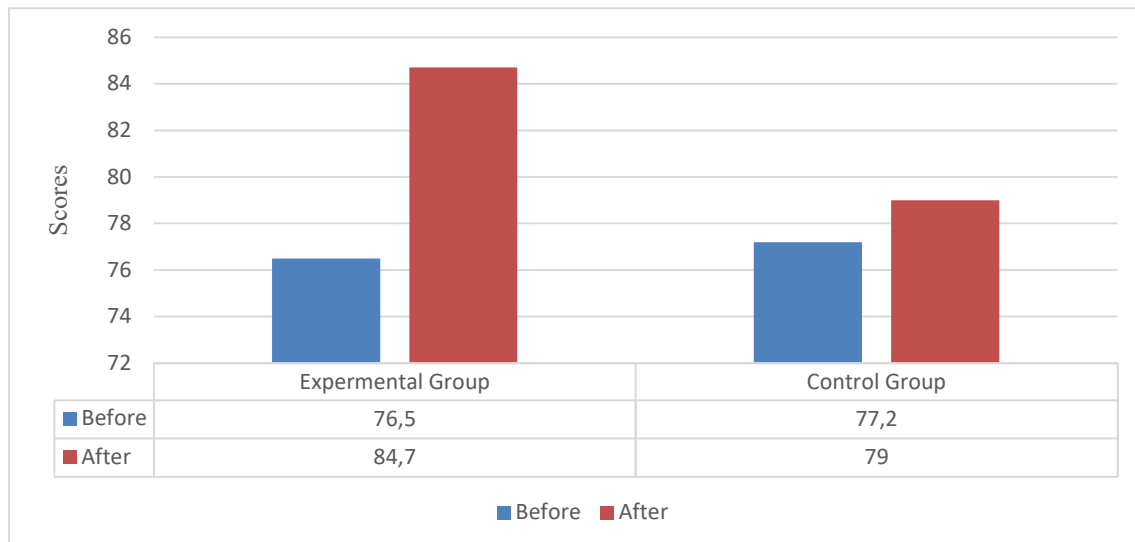


Figure 1. Academic Performance Pre- and Post-Test Scores Learner Motivation

Motivation was measured using the AMTB, scored on a 100-point scale across four domains. In the experimental group (EG, $n = 17$), mean motivation scores increased significantly from 66.87 ($SD = 8.44$) to 78.13 ($SD = 6.91$), $t(16) = -31.61$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 7.90$. The control group (CG, $n = 14$) also showed a statistically significant increase from 67.33 ($SD = 7.90$) to 69.27 ($SD = 8.08$), $t(13) = -47.62$, $p < .001$, $d = 12.73$; however, the effect size may be inflated due to small variance and sample size. An independent samples t-test comparing post-course motivation scores between groups revealed a statistically significant difference in favour of the EG, $t(29) = 3.23$, $p = .003$, Cohen's $d = 1.19$ (see Table 1), indicating that the debate-based instruction substantially

enhanced students' motivation to engage in English learning for diplomatic purposes.

Table 1

Motivation T-Test Summary Measured Before and After the Intervention Using the AMTB

Comparison	<i>M</i> , Pre	<i>SD</i> , Pre	<i>M</i> , Post	<i>SD</i> , Post	<i>t</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
EG, Pre vs Post	66.87	8.44	78.13	6.91	-31.612	7.903082
CG, Pre vs Post	67.33	7.90	69.27	8.08	-47.616	12.726075
EG vs CG Post	78.13	6.91	69.27	8.08	3.233	1.185122

Note. $p < .001$ for EG and CG pre-post comparisons; $p = .003$ for the post-test comparison between groups.

Rhetorical Proficiency

Students' rhetorical proficiency was assessed via a 30-point rubric focusing on clarity, logical structure, use of evidence, refutation, and persuasive language. The experimental group (EG, $n = 17$) demonstrated a significantly higher mean score of 25.73 ($SD = 2.41$) on final debates compared to the control group (CG, $n = 14$), which scored a mean of 20.86 ($SD = 2.88$) on final presentations. An independent samples t-test confirmed that this difference was statistically significant, $t(29) = 5.24$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.85$, indicating a large effect size. These results are summarised in the Rhetorical Proficiency T-Test Summary table (see Table 2). The EG exhibited particular strength in argument structuring and rebuttal, with teacher notes highlighting the frequent and accurate use of debate-specific functional language. These results indicate that structured debates significantly enhance rhetorical and critical thinking skills more effectively than traditional ESP formats.

Table 2

Rhetorical Proficiency T-Test Summary

Comparison	<i>M</i> (EG)	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i> (CG)	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
EG vs CG	25.73	2.41	20.86	2.88	5.241261	0.000014	1.845643

Engagement in Diplomatic Communicative Tasks

Thematic analysis of qualitative data revealed consistent engagement among EG participants in diplomatically relevant communicative tasks. Three dominant themes emerged: (1) increased communicative confidence, where students reported greater comfort expressing opinions in English; (2) situational authenticity, with students highlighting the realism of debate

simulations in mirroring diplomatic discourse; and (3) collaborative engagement, with frequent mentions of learning through peer interaction. One student journal stated, “It felt like being in a real negotiation,” while a peer evaluation noted, “My partner responded with calm but firm rebuttals, like a diplomat.” Teacher observations further confirmed that EG students asked more clarification questions, used more persuasive discourse markers, and demonstrated improved intercultural sensitivity over time. In contrast, CG reflections indicated lower levels of task immersion and less frequent use of diplomatic register.

The findings of this study align with a growing body of research that supports the integration of debate as an instructional strategy in language learning and critical thinking development. Similar to Williams-Brown (2015), this study found that structured debates significantly enhance students’ analytical and rhetorical skills, particularly in contexts requiring persuasive communication and evidence-based reasoning. The statistically significant gains in rhetorical proficiency and academic performance in the experimental group confirm Kennedy’s (2009) assertion that debates promote active learning and cognitive engagement in higher education. Additionally, the marked improvement in learner motivation observed in our study corroborates the work of Najafi et al. (2016), who argued that debate fosters a dynamic and motivating classroom environment conducive to learner autonomy and participation. This study further extends existing literature by demonstrating that aligning debate activities with students’ intelligence types and learning styles – building on Gardner’s (2004) motivation framework and Şener & Çokçalışkan (2018) insights into differentiated instruction – amplifies the pedagogical benefits. Specifically, our findings contribute new empirical evidence to the underexplored intersection of debate pedagogy and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in diplomacy education. By embedding debates in diplomatically themed communicative tasks, our research not only confirms the effectiveness of debate in general education but also highlights its value in cultivating diplomatic discourse competencies. Thus, this study bridges the gap between debate-oriented instruction and the vocational training needs of future diplomats, suggesting a replicable model for similar educational contexts.

Conclusions. This study provides compelling evidence for the effectiveness of integrating structured debates into ESP instruction for diplomacy students. Across all measured variables – academic performance, learner motivation, rhetorical proficiency, and engagement

in diplomatic communicative tasks – the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group. The large effect sizes observed in academic and rhetorical outcomes suggest that debate-based instruction not only enhances language acquisition but also fosters critical skills essential for diplomatic contexts. In particular, students exposed to debate techniques demonstrated superior argumentation, persuasive communication, and confidence in real-world diplomatic simulations. The notable increase in learner motivation further underscores the pedagogical power of tailoring instruction to students' intelligence types and learning styles, confirming the utility of differentiated, student-centred approaches. By embedding debate activities into authentic communicative scenarios relevant to diplomacy, this study extends current ESP research and fills a gap in the literature by offering a scalable instructional model that promotes both linguistic and professional competence. These findings contribute to the ongoing shift in language education towards interactive, skills-based learning and present a strong case for the inclusion of debates in ESP curricula aimed at training future diplomats. Further research is recommended to explore the long-term impact of debate-based instruction on students' professional communication skills in real diplomatic settings and to examine its applicability across broader ESP contexts and cultural environments.

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SUMMARY

Зацерковний Олег. Критичне мислення через включення дебатів у англійську за професійним спрямуванням: розвиток навичок аргументації у майбутніх дипломатів.

Метою статті є дослідження ефективності використання дебатів у курсі англійської мови за професійним спрямуванням (ESP) для розвитку критичного мислення та аргументаційних навичок у студентів спеціальності «Міжнародні відносини». У роботі використано квазіекспериментальний дизайн із залученням контрольної та експериментальної груп студентів ($n = 31$) та застосовано змішану методологію, що поєднує кількісні (тестування, опитування) і якісні (спостереження, щоденники, самооцінки) методи збору даних. Результати дослідження показали суттєве зростання академічної успішності, мотивації до навчання, риторичних навичок та комунікативної активності у студентів, які брали участь у дебатах. Практичне значення дослідження полягає у можливості впровадження дебатно-орієнтованих методик у курси ESP для майбутніх дипломатів. У висновках обґрунтовано доцільність диференційованого підходу до навчання з урахуванням типів інтелекту студентів. Перспективою подальших наукових розвідок є вивчення довгострокового впливу дебатів на професійну комунікативну компетентність випускників у реальних дипломатичних практиках.

Ключові слова: дебати, критичне мислення, англійська за професійним спрямуванням (ESP), риторичні навички, аргументація, дипломатія, мотивація, диференційоване навчання, комунікативна компетентність.