STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE DEBATE ACTIVITY IN GRADE 9 INTENSIVE ENGLISH PROGRAM

Nguyen Hoang Xuan Chieu[1]

Abstract: This primary research focuses on students' perceptions on the implementation of debate activity in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom and their improvements in their teamwork skills and speaking skills so as to determine the effectiveness of implementing debate as an additional activity in the intensive English program. The research involved 84 participants in two grade-9 Intensive English classes at one public secondary school in Thu Duc City (Ho Chi Minh City). The research was conducted using the mixed-method approach. A survey, class observations and an open-ended question in the questionnaire were used to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. The findings of the study indicated that the majority of participants found the debate activity enjoyable to take part in and debating skills are considered useful for their future. In addition, the participants witnessed a number of improvements in their teamwork skills and speaking skills. Some of the participants believed that more teenager-relatable topics should be introduced in the debate activity. Teachers should provide students with enough input such as topic-related knowledge, vocabulary and useful expressions before the actual debate, and encourage them to reflect on their performance and comment on their peers' performances.

Keywords: debate, arguments, intensive English, perceptions

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[1]Ho Chi Minh City University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Email: xuanchieu0703@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Debating is one of the many communicative activities which have been designed and held in many classrooms in different contexts and settings because this activity is widely believed to be a platform in which learners can both practicetheir language skills and other skills, from lower-order thinking to higher-order thinking skills (Stewart & Pleisch, 1998; Bellon, 2000; Goodwin, 2003; Omelicheva, 2007). Teamwork skill, in addition, is one of the skills that can be greatly enhanced by the implementation of debating in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom (Stewart & Pleisch, 1998). However, how Vietnamese learners in secondary schools think about debate as a classroom activity has not yet been explored. Moreover, Vietnamese secondary learners have a few chances of practicing their speaking skills and teamwork skills, which can be practiced and enhanced through their participation in the debate activity. This study, hence, focuses on exploring the perceptions of learners towards the implementation of debating in an EFL classroom, as well as their teamwork skills and oral performance during the debate.

2. Literature review

2.1. The importance of argumentation and debating

Logic is believed to be closely related to the soundness of the claims made in an argument so as to provide the solidity of the grounds on which the debater is standing and the firmness of the backing he provides for those claims. In other words, the merits of a claim depend on the merits of the argument which could be produced in its support (Toulmin, 1958). This is the foundation of debating.

According to Freeley (2009), debate is the process of inquiry and advocacy, a way of arriving at a reasoned judgment on a proposition to reach a decision in their minds. Regarding the gains debaters can have from a debate, Johnson (2009) claimed that critical thinking skills can be greatly achieved through the act of debating. Meanwhile,

Sanonguthai (2011) stated that the debaters are bound to develop "a strategy of control" by focusing on determining, designing and directing what happens in the round, attempting to provide the soundest and firmest backing for their argument. Moreover, debates are usually concerned with controversial topics and require argumentative reasoning, which can contribute to the analytical process of both the depth and the breadth of the arguments. Therefore, it is widely agreed that the practice of argumentation and debating can have a positive impact on the debaters, which poses promising potential of being introduced and implemented in educational contexts.

2.2. Debate Activity in EFL Classrooms

Debate is not an unfamiliar term as its emergence in ELT has been witnessed for a relatively long time, especially along with the advent of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach. It is believed to contribute to the improvement of all four language skills (reading, listening, writing, speaking). According to Stewart and Pleisch (1998), although speaking skill is naturally the skill utilized most, students are essentially competent at listening, note-taking and writing. Debate's significant role in assisting the mastery of speaking skills, as well as listening and reading skills, has been proven and investigated with a wide scope, applied in many EFL settings (Othman & Murad, 2015).

Besides language skills, learners' critical thinking is believed to be developed thanks to the debate activity. Bellon (2000) described a debate activity as a tool to not only teach students to adopt multiple perspectives, which is considered one of the most important problem solving skills, but also help students develop content mastery, as well as argumentation and communication skills. In addition to developing an individual's critical thinking and problem solving skills, debate is believed to allow students to actively participate in their learning and requires the use of skills that are not easily developed in a traditional

didactic context (Oros, 2007). Learners develop all types of skills in a debate activity not only through their individual preparation and performance, but also because of a variety of small group tasks in which learners benefit from the inputs of their group mates. In a study conducted by Goodwin (2003), learners took part in different group tasks and had their views challenged and improved by listening to others' points of view. These became the drive that drew more and more learners' attention into the subject or the course, enhancing their learning experience.

With regards to learners' acquisition of a second language, a debate activity can be a helpful tool to engage learners cognitively and linguistically (Krieger, 2005) because learners are involved in a number of speaking practices and verbal discussions with their classmates, which is believed to enhance their listening, reading and writing skills. In a debate activity, learners are required to carry out research on the topic, take notes of important points for the discussions and write their arguments in advance. Moreover, they have to use their skimming, scanning techniques and critical reading skills in order to select the strongest evidence, making the soundest argument. In a debate, each debater needs to pay attention to the other team's arguments by listening carefully so as to prepare for their rebuttals. Thus, not only is the debate activity considered to help learners practice thinking more critically, but it also provides learners with more access to linguistic input and output, promoting effective language learning (Bellon, 2000; Kennedy, 2009). In other words, a high level of discourse skills is applied in a debate activity, making it a complicated type of communicative interaction (Lubetsky et al., 1999).

2.3. Research questions

Of the scarce publications on debating for ESL/EFL students, many focus on the format and procedures of the debate event (Lachowski & Plautz, 1994) or how the debate activity is implemented in tertiary-levelclassrooms and institutions. Consequently, there is very

little material available for teaching debate to foreign language learners (Le, 1995; Lubetsky, 2005), and a total lack of the related literature in the context of Vietnamese teaching and learning at the secondary level. Hence, this study was conducted with a view to exploring the perceptions of ninth graders in a public secondary school toward a debate activity. The research questions of this study are as followed:

- *What are grade 9 students' perceptions of the debate activity, their teamwork skills and oral performance in the debate activity in the Intensive English Program?*

- *What do the students think can improve the debate activity in the future?*

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

So as to explore learners' affection, cognition and behavior toward the debate activity, mixed-methods design was employed. Quantitative data were collected for analysis and class observations, along with an open-ended question at the end of the questionnaire that was designed in order to collect qualitative data. This design is appropriate as it can provide more insight into the matter of inquiry (Creswell, 2001). While quantitative data yielded from the questionnairecan be statistically analyzed, qualitative data coming from class observations and the open-ended question at the end of the questionnaire can offer a number of different perspectives on the topic.

In order to investigate the perceptions of learners of an activity, the researcher decides on the operationalization of the components of perceptions. According to McLeod (2018), there are three components together constituting the operationalization of the term "attitude", namely, Affection, Cognition and Behavior. In this current study, the researcher also adopts this operationalization of the term "attitude" for

the key term "perceptions" because to formulate a complete perception of something, learners have emotions or feelings towards the target (Affection), opinions, beliefs and knowledge about the target (Cognition) and last but not least, a set of reactions and actions toward the target (Behavior). Specifically, learners' oral performance in the debate activity and their teamwork skills were observed and the main focus of the investigation. So as to observe and investigate learners' perceptions of their own oral performance in the activity, a scoring rubric was created based on IELTS Band Descriptors of the Speaking skill, issued by the International English Language Testing System. The Speaking band descriptors are a set of assessment criteria used by the examiners to assess an EFL candidate's speaking performance, including four categories across nine bands, namely, Fluency and Coherence, Lexical resource, Grammatical range and Accuracy and Pronunciation. In addition, paralinguistic features such as appropriate eye-contact, facial expressions, body language and tone of voice are believed to affect the flow of conversation (Thornbury & Slade, 2006), and in this specific activity, affect the extent to which an argument can be delivered convincingly. For this study, the category Tone and Body language was added into the scoring rubric because of the aforementioned reason. Regarding the investigation of the students' teamwork skills, how they cooperated in the preparation process and during the official debates were the focus (see Figure 1).
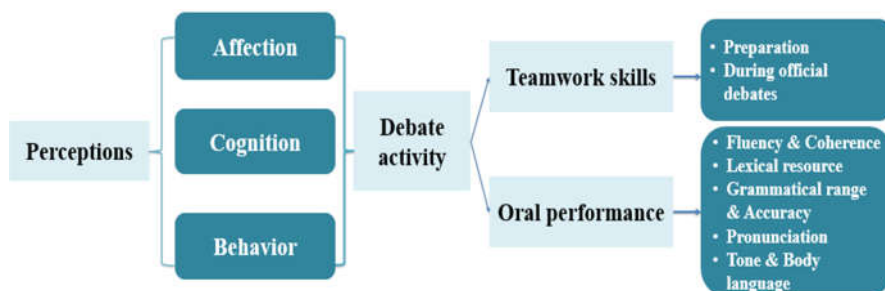

Figure 1: The investigation of learners' perception of the debate activity, their teamwork skills and oral performance

3.2. Participants

There were in total 84 students in grade 9 of a public secondary school in Thu Duc city participating in this study. These students have been students in the IntensiveEnglish program for four years and their level of proficiency ranges from lower-intermediate to intermediate.

Before conducting the research, the researcher asked for permission from the school management board and the Principal approved that the research was to be conducted, as long as the treatment would directly provide students with knowledge required for the end term exams in the Intensive English Program, following strictly the themes of the chapters in the currently in-use ELT textbook. Regarding the students, they were informed of the purpose for which their data were being collected and confidentiality was ensured. Students' personal identifiabledata was anonymized so that it cannot be linked to other data by other people. A coding system was used in order to assign participants' responses with numbers. Before the practice sessions, the researcher informed the students about the study's aims, procedures and potential benefits or harms in Vietnamese. The potential harms were the feeling of anxiety or pressure because of the competitiveness among groups in the debate activity.

3.3. Research Tools

Regarding the questionnaire, the researcher wanted to collect comparable data from a large group of participants using close-ended questions, the answers to which can be scored and measured for interpretation. The questionnaire adopted the four-point Likert scale so as to avoid central tendency when learners may be undecided or refuse to choose extreme responses. As all the questions aimed to investigate learners' opinion towards a statement, the responses are written as (1) Strongly agree, (2) Agree, (3) Disagree and (4) Strongly disagree. As the questionnaires aim to investigate learners' perceptions of the debate activity and its possible effects on their speaking skills and

teamwork skills, they consist of four main parts. The first part collects data about their perceptions towards the debate activity. The second part is about the students' perceptions of their teamwork skills during the process of preparing and debating, the third part collects data about their cognitive and behavioral perceptions of their oral performance and the fourth about their suggestions for future debate activities (see Appendix A).

In terms of the class observations during the official debates, videos of participants taking part in the debate activity were recorded with a camera and a tablet. Before recording the videos of each debate, the researcher explained the purpose of recording their debates, which is as a tool for observation for the study only. All of the students agreed that their debates would be recorded after the researcher guaranteed that confidentiality would be maintained throughout the time of the study and all of the videos would not be accessed to, shared or used by any other people except the researcher and the participants themselves. Each debate lasted from 20 minutes to a maximum of 25 minutes. The teacher took notes of the students' arguments and utterances that need addressing later in another class session using an observation form.

3.4. Data collection and analysis

Before having official debates, the teacher provided the learners with a number of preparatory sessions to introduce the nature and features of a debate and familiarize them with the debate format. Moreover, two practice sessions were organized so as to give the participants opportunities to practice in groups.

The questionnaire was distributed in the last week of the activity and when all the questionnaires were filled out, they were collected immediately and the mean score of each questionnaire item was calculated to find out whether learners agree or disagree with each statement. The standard deviation of each item was also calculated to determine how dispersed their answers were. Anonymity was

maintained as the students were not required to provide their names in the questionnaires. In the student observation form, each student was given a code starting from S1 for the first student to S84 for the eighty-fourth student. For the open-ended question, there were 55 students giving the answers, so their answers were coded from S1 to S55 with the order different from that of the questionnaire.

With regards to the answers to the open-ended question at the end of the questionnaire, all answers were retyped into a Word file to extract themes. The researcher adopted the new application of unfolding matrix in framing qualitative data (Padilla, 1996) introduced by Nguyen (2018). The technique of unfolding matrix helps the researcher to avoid missing important data. Moreover, because the number of answers to the open-ended question was relatively large (55 samples), it is feasible that this set of qualitative data is framed using this technique.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Students' affection towards the debate activity

Table 1 illustrates the affection of the participants toward the debate activity. Overall, the majority of the participants agreed that they were interested in the debate activity and practice sessions and they also enjoyed sharing their opinions upon a matter. It is evident that the standard deviation is relatively low, which means that the responses are not scattered, but rather clumping up towards a specific mean and the data were statistically significant. Most of the students enjoyed taking part in debate practice sessions, and this statement also had the highest mean of 3.52, followed by the statement about their affection toward joining the debate activity, at 3.12. This was consistent with what the researcher observed during the practice sessions as almost all students paid attention to the instruction, although very few of them did not maintain full attention. Moreover,

when the students were divided into groups (first, pairs of two, then groups of four, six and twenty people) to debate against the other team, they were all excited and competitive. When observing students discussing in their pairs (before they were combined into larger groups), the researcher found out that a large number of students actively expressed their opinions upon the motion. These results corroborate the findings from the study conducted by Goodwin (2003), which indicate that many students felt happy when participating in debate exercises, although a few had anxiety because of the competitiveness.

Table 1: Students' affection towards the debate activity

	Students' affection towards the debate activity			
	Like participating in the debate activity	Like presenting opinions and arguments	Be open to opposite opinions	Like participating in debate practice sessions
Strongly agree	18	8	4	52
	21.4%	9.5%	4.8%	61.9%
Agree	60	52	60	25
	71.4%	61.9%	71.4%	29.8%
Disagree	4	18	16	6
	4.8%	21.4%	19%	7.1%
Strongly disagree	2	6	4	1
	2.4%	7.1%	4.8%	1.2%
Means	3.12	2.74	2.76	3.52
Std. dev.	0.59	0.73	0.61	0.69

4.2. Students' cognition toward the debate activity

Regarding what the students thought of the debate activity, the students were asked to show whether they agreed with the statements

about their view on the importance of debating and other related sub-activities in preparation for the debate activity. Table 2, Table 3 and Table 4 illustrate the students' cognition towards the debate activity. The majority of the students deemed the debate practice sessions useful, with the highest mean of 3.48, while the mean of the statement about commenting on the other teams' debates viewed useful only yielded 2.88; however, the dispersion is the lowest, at 0.39.

Table 2: Students' cognition towards the debate activity

	Students' cognition towards the debate activity			
	Think the debate practice sessions are useful	**Ideas prepared for the debate useful for other educational activities**	**Watching other teams' debates is useful**	**Commenting on other teams' debates is useful**
Strongly agree	41	42	46	2
	48.8%	50%	54.8%	2.4%
Agree	42	26	32	70
	50%	31%	38.1%	83.3%
Disagree	1	15	5	12
	1.2%	17.9%	6%	14.3%
Strongly disagree	0	1	1	0
	0%	1.2%	1.2%	0%
Means	3.48	3.30	3.46	2.88
Std. dev.	0.53	0.80	0.67	0.39

Most interestingly, most of the students agreed that what they learnt while researching information in preparation for the debate activity can be useful for other academic activities. This is explained in the study by Goodwin (2003) in which the students claimed that they were exposed to different perspectives, so it seemed evident that they could connect to the content of the course more easily and at a deeper level.

Table 3: Students' cognition towards the debate activity (cont.)

	Students' cognition towards the debate activity				
	Know how to define key words in the motion	Can construct an argument using opinion-explanation-example-conclusion	Can refute the opposite team's points	Can summarize the points in the argument	Can express personal opinion by answering follow-up questions
Strongly agree	16	15	8	2	16
	19%	17.9%	9.5%	2.4%	19%
Agree	50	57	60	61	56
	59.5%	67.9%	71.4%	72.6%	66.7%
Disagree	16	11	14	18	9
	19%	13.1%	16.7%	21.4%	10.7%
Strongly disagree	2	1	2	3	3
	2.4%	1.2%	2.4%	3.6%	3.6%
Means	2.95	3.02	2.88	2.74	3.01
Std. dev.	0.69	0.60	0.59	0.56	0.67

In order to gain a deeper insight into what students thought of what they were able to do after the debate practice sessions, table 4 demonstrates students' cognition towards the debate activity regarding specifically the skills and knowledge they were supposed to have after three sessions of input.

Table 4: Students' cognition towards the debate activity (cont.)

	Students' cognition towards the debate activity			
	Think debate is important to their further education	**Help construct convincing arguments**	**Look at an issue from different perspectives**	**Model script for each speaker is useful**
Strongly agree	78	74	70	4
	92.9%	88.1%	83.3%	4.8%
Agree	2	6	10	60
	2.4%	7.1%	11.9%	71.4%
Disagree	4	3	4	12
	4.8%	3.6%	4.8%	14.3%
Strongly disagree	0	1	0	8
	0%	1.2%	0%	9.5%
Means	3.88	3.82	3.79	2.71
Std. dev.	0.45	0.54	0.52	0.70

It is shown in Table 4 that all statements enjoyed a relatively low standard deviation. Most of the students agreed that they were able to construct an argument following opinion–explanation–example–conclusion and nearly all of them thought that thanks to the debate activity, they knew how to construct convincing arguments. These were confirmed by the observation of individual students in their official debate activity. Because of having sufficient time for preparation and a number of resources suggested by the teacher, most of the students managed to deliver a meaningful argument, along with examples taken from reliable news or online sources. Moreover, the students were able to counter the argument from the opposite team, although some students did not succeed in expressing opposite opinions. These findings corroborate with those in the study carried out by Davidson (1995), in which learners showed improvement in

their abilities to voice and support their opinions and point out the weaknesses in others' arguments.

Table 5: Students' cognition towards the debate activity (cont.)

	Students' cognition towards the debate activity			
	Think debate is important to their further education	**Help construct convincing arguments**	**Look at an issue from different perspectives**	**Model script for each speaker is useful**
Strongly agree	78	74	70	4
	92.9%	88.1%	83.3%	4.8%
Agree	2	6	10	60
	2.4%	7.1%	11.9%	71.4%
Disagree	4	3	4	12
	4.8%	3.6%	4.8%	14.3%
Strongly disagree	0	1	0	8
	0%	1.2%	0%	9.5%
Means	3.88	3.82	3.79	2.71
Std. dev.	0.45	0.54	0.52	0.70

It can be seen from Table 5 that the statement that had the lowest mean (2.71) was the one regarding the usefulness of the speaker turn template that was provided by the teacher before the official debate activity. The statement about the importance of debating to the students' further education had the highest mean of 3.88 because the students believed that in the future, they would be required to argue for their opinions and their judgments would be challenged, and therefore, they must be able to construct a good argument to present their explanations.

4.3. Students' behavior toward the debate activity

Table 6 illustrates students' behavior towardsthe debate activity including how they prepared for the debate activity or how they participated in the debate activity of their own and other peers. It is evident that approximately a quarter and even a third of all

participantsclaimed that they did not watch debate videos while preparing the official debate activity. A possible reason can be that learning about the format and debate techniques from videos without the teacher's instructions and explanations seems to be difficult. One interesting finding here is the highest mean of 3.56 recorded for the statement about the usefulness of the ideas prepared for the debate activity than used in a follow-up writing activity. Because there was an argumentative essay activity following the debate activity and this writing genre is similar to the way of constructing an argument in debate, it seems that the students found it easy to complete the writing task using the ideas and knowledge about constructing a convincing argument obtained from the debate activity. This finding prompts further research into the correlational relationship between the debate activity and argumentative essay writing.

Table 6: Students' behavior towards the debate activity

	Students' behavior towards the debate activity			
	Watch debate videos to learn about the format	Watch debate videos to learn how to construct an argument	Use ideas in the debate for the writing activity	Enthusiastically participate in the debate
Strongly agree	11	8	66	14
	13.1%	9.5%	78.6%	16.7%
Agree	49	50	2	40
	58.3%	59.5%	2.4%	47.6%
Disagree	20	25	13	22
	23.8%	29.8%	15.5%	26.2%
Strongly disagree	2	1	3	8
	2.4%	1.2%	3.6%	9.5%
Means	2.77	2.77	3.56	2.71
Std. dev.	0.67	0.63	0.88	0.86

4.4. Students' cognition and behavior towards teamwork skills in the debate activity

Regarding students' cognition towards teamwork skills, the majority of the students discussed with teammates about the points for

the argument, holding the higher mean of 3.12. These findings are similar to those found in the study conducted by Stewart and Pleisch (1998). The students thought that they learnt to work with classmates and that increased their self-esteem because cooperation and teamwork were greatly encouraged during the debate activity. However, approximately a quarter of the students disagreed that their skills were improved thanks to the debate activity. Moreover, nearly a third of the students believed that the debate activity did not make group work a more pleasant experience. Students' cognition and behavior towards teamwork skills in the debate activity are shown in Table 7.

Table 7: Students' cognition and behavior towards teamwork skills in the debate activity

	Students' cognition towards teamwork skills in the debate activity		Students' behavior towards teamwork skills in the debate activity		
	Help improve teamwork skills	Discuss with teammates whether each point is convincing enough	Share with teammates useful information about the debate topic	Know their roles and teammates' roles in the debate	Make group work more enjoyable
Strongly agree	11	18	8	4	8
	13.1%	21.4%	9.5%	4.8%	9.5%
Agree	49	60	52	60	50
	58.3%	71.4%	61.9%	71.4%	59.5%
Disagree	20	4	18	16	25
	23.8%	4.8%	21.4%	19%	29.8%
Strongly disagree	2	2	6	4	1
	2.4%	2.4%	7.1%	4.8%	1.2%
Means	2.77	3.12	2.74	2.76	2.77
Std. dev.	0.67	0.59	0.73	0.61	0.63

4.5. Students' perceptions of their oral performance in the debate activity

With regards to students' perceptions of their oral performance, 81% of the students use a wide range of vocabulary and connective devices, and this is confirmed in student observation results. According to the Student Observation Evaluation Form (see Appendix B), indicator coded P04 has the highest mean of 3.25, which means that the majority of students had prepared for all the topics properly and attempted to utilize a variety of uncommon words effectively. For example, one student (S3) used words or collocations such as *discrimination*, *bias* and *mentally affected* in the speech about the use of technology in education. This corroborates the findings from the study carried out by Lubetsky, LeBeau and Harrington (1999), in which students thought high levels of discourse skills were applied in a debate activity. This is also similar to what Lee (2005) found in an experimental design study. Students in the experimental group with six sessions of classroom debate progressed significantly in terms of public speaking skills, communication skills and many other skills. The statement that showed contrary findings is the one about the ability to speak at length in the debate activity. For each turn, each speaker was required to speak for at least two minutes, and while only two-thirds of the students think that they can speak at length, the observation indicates that only approximately 18% of the students did not manage to speak continuously for two minutes.

4.6. Students' suggestions for future debate activities

In order to answer the second research question about what students think can improve the debate activity in the future, the researcher used one open-ended question at the end of the questionnaire. There were in total three main themes generated from all the answers of the students, namely, Debate Format and Topics, Preparation and Supporting Resources, and Teamwork.

For the first theme Debate Format and Topics, most of the students believed that the time for each speaker's turn should be

longer than two minutes because they wished to speak at a slower pace and add more examples. Moreover, students thought that their debates should be recorded and posted onto some social media sites so that other people can view and leave some comments to share their opinions. About the number of debaters in one team, students thought that there should be fewer than five people on each team. With regards to the topics, although the topics were taken from the units in the in-use textbook so that the learning outcomes related to topic knowledge would be met, the students believed that the motions could be more interesting and relevant to teenagers.

> *"Debate videos can be posted on social media sites such as Facebook so that other friends from other classes can also watch and comment." (S44F08)*

> *"A speaker should have a bit more time to speak. The rules of the debate should be stricter because the audience can be quite noisy and that affects the debaters a lot." (S50F14)*

> *"A team should include three people only. Three people can take turns to debate and answer the questions". (S49F13)*

> *"I think we can debate and present our ideas on the board. I wish we could bring some real aliases into the classroom to illustrate our points (e.g., clothing, objects ...)" (S8F04)*

> *"I think there should be more meaningful topics such as "Is expectation motivation or pressure?" or "Are pageant contests necessary?" and more LGBTQ-related topics." (S48F09)*

For the second theme Preparation and Supporting Resources, some students wished that instead of showing them videos about debating, the teacher could organize some games or exciting activities so that they could actively participate in and become familiar with concepts and techniques of debate. Moreover, there are contrary ideas about the amount of time allowed for preparation. While some students thought that a number of their peers would need more time to

prepare for their speech, some others believed that the debate would become more exciting if the debaters were not given a long period of time for preparation.

"There should be more games related to debate so we can be more familiar with the activity and learn more about the concepts related to debate." (S1P01)

"The teacher should provide us with more videos and articles about the topics." (S15P02)

"We need more time to prepare because it may be hard for some of my friends who do not have adequate abilities to debate." (S31P04)

"The preparation time should be limited (as much as possible) so that our arguments can be more exciting and the debate can be more heated." (S48P05)

With regards to the last theme found in the answers of the students, which is teamwork, most of the students were not pleased with the groups they were in because of the lack of mixed levels of proficiency. Students with higher proficiency level had a tendency to choose each other as teammates, leaving lower-proficiency students in other groups. This, to some extent, seemed to discourage some students. Hence, the students thought that they could have been grouped into groups randomly, or by the teacher. In addition, some students wished that the teacher could help them with keeping track with the workload in their team by the use of a work rota so that their teammates could contribute actively to the group work.

"I don't like being grouped in a team because we didn't have a fair share of work. Better students need to cover for less proficient ones. I prefer debate activities that divide the class into two groups only." (S16T02)

"I don't really enjoy being in my group, so I think the teacher should put us into groups without letting us choose." (S30T04)

"I think the teacher should provide us with a work rota template to distribute work among all teammates. Sometimes, I have to cover the work of the other four members and I am the only one that learns something." (S37T05)

The data yielded from the questionnaire and the open-ended question have provided a valuable insight into how ninth graders in Vietnam think about the debate activity when it is organized in the classroom. Moreover, how their teamwork skills and speaking skills before and during the debate are perceived is also shed light on. Suggestions for improvement in future debates were made by the learners, which are worth considering.

5. Conclusion & Implications

The questionnaire was distributed in order to investigate the perceptions of grade-ninth learners enrolling in the Intensive English Program in a public secondary school in Ho Chi Minh City towards the debate activity. The results showed that most participants enjoyed participating in the debate activity and deemed debating crucial for their further education in the future. In addition, the majority of the students demonstrated the ability to use a wide range of vocabulary, cohesive devices and grammatical structures in their arguments, as well as their perceptions towards teamwork skills were positive, as previously suggested (Davidson, 1995; Stewart & Pleisch, 1998; Lubetsky et al., 1999; Goodwin, 2003; Lee, 2005). However, the debate format could have allowed the students to speak for a longer time with randomly-assigned groups and with more interesting and teenager-related topics.

In order to prepare participants properly for the debate activity, concepts and techniques relevant to debating need to be well introduced. According to the Input Hypothesis put forward by Krashen (1983), only with sufficient amount of input can learners be able to produce the desired products or achieve the objectives and

outcomes. Regarding the context of an EFL classroom experiencing debating, there needs to be enough input provided in the practice sessions and before the official debates. Teachers can consider organizing a number of discussions about debate techniques and concepts and requiring students to practice using different grouping techniques, beginning with pair work and then in larger groups, as previously suggested, group work can help learners to enrich their ideas and improve accuracy (Othman & Murad, 2015). Providing students with a variety of useful sentence structures and appropriate topical vocabulary is another good idea. Not only should grammatical structures and lexical items be given to students in advance but supporting resources such as videos and news articles should also be introduced so that students can have more reference.

The input provided for students can only become meaningful when students are fully aware of the objectives of each phase in preparation for the debate activity. Each task has a number of specific objectives and each stage of the debate activity has specific goals, and knowing these clearly can greatly facilitate the learning process. So as to facilitate students' performance in the debate activity and their actual gains after the activity, it is highly recommended that teachers provide learners with a complete model of a debate activity with three separate stages, namely, pre-debate, actual debate and post-debate. The goals of each stage need to be made known to the students so that they are fully aware of what they can achieve after completing each stage (Aclan et al., 2016). Furthermore, particularly in the post-debate stage, it is advisable that teachers comment on each team's strengths and weaknesses for further improvement and students can pose questions related to the topic for further discussions among all classmates.

The three-stage model of a debate activity should have appropriate difficulty levels, allowing students to develop their lower-order-thinking skills then higher-order-thinking skills, based on the

Bloom Taxonomy of Learning. In the pre-debate stage, teachers can provide students with materials and activities with an increasing level of difficulty so that lower-proficiency students may not feel discouraged. Instead, all students can feel motivated to take on new challenges as different skills are required. First, students can be required to brainstorm and research for information needed for the debate. Following this, they practice constructing their arguments by analyzing their own points, examples and discussing with their teammates. In the post-debate stage, students are allowed to give comments on each other's performance as a way to give evaluation, and answer follow-up questions to practice synthesizing all the information they have prepared and obtained from listening to other teams' debates.

This study explored the perceptions of ninth-graders towards the debate activity held in the Intensive English Program. Overall, most students enjoyed participating in this activity and they also viewed their experience with teamwork positively. Also, the learners thought that they managed to fulfill the requirements about their oral abilities. Moreover, the learners gave some interesting suggestions for the activity in the future regarding the topics, format and supporting resources. Debate activity is, hence, a suitable communicative activity to be held in an EFL classroom. Pedagogical implications for Vietnamese teachers in secondary grades are provided so that debate activities in the future can be organized with a clear model consisting of stages and appropriate sub-activities for each stage. Although the participants felt excited about the debate activity in the study and meaningful data were collected and analyzed, this study could have been conducted within a longer period of time, probably throughout a term of an academic year, so that learners' progress and improvement in their own teamwork and speaking skills can be witnessed and result in even more meaningful and valuable data. Further research in the field of debate as a classroom activity can explore the effects of a debate activity on students' writing performance in an argumentative

essay writing task because in an argumentative essay, the students need to provide reasons, explanations and examples to support their opinion and the debate activity can act as a preparatory stage in which learners do research, outline their opinions and supporting ideas, and see whether their arguments are convincing enough. Practicing argumentation in a debate activity may give students an idea of how to structure their argumentative essay and convince the readers by the use of reasons and relevant instances.

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APPENDIX A: SURVEY (DEBATE)

TRONG CHƯƠNG TRÌNH TIẾNG ANH TĂNG CƯỜNG 9 HỌC KÌ 2

Năm học 2021-2022

PHẦN 1 – THÁI ĐỘ ĐỐI VỚI HOẠT ĐỘNG TRANH LUẬN

Đối với các câu hỏi trong phần 2 và phần 3, học sinh đánh dấu X vào ô trống hợp lý cho từng câu. Lưu ý, chỉ đánh X một lần cho mỗi câu.

STT		Hoàn toàn không đồng ý	Không đồng ý	Đồng ý	Hoàn toàn đồng ý
1	Em thích tham gia hoạt động tranh biện trong lớp học.				
2	Em thích trình bày quan điểm và lập luận trước khán giả.				
3	Em cởi mở với các quan điểm đối nghịch.				
4	Em thích tham gia hoạt động luyện tập tranh biện.				
5	Em muốn phát triển kỹ năng tranh biện để thuyết phục người khác.				
6	Em biết cách định nghĩa từ khóa trong chủ đề.				
7	Em có thể xây dựng một bài lập luận theo cấu trúc Ý kiến – Giải thích – Dẫn chứng – Kết luận.				
8	Em có thể lập luận để phản biện lí lẽ của bên đối.				
9	Em có thể tóm tắt các luận điểm của đội.				
10	Em cảm thấy các buổi luyện tập tranh biện trong lớp hữu ích.				

STT		Hoàn toàn không đồng ý	Không đồng ý	Đồng ý	Hoàn toàn đồng ý
11	Em nghĩ việc theo dõi các đội tranh biện khác giúp em cải thiện phần tranh biện của bản thân.				
12	Em nghĩ việc nhận xét phần tranh biện của các đội khác giúp ích cho phần tranh biện của em.				
13	Em nghĩ việc trả lời các câu hỏi sau mỗi phần tranh biện là cơ hội để em thể hiện quan điểm cá nhân.				
14	Tranh biện quan trọng đối với quá trình giáo dục nâng cao của em trong tương lai (cấp 3, đại học …)				
15	Tranh biện giúp em biết cách xây dựng lập luận có tính thuyết phục.				
16	Tranh biện giúp em nhìn nhận một vấn đề từ nhiều khía cạnh.				
17	Em nghĩ các thông tin em chuẩn bị cho hoạt động tranh biện có thể hữu dụng cho các hoạt động học tập khác.				
18	Em xem các video về tranh biện để hiểu cấu trúc của một hoạt động tranh biện.				
19	Em xem các video về tranh biện để biết cách đưa ra quan điểm và lập luận.				
20	Kịch bản tranh biện mẫu cho từng người nói do giáo viên cung cấp hữu ích cho việc chuẩn bị của em.				
21	Em luyện tập phần tranh biện của bản thân trước hoạt động tranh luận chính thức.				

PHẦN 2 – THÁI ĐỘ ĐỐI VỚI KỸ NĂNG LÀM VIỆC NHÓM

STT		Hoàn toàn không đồng ý	Không đồng ý	Đồng ý	Hoàn toàn đồng ý
1	Hoạt động tranh biện giúp em cải thiện kỹ năng làm việc nhóm.				
2	Em thảo luận với bạn cùng đội về tính thuyết phục của từng lập luận.				
3	Em chia sẻ với bạn cùng đội những thông tin hữu ích liên quan đến chủ đề.				
4	Em biết rõ vai trò của bản thân và đồng đội trong hoạt động tranh biện.				
5	Hoạt động tranh biện khiến hoạt động nhóm trở nên thú vị hơn.				

PHẦN 3 – THÁI ĐỘ ĐỐI VỚI KỸ NĂNG NÓI

STT		Hoàn toàn không đồng ý	Không đồng ý	Đồng ý	Hoàn toàn đồng ý
1	Em luyện tập phát âm từ vựng khó trong phần tranh biện của đội.				
2	Em sử dụng phối hợp các loại cấu trúc câu trong phần tranh biện của mình.				
3	Em cố gắng kiểm soát các quy tắc ngữ pháp về thì (tenses) khi tranh biện.				
4	Vốn từ vựng em sử dụng trong hoạt động tranh biện đa dạng.				
5	Em sử dụng những từ nối (cohesive devices) để tăng tính mạch lạc cho phần tranh biện của mình.				

STT		Hoàn toàn không đồng ý	Không đồng ý	Đồng ý	Hoàn toàn đồng ý
6	Em có thể nói liên tục trong hai phút.				
7	Em cố gắng hạn chế sự ngập ngừng, ngắt quãng (pauses) trong khi tranh biện.				
8	Em luyện tập ngôn ngữ cơ thể và giao tiếp mắt phù hợp với hoạt động tranh biện				
9	Em luyện tập điều chỉnh âm điệu (intonation) để bày tỏ thái độ phù hợp.				

PHẦN 4 – CHIA SẺ CÁ NHÂN

Đối với các câu hỏi trong phần 4, các em ghi câu trả lời theo quan điểm cá nhân.

Em có đóng góp ý tưởng gì để hoạt động tranh biện trong môn Tiếng Anh Tăng cường 9 tốt hơn cho các bạn trong năm học tới?

_____

_____

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APPENDIX B: STUDENT OBSERVATION EVALUATION FORM

Code	Description	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent	Mean	Std. dev.
			Evaluation			Mean	Std. dev.
	THEME 1 - TEAMWORK						
T01	The speaker discusses the opposite team's argument with the teammates.	3	28	32	21	**2.85**	0.84
T02	The speaker knows his/her role and other teammates' roles well.	0	36	36	12	**2.71**	0.70
T03	The speaker discusses the follow-up questions with the teammates.	9	38	26	11	**2.46**	0.86
	THEME 2 - ORAL PERFORMANCE						
P01	The speaker's pronunciation is clear enough to convey his/her speech effectively.	0	4	68	12	**3.10**	0.43
P02	The speaker uses different sentence structures in his/her speech.	0	27	49	8	**2.77**	0.61
P03	The speaker tries to control his/her use of verb tenses.	1	21	52	10	**2.85**	0.63
P04	The speaker uses a wide range of vocabulary.	0	2	59	23	**3.25**	0.49
P05	The speaker uses cohesive devices to increase cohesion.	2	19	52	11	**2.86**	0.66
P06	The speaker can speak at length (maximum 2 minutes).	2	13	59	10	**2.92**	0.61
P07	The speaker tries to avoid pauses while debating.	0	1	78	5	**3.05**	0.26
P08	The speaker has appropriate body language and eye contact.	0	25	50	9	**2.81**	0.61
P09	The speaker has a suitable intonation.	1	28	41	14	**2.81**	0.72
P10	The speaker has minimal reliance on notes.	3	47	28	6	**2.44**	0.68