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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Impact of Debate Based Instruction on the Development of Critical Thinking Skills among Moroccan EFL Learners

EDDIMANI ABDELFATTAH[1] ✉ **and BADDANE KHADIJA**[2]

[1] *Doctor, Art, and Pedagogical Engineering Laboratory, Faculty of Languages, Letters and Arts, Kenitra, Ibn Tofail University, Morocco*

[2] *Doctor*, ESCA École de Management, Casablanca, Morocco

Corresponding Author: EDDIMANI ABDELFATTAH, **E-mail:** dimaniabdelfattah@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

In the Moroccan baccalaureate context, fostering learners' critical thinking and active engagement remains a significant pedagogical challenge. Although classroom debates offer opportunities for argumentation, perspective-taking, and reflective learning, their integration into instructional practice remains limited. This study examines the role of debate-based instruction in enhancing critical thinking and student engagement, while also exploring teachers' preparedness to implement this approach. A mixed-methods design was employed, combining surveys of 140 students and 220 teachers with semi-structured interviews involving 10 educators. Findings indicate that 54.5% of students perceived debates as enhancing their engagement, while 66.7% reported that they broadened their understanding of diverse perspectives. However, implementation is constrained by limited teacher preparedness: 60% of teachers reported unfamiliarity with debate techniques, and 87.5% had received no formal training. Time constraints and curricular rigidity further hindered integration. The findings highlight the need for targeted professional development and greater curricular flexibility to facilitate the effective use of debate as a pedagogical tool for promoting critical thinking and meaningful learner engagement in Moroccan classrooms.

KEYWORDS

Classroom Debates, Critical Thinking Skills, Moroccan EFL Classrooms

ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. General introduction

In the twenty-first century, educational systems worldwide are increasingly expected to prepare students not only with subject-specific knowledge but also with the higher-order thinking skills necessary to navigate complex social, academic, and professional environments. Among these competencies, critical thinking has emerged as one of the most essential learning outcomes, enabling learners to analyze information, evaluate evidence, solve problems, and make informed decisions (Facione, 1990). Consequently, contemporary educational reforms have emphasized learner-centered pedagogies that actively engage students in inquiry, discussion, and collaborative learning rather than passive knowledge acquisition.

One instructional strategy that has received considerable attention for promoting critical thinking is classroom debate. Debate encourages students to examine multiple perspectives, construct logical arguments, justify claims with evidence, and respond critically to opposing viewpoints. Unlike traditional teacher-centered instruction, debate fosters active participation, communication, collaboration, and reflective thinking, thereby creating a dynamic learning environment where students become active constructors of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978; Brookfield, 2012). Research has consistently shown that structured debates contribute to the development of analytical reasoning, argumentation skills, oral communication, and learner engagement across different educational contexts (Kennedy, 2007; Snider & Schnurer, 2006).

The theoretical foundations supporting debate-based instruction are rooted in constructivist and sociocultural learning theories. Constructivist scholars argue that knowledge is actively constructed through meaningful interaction with ideas and

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experiences rather than passively transmitted from teacher to learner (Piaget, 1972). Similarly, Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory emphasizes the role of dialogue and social interaction in cognitive development, suggesting that collaborative activities such as debate create opportunities for learners to negotiate meaning, challenge assumptions, and develop higher mental functions. Within this framework, classroom debate represents an authentic pedagogical practice capable of cultivating critical and independent thinkers.

In language education, debate offers additional pedagogical advantages. Besides fostering critical thinking, it creates meaningful opportunities for learners to develop linguistic competence through authentic communication. Students participating in debates practice speaking fluently, listening actively, organizing ideas coherently, and using persuasive language to defend their positions. Such communicative experiences align closely with communicative language teaching principles, which prioritize meaningful interaction as the foundation of language acquisition (Richards, 2006). Consequently, debate has become an increasingly recommended instructional strategy in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms.

Within the Moroccan educational context, recent educational reforms have highlighted the importance of developing learners' critical thinking, creativity, communication, and problem-solving abilities to meet the demands of a rapidly changing global society (Ministry of National Education, Preschool and Sports, 2022). The competency-based approach adopted in Moroccan secondary education encourages active learning methodologies that move beyond rote memorization toward learner autonomy and intellectual engagement. Despite these policy aspirations, classroom instruction in many Moroccan high schools continues to rely predominantly on traditional teacher-centered practices that prioritize examination preparation and factual knowledge over discussion-based learning. As a result, innovative pedagogical strategies such as classroom debate remain underutilized despite their recognized educational value.

Although previous international studies have documented the positive impact of debate on students' critical thinking and academic performance, relatively limited research has examined the practical implementation of debate in Moroccan secondary education. Existing literature suggests that teachers frequently encounter institutional and pedagogical challenges, including insufficient professional training, limited instructional time, large class sizes, curriculum constraints, and assessment pressures, all of which may discourage the adoption of debate-based instruction. At the same time, little is known about Moroccan students' perceptions of debate and the extent to which they believe it enhances their learning and critical thinking skills. This gap in the literature highlights the need for context-specific empirical research that investigates both teachers' and students' perspectives regarding debate as a pedagogical tool.

Against this background, the present study explores the role of classroom debate in promoting critical thinking among Moroccan baccalaureate students. Specifically, it investigates teachers' perceptions of debate-based instruction, identifies the factors influencing their willingness to integrate debates into classroom practice, examines students' attitudes toward debate as a learning strategy, and explores the challenges associated with implementing debate within Moroccan high school classrooms. Employing a mixed-methods research design, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of both the opportunities and barriers surrounding debate integration.

The significance of this study lies in its potential contribution to educational research and practice. By identifying the pedagogical, institutional, and contextual factors that shape debate implementation, the findings may inform curriculum development, teacher education programs, and educational policy aimed at strengthening critical thinking instruction in Moroccan secondary schools. Furthermore, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on learner-centered pedagogies in EFL education by providing empirical evidence from a context that remains comparatively underrepresented in international research. Ultimately, promoting effective debate practices may help equip Moroccan learners with the critical thinking and communication skills required to succeed in higher education, the workplace, and democratic participation in contemporary society.

2. Literature review

2.1 Debate

Debate is widely recognized as an effective pedagogical strategy that significantly enhances students' critical thinking abilities and promotes active classroom engagement, particularly in educational contexts such as Iranian religious universities. It encourages learners to participate actively in classroom discourse by expressing, defending, and critically evaluating different viewpoints. According to Mohammad Najafi, debate promotes mastery learning, enabling students to develop a deeper understanding of subject matter while strengthening their analytical and evaluative skills. Through participation in debates, students are also encouraged to confront their uncertainties, refine their reasoning, and clarify their ideas.

The educational value of debate can be traced back to the Socratic method. Socrates employed dialogue and systematic questioning to guide learners toward discovering knowledge and correcting misconceptions. This approach stimulates critical inquiry and encourages meaningful intellectual dialogue within a supportive learning environment where diverse perspectives can

be exchanged respectfully. Consequently, students develop greater confidence, improve their communication skills, and become more effective participants in academic discussions.

Furthermore, debate promotes collaboration through constructive disagreement. Beyond facilitating knowledge acquisition, it fosters the development of essential interpersonal and social competencies. By engaging in structured debates, students learn to collaborate effectively, appreciate diverse perspectives, and communicate respectfully despite differences of opinion. These competencies prepare learners to address academic, professional, and societal challenges, making debate a valuable instructional strategy for promoting both cognitive and social development.

2.2 Debate as a pedagogical tool

Debate is a highly effective instructional strategy that enhances students' communication, argumentation, and reasoning skills. Snider (2014) argues that participation in debates enables students to articulate their ideas clearly and persuasively. Because debates require participants to prepare arguments systematically and anticipate opposing viewpoints, students develop logical reasoning, organizational skills, and confidence in public speaking. This preparation strengthens both the quality of their arguments and their ability to present them effectively.

In addition, debate promotes active student engagement. Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2001) maintain that exposure to multiple perspectives creates a dynamic and interactive learning environment. Rather than passively receiving information, students actively construct knowledge by presenting arguments, responding to counterarguments, and engaging in collaborative dialogue. Such interaction fosters a sense of academic community in which learners feel encouraged to express their ideas, exchange knowledge, and critically examine alternative viewpoints.

Moreover, debate encourages independent thinking. El Majidi and de Graaff (2021) emphasize that cultivating students' reasoning abilities is a central objective of education. Preparing for debates requires learners to conduct extensive research, gather and evaluate evidence, consider opposing perspectives, and formulate well-supported arguments. This process promotes higher-order thinking skills, including analysis, evaluation, and synthesis, enabling students to understand complex issues and reach reasoned conclusions. Overall, integrating debate into classroom instruction not only enhances communication skills but also fosters active participation, intellectual independence, and the capacity to address real-world challenges critically and responsibly.

2.3 Critical thinking

Critical thinking is widely regarded as a fundamental objective of higher education, as it enables students to engage in purposeful, reflective, and self-regulated judgment. These cognitive skills allow learners to analyze arguments, evaluate evidence, resolve conflicts, and solve complex problems effectively. Empirical research demonstrates that instructional interventions designed to develop critical thinking vary considerably in their effectiveness, with outcomes largely influenced by the quality of implementation. Moreover, qualitative research provides valuable insights into students' cognitive development that may not be fully captured through quantitative assessment alone.

Prominent scholars such as Roth (2010) and Tsui (2002) emphasize the essential role of critical thinking in preparing responsible and informed citizens. However, existing research often presents methodological limitations, including weaknesses in research design and issues related to sample representativeness, which necessitate cautious interpretation of findings. Consequently, researchers recommend employing multiple assessment methods to obtain a comprehensive evaluation of students' critical thinking development. Overall, fostering critical thinking is essential for equipping learners with the intellectual competencies required to make informed decisions in an increasingly complex and interconnected world.

2.4 Critical thinking skills in pedagogical settings

Critical thinking constitutes an essential component of English language teaching because it enhances learners' communicative competence, comprehension, and language proficiency. Developing these skills is increasingly important in preparing students to become informed citizens capable of contributing to societal development and sustainable progress. Pedagogical approaches such as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) have been recognized as effective means of fostering critical thinking while simultaneously supporting language acquisition.

For instance, classroom discussions encourage students to articulate their opinions, challenge alternative viewpoints, and engage in reasoned argumentation, all of which are central components of critical thinking (Paul & Elder, 2006). Similarly, problem-solving activities expose learners to authentic situations that require collaboration, decision-making, and the meaningful application of language skills (Halpern, 1998). Reflective learning practices further contribute to critical thinking by encouraging students to evaluate their language use, assess their learning experiences, and identify areas for improvement. Brookfield (2012) argues that reflective practice promotes self-awareness and supports continuous personal and academic development.

By integrating these instructional strategies into English language teaching, educators create learning environments that value inquiry, reflection, and intellectual engagement. Such environments cultivate confident, autonomous, and competent language

learners equipped with effective communication skills, creative problem-solving abilities, and the critical thinking competencies necessary to navigate the demands of contemporary society.

2.5 The relationship between debate and critical thinking

Debate plays a significant role in developing students' critical thinking skills by encouraging them to formulate coherent arguments, evaluate evidence critically, and consider multiple perspectives. Throughout the debating process, students are required to construct logical arguments and support them with credible evidence (Clark & Sampson, 2008). This process not only strengthens their argumentative competence but also develops their ability to assess the credibility and reliability of information sources.

Furthermore, debate provides a structured environment in which students critically examine both opposing arguments and their own assumptions. This reflective process is fundamental to the development of rational and analytical thinking because it challenges cognitive biases and encourages learners to reconsider their initial beliefs. Through rebuttals and counterarguments, students evaluate the logical consistency of competing claims, refine their reasoning, and develop greater intellectual flexibility.

Ultimately, participation in debate enhances not only critical thinking but also a range of transferable skills, including problem-solving, teamwork, effective communication, and evidence-based reasoning. These competencies are indispensable for addressing complex academic, professional, and real-world challenges.

2.6 Debate as a tool for promoting critical thinking in English classrooms

Debate has the potential to transform English language teaching by shifting instructional practices from a teacher-centered model toward a learner-centered approach that actively engages students in constructing knowledge. Numerous scholars have highlighted the effectiveness of debate in promoting interactive learning and intellectual engagement.

First, debate encourages students to participate actively in the learning process. Rather than passively receiving information through lectures, learners are required to articulate, defend, and justify their viewpoints. Oros (2007) argues that such active participation promotes deeper understanding because students are encouraged to think critically, reflect on their positions, and engage meaningfully with course content.

Moreover, debate simultaneously develops students' language proficiency and critical thinking abilities. Preparing for debates requires learners to conduct extensive research using a variety of academic sources, thereby expanding their vocabulary, improving reading comprehension, and strengthening their ability to synthesize information. Freeley and Steinberg (2005) contend that this preparation promotes both knowledge acquisition and the integration of information from diverse sources.

Participation in debate also enhances oral communication skills. Students learn to present arguments persuasively, respond effectively to opposing viewpoints, and communicate confidently in public settings. Kennedy (2007) emphasizes that this interactive process increases learners' self-confidence while encouraging them to evaluate both their own arguments and those of their peers critically. As students refine their reasoning skills, they become increasingly capable of identifying the strengths and weaknesses of competing arguments.

Furthermore, debate promotes collaborative learning. Working in teams enables students to exchange ideas, develop strategies collectively, and strengthen their interpersonal and cooperative skills. Alder (1982) argues that collaborative learning approaches, including debate, foster learners' sense of responsibility for their own learning while encouraging active listening and respect for differing perspectives.

Finally, debate serves as a powerful means of cultivating critical thinking. Zare and Othman (2013) argue that effective debating requires students to evaluate the credibility of evidence, identify underlying assumptions, detect logical inconsistencies, and formulate well-reasoned conclusions. These processes not only enhance critical thinking but also prepare students to participate effectively in complex real-world discussions characterized by diverse perspectives and competing viewpoints.

In conclusion, debate represents a highly effective pedagogical strategy for English language teaching. It promotes active learning, strengthens language proficiency, enhances communication and collaboration, and develops higher-order thinking skills. Through research, reflection, argumentation, and teamwork, students become more autonomous learners, critical thinkers, and effective communicators, thereby acquiring the competencies necessary for success in both academic and professional contexts.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

This study adopted a mixed-methods exploratory survey research design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. Mixed-methods research is particularly appropriate for educational investigations that seek to combine statistical evidence with participants' lived experiences, thereby producing findings that are both empirically robust and contextually meaningful. As noted by Dörnyei (2007), survey research is particularly suitable for examining relationships among variables and investigating participants' attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions without

manipulating the research environment. Accordingly, the present study employed questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to explore teachers' and students' perceptions of debate as a pedagogical strategy for enhancing critical thinking skills.

The quantitative component consisted of structured questionnaires administered electronically through Google Forms to both students and teachers. This method was selected because it facilitated efficient data collection, increased accessibility, and enabled the systematic organization of participants' responses for statistical analysis.

The student questionnaire was distributed to approximately 40 students enrolled at Mohammed VI High School and Hassan II High School, with 60% male and 40% female participants. Distribution was facilitated through a class representative at Mohammed VI High School and an English language teacher at Hassan II High School. The questionnaire examined students' participation in classroom debates, their perceptions of debate-based learning, and their self-evaluation of critical thinking skills.

The teacher questionnaire was administered to 220 English language teacher from secondary schools across the Marrakech-Safi region. Distribution was facilitated through the professional network of an English language supervisor, enabling the researcher to obtain responses from educators representing diverse teaching contexts. The questionnaire investigated teachers' familiarity with debate-based instruction, their classroom experiences, perceived pedagogical benefits, implementation challenges, and their views regarding the effectiveness of debate in promoting students' critical thinking abilities.

The qualitative component comprised semi-structured interviews conducted with 10 English language teachers from different areas of the Marrakech-Safi region, including Chichaoua. The interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via WhatsApp to accommodate participants' availability. Their semi-structured format allowed participants to provide detailed reflections on their instructional practices, perceptions of critical thinking, and experiences with implementing debate-based activities in English language classrooms. Interviews were conducted in English, Arabic, or Moroccan Darija, depending on participants' linguistic preferences, to encourage open and authentic communication.

By integrating quantitative findings with qualitative insights, the mixed-methods design enabled the triangulation of data from multiple sources, thereby enhancing the validity, credibility, and comprehensiveness of the research findings. As emphasized by Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), the integration of quantitative and qualitative evidence strengthens the interpretative power of educational research by combining measurable trends with detailed contextual explanations. Consequently, this research design provides a robust methodological framework for examining the pedagogical value of classroom debate and its contribution to the development of critical thinking skills among Moroccan baccalaureate students.

3.2 Research objectives

The present study is guided by a set of interrelated objectives designed to examine the pedagogical role of debate in promoting critical thinking among Moroccan baccalaureate students. First, it aims to identify the principal factors that discourage English language teachers from incorporating debate into their classroom practices. Second, the study seeks to investigate teachers' perceptions of debate as a pedagogical strategy for fostering students' critical thinking skills, with particular emphasis on its perceived effectiveness, practicality, and educational value. Third, the research explores baccalaureate students' perceptions of debate as an interactive learning strategy and examines the extent to which they believe it contributes to the development of their critical thinking abilities. Finally, the study investigates the pedagogical and contextual challenges teachers encounter when attempting to integrate critical thinking instruction and debate-based activities into English language teaching. Collectively, these objectives provide a comprehensive framework for understanding both the opportunities and the constraints associated with the implementation of debate as a means of enhancing higher-order thinking skills in Moroccan secondary education.

3.3 Participants

3.3.1 Students

Students were recruited from Mohammed VI High School and Hassan II High School in Marrakech. The selection of participants from two public secondary schools was intended to ensure greater diversity within the sample and to provide a broader representation of students' experiences in the Moroccan educational context.

At Mohammed VI High School, access to participants was facilitated through the cooperation of the school administration and an English language teacher, who assisted in administering the questionnaire to the students. Similarly, at Hassan II High School, the questionnaire was distributed with the assistance of an English language teacher, whose collaboration facilitated access to the participants and contributed significantly to the data collection process.

The final sample comprised 140 baccalaureate students, of whom 60% were male and 40% were female. Recruiting participants from two different secondary schools enhanced the diversity and representativeness of the sample. This approach aligns with Denzin's (1978) concept of data triangulation, which advocates the use of multiple data sources to improve the credibility and trustworthiness of research findings. By collecting data from students across different educational settings, the study provides a more comprehensive and balanced understanding of learners' perceptions of classroom debate and its contribution to the development of critical thinking skills.

3.4 Research instruments

3.4.1 Students' questionnaire

The student questionnaire constituted one of the principal instruments employed for quantitative data collection. Questionnaires are widely recognized as effective research tools for collecting data from a relatively large number of participants through systematically designed questions that generate both quantitative and qualitative information. Consequently, the instrument incorporated a combination of closed-ended items, which produced measurable data suitable for statistical analysis, and open-ended questions, which enabled participants to elaborate on their experiences and perceptions.

The questionnaire was administered to students from Mohammed VI High School and Hassan II High School in Marrakech with the objective of investigating their perceptions of classroom debates and their perceived contribution to the development of critical thinking skills and overall learning outcomes.

At Mohammed VI High School, the questionnaire was distributed with the support of the school administration and an English language teacher. Likewise, at Hassan II High School, the questionnaire was administered with the assistance of an English language teacher, whose cooperation facilitated access to the participants. A total of 140 students, aged between 16 and 18 years, completed the questionnaire, including 60% male and 40% female respondents.

The questionnaire was designed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data concerning students' engagement with debate activities, their perceptions of the educational value of classroom debates, and their views regarding the development of critical thinking skills.

3.4.2 Teachers' questionnaire

The teacher survey was designed to investigate educators' experiences, perceptions, and attitudes regarding the integration of classroom debates into their pedagogical practices. More specifically, the instrument sought to ascertain teachers' familiarity with debate-based instruction, examine their perceptions of its potential pedagogical benefits, and identify the practical, instructional, and contextual challenges they encounter when incorporating debates into their classrooms. In addition, the survey provided participants with an opportunity to reflect on the extent to which debate-based activities may contribute to the development of learners' critical thinking abilities and foster greater levels of classroom engagement and participation. The sample comprised 220 teachers, whose ages ranged from 24 to 45 years.

The questionnaire incorporated both closed-ended and open-ended items in order to generate complementary forms of evidence. The closed-ended questions were intended to yield quantifiable data that could be systematically analyzed and used to identify general patterns in teachers' responses. Conversely, the open-ended questions provided participants with greater scope to articulate their experiences, perceptions, and concerns in their own words. The inclusion of these qualitative components enriched the data collected by providing more detailed insights into teachers' attitudes towards classroom debates, the perceived pedagogical value of this instructional approach, and the difficulties associated with its implementation. Consequently, the combination of closed- and open-ended questions enabled a more comprehensive examination of teachers' perspectives while strengthening the overall depth of the findings.

3.4.3 Interviews with teachers

Interviews constitute a qualitative research methodology through which researchers systematically engage participants in order to elicit detailed accounts of their experiences, perceptions, attitudes, and viewpoints. Depending on the degree of structure imposed by the researcher, interviews may assume structured, semi-structured, or unstructured forms. While structured interviews rely on a predetermined and standardized set of questions, semi-structured interviews combine a predefined framework with a considerable degree of flexibility, thereby allowing participants to expand upon their responses and introduce issues that may emerge organically during the interaction. Unstructured interviews, by contrast, adopt a predominantly conversational orientation and involve limited researcher intervention or predetermined direction. The principal rationale for incorporating interviews into the present study lies in their capacity to generate rich, contextualized, and in-depth qualitative data, thereby facilitating a more comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences and perceptions than would be possible through survey instruments alone.

As a means of complementing and enriching the quantitative data generated through the surveys, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposively selected sample of ten teachers drawn from different areas of the Marrakech region, including Chichaoua. The sample comprised five male and five female teachers, ranging in age from 24 to 45 years. The interviews were primarily designed to investigate teachers' perceptions of the potential contribution of classroom debates to the development of learners' critical thinking skills, rather than concentrating exclusively on their role in promoting English language use. To ensure that participants could articulate their perspectives as freely and authentically as possible, they were given the opportunity to express themselves in Arabic, Darija, or English, depending on their linguistic preferences and communicative comfort.

The semi-structured nature of the interviews provided a balanced framework in which key areas of inquiry could be systematically addressed while simultaneously allowing participants sufficient latitude to elaborate on issues they considered particularly relevant. In particular, the discussions sought to identify teachers' perceptions of the pedagogical benefits associated with classroom debates, the practical and contextual challenges that may hinder their implementation, and their potential contribution to the development of learners' critical thinking abilities. Participants were also encouraged to formulate recommendations concerning ways of enhancing the integration and effectiveness of debate-based activities within the classroom. This methodological approach ultimately yielded a more nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of the pedagogical potential of debates and the conditions under which they may be effectively employed in Moroccan educational settings to promote the development of critical thinking skills.

3.5 Validity and reliability of the research instruments

The validity and reliability of the research instruments were carefully considered to ensure the methodological rigour, credibility, and trustworthiness of the findings. Regarding validity, the teacher questionnaire and the semi-structured interview guide were developed in close alignment with the research objectives, research questions, and theoretical framework underpinning the study. The items were formulated to adequately address the principal dimensions under investigation, including teachers' familiarity with classroom debates, their perceptions of the pedagogical benefits of debate-based instruction, the challenges associated with its implementation, and its potential contribution to learners' critical thinking and classroom engagement. Particular attention was devoted to the clarity, relevance, coherence, and contextual appropriateness of the items in order to minimize ambiguity and ensure that the instruments adequately captured the constructs under investigation. The instruments were also reviewed and refined prior to their administration in order to strengthen their content validity and ensure their suitability for the Moroccan educational context.

With regard to reliability, the internal consistency of the closed-ended items included in the teacher questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The analysis yielded a Cronbach's alpha value of $\alpha = 0.87$, which indicates a high level of internal consistency among the questionnaire items and suggests that they reliably measured the constructs targeted by the study. This coefficient provides evidence that the items demonstrated a satisfactory degree of coherence and were sufficiently consistent for the purposes of the present investigation. Reliability was further supported through the standardized administration of the questionnaire, with all participants receiving the same instructions and responding to the same set of items. Similarly, consistency in the semi-structured interviews was enhanced through the use of a common interview protocol and a predetermined set of guiding questions, while retaining sufficient flexibility to allow participants to elaborate on their experiences and perspectives. Collectively, these procedures contributed to enhancing the consistency, dependability, and overall methodological robustness of the research instruments.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Enhancing student engagement through debates

The findings demonstrate that classroom debate is widely perceived by students as an effective pedagogical strategy for enhancing classroom engagement. The fact that 54.5% of the respondents reported a significant increase in engagement, while an additional 27.3% perceived a moderate improvement, indicates that debate encourages learners to participate more actively in classroom activities. These findings suggest that debate transforms students from passive recipients of knowledge into active contributors to the learning process by encouraging them to articulate ideas, defend arguments, and respond critically to opposing viewpoints. Such active participation is fundamental to learner-centered pedagogy, which emphasizes collaboration, interaction, and meaningful engagement as essential conditions for effective learning.

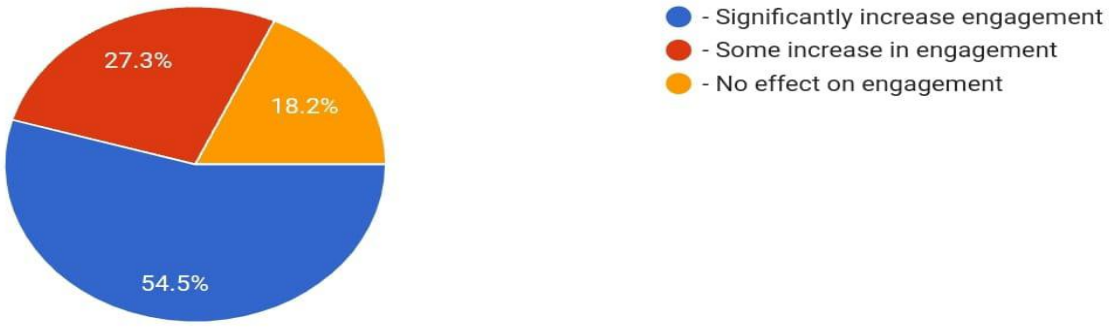


Figure 1: Impact of Debates on Learners' Engagement

The present findings are consistent with Kennedy (2007), who argues that classroom debate promotes active learning by requiring students to analyse information critically, construct logical arguments, and defend their positions using evidence. Through this process, learners become intellectually engaged and assume greater responsibility for their own learning. Similarly, Alasmari and Ahmed (2013) found that debate-based instruction significantly improves students' classroom participation, motivation, and communication skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. The increased engagement reported by participants in the present study therefore reinforces previous research highlighting debate as an effective strategy for promoting both linguistic development and cognitive engagement.

These findings also support the theoretical perspectives advanced by Paul and Elder (2014), who contend that critical thinking develops most effectively in learning environments that encourage questioning, reasoned discussion, and reflective judgment. Debate naturally creates such an environment by requiring learners to evaluate evidence, challenge assumptions, and consider alternative perspectives before reaching informed conclusions. Consequently, student engagement during debates extends beyond simple classroom participation to include deeper cognitive involvement in the learning process.

Within the Moroccan educational context, the findings corroborate the work of El Kirat El Allame and Astaifi (2020), who maintain that debate is an effective instructional strategy for promoting active learning and strengthening higher-order thinking skills among Moroccan EFL learners. Likewise, Eddimani and Brigui (2024) argue that the successful integration of critical thinking into Moroccan English language classrooms depends on the adoption of learner-centred pedagogies that encourage inquiry, dialogue, collaborative learning, and reflective reasoning. Their study emphasizes that traditional teacher-centred instructional practices often limit students' opportunities to analyse, evaluate, and defend ideas critically. The positive perceptions reported by students in the present study therefore provide empirical support for Eddimani and Brigui's (2024) assertion that critical thinking-based instruction creates an interactive learning environment in which learners become cognitively engaged while simultaneously developing their analytical and communicative competencies.

Furthermore, the findings reflect the broader objectives of Morocco's ongoing educational reforms, which advocate competency-based teaching approaches designed to foster twenty-first-century skills, including critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and problem-solving. By encouraging students to justify opinions with evidence, challenge opposing viewpoints, and engage in reasoned argumentation, debate contributes directly to the achievement of these educational objectives.

Nevertheless, the finding that 18.2% of respondents reported no noticeable improvement in classroom engagement suggests that debate does not benefit all learners equally. This variation may be attributed to differences in English language proficiency, self-confidence, personality traits, classroom climate, or teachers' ability to facilitate debate effectively. Brookfield (2012) argues that the success of discussion-based pedagogies depends largely on the instructor's capacity to establish an inclusive learning environment in which all students feel comfortable expressing their opinions. Consequently, the effectiveness of debate is influenced not only by the strategy itself but also by the pedagogical conditions under which it is implemented.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that debate possesses considerable potential to enhance student engagement in Moroccan EFL classrooms. However, maximizing its effectiveness requires systematic teacher training, thoughtful classroom management, and curriculum designs that allocate sufficient time for structured debate activities. By addressing these pedagogical considerations, debate can become a powerful instructional strategy that promotes active participation while simultaneously fostering students' critical thinking, communication, and collaborative learning skills.

4.2 The role of debates in expanding students' perspectives

The findings presented in Figure 2 indicate a highly positive perception among the students regarding the contribution of classroom debates to their understanding of different perspectives. As shown in the figure, 66.7% of the respondents strongly agreed that debates help them understand different viewpoints, while 33.3% agreed with the statement. The absence of neutral or negative responses is particularly noteworthy, as it indicates that all participants perceived some degree of benefit from engaging in debate. This pattern suggests that classroom debates may provide learners with opportunities to encounter opinions, interpretations, and arguments that differ from their own, thereby encouraging them to reconsider issues from multiple perspectives rather than approaching them exclusively through their pre-existing assumptions.

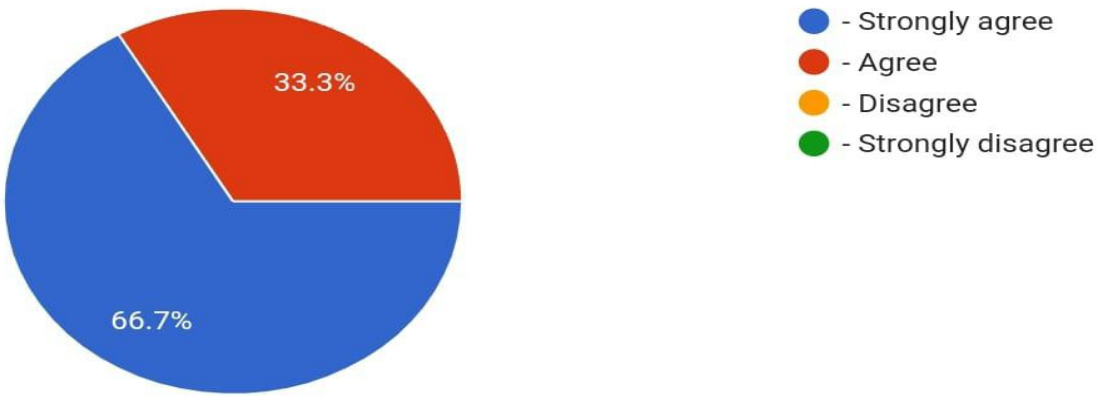


Figure 2: Learners'' Perceptions on the role of debates in understanding different perspectives

The findings are consistent with the broader theoretical conception of critical thinking advanced by Ennis (1996), who characterizes critical thinking as reflective and reasoned thinking directed towards deciding what to believe or do. From this perspective, exposure to competing viewpoints is an important condition for developing the capacity to evaluate claims rather than accepting them uncritically. Classroom debate is particularly relevant in this regard because students are required to listen to alternative positions, assess the reasoning supporting those positions, and formulate responses based on evidence and justification. The unanimous positive response obtained in the present study may therefore reflect students' recognition of this particular cognitive dimension of debate.

The results also correspond with empirical research demonstrating the relationship between debate and critical-thinking development in EFL contexts. Iman (2017), for example, found that students who participated in debate instruction demonstrated significant improvements in critical thinking and speaking skills. The study indicated that debate encouraged learners to consider issues, contexts, implications, and assumptions when constructing and defending arguments. Such findings provide a plausible explanation for the results of the present study: when learners are confronted with opposing positions, they are required to examine an issue from more than one angle and consequently become more attentive to assumptions and implications that may not have been apparent from their initial position.

Comparable findings were reported by Danaye Tous, Tahriri, and Haghighi (2015), whose experimental study found that debate-based instruction significantly influenced EFL learners' reading comprehension. Although their research did not specifically measure students' ability to understand different perspectives, their findings suggest that debate can encourage deeper engagement with information and more active processing of ideas. This is relevant to the current study because perspective-taking requires learners to go beyond identifying information and instead interpret, compare, and evaluate competing claims. Debate may consequently function as a pedagogical mechanism through which students are encouraged to process information more critically.

Evidence from the Moroccan educational context provides an additional dimension to these findings. Mimouni's investigation of Moroccan EFL students' perceptions of debates at Cadi Ayyad University found generally positive attitudes towards the use of debate as an instructional tool for developing critical thinking. This convergence is significant because it suggests that the positive perceptions identified in the present study are not isolated to a single group of learners but are also reflected among Moroccan EFL students in another educational setting. However, the present study extends this line of inquiry by focusing more specifically

on students' perceptions of the role of debate in helping them understand different perspectives, thereby highlighting perspective-taking as a particular dimension of the broader critical-thinking construct.

Further insight can be obtained from research on Moroccan secondary-school learners' argumentative practices. Lemzaouak and Anasse (2024), in their analysis of Moroccan high school students' speeches during classroom debates, examined the logical and rhetorical strategies employed by learners when constructing persuasive arguments. Their findings demonstrate that debate can provide students with opportunities to engage in structured argumentation and to respond to positions presented by others. Although their study does not directly measure perspective-taking, its findings are relevant because effective argumentation requires learners to attend to alternative claims and anticipate possible counterarguments. The ability to respond to an opposing position therefore creates an interactional context in which students may become increasingly aware of viewpoints that differ from their own.

The Moroccan curricular context also lends support to the pedagogical relevance of these findings. Research examining the representation of critical thinking in Moroccan English-language textbooks has identified activities involving discussion, opinion exchange, argumentation, and debate as opportunities through which learners can engage with issues from different positions. This suggests that the development of critical thinking and the consideration of alternative viewpoints are not entirely peripheral to Moroccan EFL pedagogy. Nevertheless, the extent to which such potential is realized depends substantially on classroom implementation. The existence of debate-oriented activities in instructional materials does not necessarily guarantee that students will engage in genuine critical dialogue; the teacher's mediation, the formulation of questions, the selection of topics, and the degree of student participation remain crucial factors.

The findings can also be situated within the broader literature on dialogic and discussion-based pedagogy. Mercer and Littleton (2007) emphasize the importance of dialogic interaction in enabling learners to reason collectively and develop understanding through engagement with the ideas of others. From this perspective, debate can be viewed as a form of structured dialogue in which knowledge is not simply transmitted from teacher to learner but is constructed and negotiated through interaction. Similarly, Kuhn (1991) emphasizes the importance of argumentation in the development of reasoning, particularly when learners are required to consider and respond to alternative claims. These perspectives help explain why the students in the present study may perceive debate as contributing to their understanding of different viewpoints: the activity places them in a situation where encountering disagreement is not an obstacle to learning but an integral component of the learning process.

At the same time, the findings warrant a degree of methodological caution. Although 100% of the participants either agreed or strongly agreed that debates help them understand different perspectives, this result represents students' perceptions rather than an objective measurement of changes in their perspective-taking abilities. The data therefore cannot, on their own, establish a causal relationship between debate participation and the development of this ability. It is possible that other factors, such as students' previous experiences, the nature of the debate topics, teacher intervention, or the amount of preparation provided before the debates, may have influenced their responses. This distinction is important because participation in a debate does not automatically guarantee meaningful engagement with alternative viewpoints. Poorly structured debates may instead encourage students simply to defend predetermined positions without critically examining opposing arguments.

This consideration is particularly relevant to the Moroccan context, where classroom conditions, instructional traditions, and learners' previous exposure to interactive pedagogical approaches may shape the effectiveness of debate-based activities. Research conducted with Moroccan EFL learners suggests that students can engage productively in argumentative activities when appropriate opportunities and guidance are provided. The implication, therefore, is that the pedagogical value of debate lies not merely in placing students in opposing groups, but in designing tasks that explicitly encourage them to listen to competing arguments, evaluate evidence, identify assumptions, acknowledge alternative interpretations, and reconsider their own positions.

Overall, the findings provide strong evidence that the students surveyed perceive classroom debates as an effective means of broadening their understanding of different perspectives. The particularly high proportion of students who strongly agreed with the statement, together with the absence of negative responses, points to a consistently positive perception of debate as a cognitively engaging classroom practice. When considered alongside previous research on debate, critical thinking, argumentation, and dialogic learning, these findings suggest that debates may contribute to the development of learners who are more willing and better equipped to engage with intellectual disagreement. In the Moroccan EFL context, this is particularly significant because debate has the potential to move classroom interaction beyond the transmission and reproduction of information towards a more dialogic, reflective, and intellectually pluralistic model of learning, in which students are encouraged not only to express their own ideas but also to understand, evaluate, and respond constructively to those of others.

4.3 Teachers' use and familiarity with debates in the EFL classroom

The findings presented in Figure 3 reveal a substantial gap between teachers' familiarity with classroom debates and their actual implementation of this pedagogical practice. The results show that 60% of the teachers reported that they were neither familiar with debates as a teaching tool nor using them in their classrooms, while 30% indicated that, although they were familiar with

debates, they did not incorporate them into their teaching practices. Only 10% reported both familiarity with debates and active implementation. Taken together, these figures indicate that debate remains considerably underutilized among the teachers surveyed. More importantly, the results point to a distinction between teachers' potential awareness of innovative pedagogical approaches and their actual capacity or willingness to translate such approaches into classroom practice.

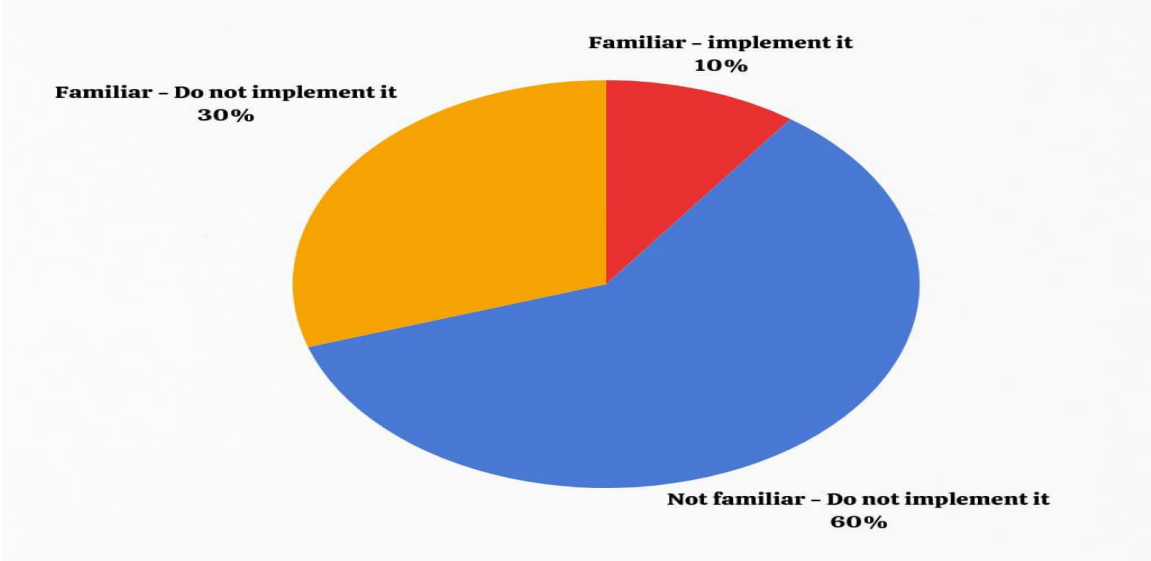


Figure 3: Teachers' Use and Familiarity with Debates in the EFL Classroom

This finding can be situated within the broader literature on the implementation of communicative and learner-centred approaches in Moroccan EFL education. El Karfa (2019), in a study of English language teaching classrooms in Moroccan secondary schools, reported a predominance of non-communicatively oriented classroom practices, despite the increasing emphasis placed on communicative language teaching. His classroom observations revealed that only 34.16% of the observed classes displayed communicative features. The study identified several factors constraining the implementation of communicative practices, including the formal nature of the classroom environment, assessment procedures, limited teaching materials and equipment, and large class sizes. The findings of the present study appear to reflect a similar theory–practice gap. Although debate is compatible with communicative and learner-centred pedagogy, its actual implementation may be constrained by the wider institutional and pedagogical conditions within which Moroccan EFL teachers operate.

The distinction between teachers' knowledge of a pedagogical approach and their actual classroom implementation is further supported by Diouani's study of communicative language teaching in the Moroccan classroom. His investigation revealed that teachers were generally well informed about the principles of communicative language teaching, yet classroom observations showed that these principles were not consistently translated into communicative teaching practices. The study associated this discrepancy with factors including learners' language proficiency, teachers' limited knowledge of how to operationalize the approach, unsuitable textbooks, and learner motivation, while also emphasizing the importance of professional development and appropriate pedagogical scaffolding. This observation provides an important interpretive lens for the present findings. The relatively high proportion of teachers who are familiar with debates but do not use them (30%) suggests that awareness alone is insufficient to ensure pedagogical implementation. Teachers may recognize the potential value of debate while simultaneously experiencing uncertainty regarding how to organize, manage, and integrate it effectively within the constraints of their existing teaching contexts.

The issue of teachers' preparedness is particularly relevant when debate is considered as a strategy for developing critical thinking. Qasserras & Qasserras (2023) examined teacher trainers' readiness and perceptions concerning critical-thinking instructional practices in Morocco. The findings indicated that participants were aware of the importance of critical thinking, but that its practical implementation remained unclear for many of them, with insufficient focused training identified as a significant concern. The study also highlighted professional-development limitations, curriculum-related issues, and large classes as obstacles to the effective incorporation of critical-thinking practices. These findings resonate strongly with the present results. If teachers lack systematic preparation in pedagogies designed to cultivate higher-order thinking, familiarity with debate as a general classroom technique may not necessarily translate into confident and sustained implementation. Debate, in particular, requires teachers to move beyond simply assigning students opposing positions and to facilitate argument construction, evidence evaluation, questioning, rebuttal, and reflection.

A related pattern emerges from research by Khalil and Hellalet (2024) on Moroccan EFL teachers' incorporation of critical thinking into argumentative writing instruction. Drawing on data from 127 Moroccan high-school EFL teachers, the researchers found that teachers generally held positive attitudes towards the integration of critical thinking, but reported several challenges, notably insufficient expertise and training, overcrowded classrooms, and outdated textbooks. This evidence is particularly useful for interpreting the present findings because it demonstrates that teachers' positive orientations towards critical thinking do not necessarily eliminate the practical barriers that prevent its systematic incorporation into classroom instruction. The fact that only 10% of the teachers in the present study reported actively using debates may therefore reflect not an outright rejection of debate, but rather a broader problem concerning teachers' preparedness and the structural conditions under which innovative pedagogies are expected to operate.

The findings are also compatible with Laabidi's (2021) investigation of Moroccan high-school English teachers' attitudes towards critical thinking. The study reported generally positive attitudes among teachers towards the importance of critical thinking, while simultaneously drawing attention to the limited extent to which critical thinking was incorporated into everyday classroom practice. This distinction is particularly important in relation to the present findings. If teachers recognize the importance of critical thinking but do not consistently employ pedagogical practices designed to develop it, then the problem may lie less in teachers' attitudes than in the conditions, knowledge, resources, and institutional support required for implementation. Classroom debate represents one such practice, but its successful integration requires more than a general appreciation of its potential educational value.

Another useful point of comparison is provided by Chouari and Nachit (2016), whose case study of teaching and assessing twenty-first-century critical-thinking skills in Morocco identified lack of training, students' educational backgrounds, and broader educational-policy issues among the principal challenges faced by teachers. Their findings help contextualize the relatively low level of debate implementation identified in the present study. Debate requires learners to participate actively, formulate and defend positions, respond to disagreement, and engage in extended classroom interaction. Such practices may prove difficult to establish in contexts where teachers and learners have been accustomed to more conventional patterns of classroom interaction. Consequently, the limited use of debate may reflect not simply individual teacher preferences but also the interaction of pedagogical, institutional, and contextual factors.

Importantly, the findings should not be interpreted as indicating that Moroccan teachers are inherently resistant to innovative or communicative teaching methods. Indeed, several Moroccan studies demonstrate that teachers express positive attitudes towards critical thinking and learner-centred approaches, even when their classroom practices remain comparatively constrained. This distinction is crucial. The 60% figure may initially appear to suggest a widespread lack of interest in debate; however, when considered alongside the wider literature, it may instead reflect a more complex implementation problem. Teachers may be willing to adopt debate but lack the training, time, resources, classroom conditions, or institutional flexibility necessary to integrate it effectively.

Furthermore, the disparity between familiarity and implementation deserves particular attention. The 30% of teachers who reported being familiar with debates but not using them constitute an especially revealing category. Their responses suggest that knowledge of a pedagogical technique does not automatically lead to its classroom adoption. This phenomenon can be conceptualized as an implementation gap, whereby teachers may acknowledge the pedagogical value of an instructional approach but refrain from using it because of contextual constraints or uncertainty about its practical application. In the Moroccan EFL context, previous research has similarly documented discrepancies between teachers' stated orientations and their observed classroom practices. The present findings therefore reinforce the argument that pedagogical reform cannot depend exclusively on teachers' individual willingness to adopt new practices; it also requires appropriate institutional and professional support.

The implications of these findings are significant for the integration of debate as a strategy for developing critical thinking in Moroccan EFL classrooms. If debate is to move from an occasional or marginal activity to a more established pedagogical practice, teachers may require targeted professional development focusing not only on the theoretical benefits of debate but also on its practical implementation. Such preparation could address the selection of age-appropriate and curriculum-relevant topics, the formulation of debate questions, the allocation of roles, classroom management, argumentation strategies, the use of evidence, and post-debate reflection. Equally important, professional development should take into consideration the actual constraints experienced by Moroccan teachers, particularly class size, curriculum demands, assessment practices, and available instructional time.

Overall, the findings presented in Figure 3 reveal that classroom debate remains significantly underutilized among the teachers surveyed. The fact that only 10% of participants reported actively using debates, compared with 60% who reported neither familiarity nor use and a further 30% who were familiar with debates but did not implement them, points to a substantial implementation gap. When compared with research on Moroccan EFL pedagogy, this pattern appears to form part of a broader challenge in translating learner-centred and critical-thinking-oriented principles into sustained classroom practice. The evidence

suggests that addressing this gap requires more than encouraging teachers to use debates; it requires systematic professional development, pedagogical guidance, curricular flexibility, and institutional conditions conducive to interactive learning. Consequently, the limited use of debate identified in the present study should be understood not merely as an issue of teacher preference, but as an indication of the broader challenges involved in transforming pedagogical innovation from policy and theoretical aspiration into everyday classroom practice.

4.4 Training gaps in implementing debates among teachers

The findings presented in Figure 4 reveal a substantial deficit in teachers' formal preparation for the implementation of classroom debates. An overwhelming 87.5% of the teachers reported that they had never received formal training on how to conduct debates, whereas only 12.5% indicated that they had received such training. This considerable disparity points to a pronounced gap in teachers' professional preparation and raises important questions regarding the extent to which existing teacher-development structures equip educators with the methodological knowledge required to implement interactive and cognitively demanding pedagogies. Given that classroom debate requires considerably more than simply allocating opposing positions to students, the absence of systematic training may constitute a significant barrier to its effective and sustained integration into Moroccan EFL classrooms.

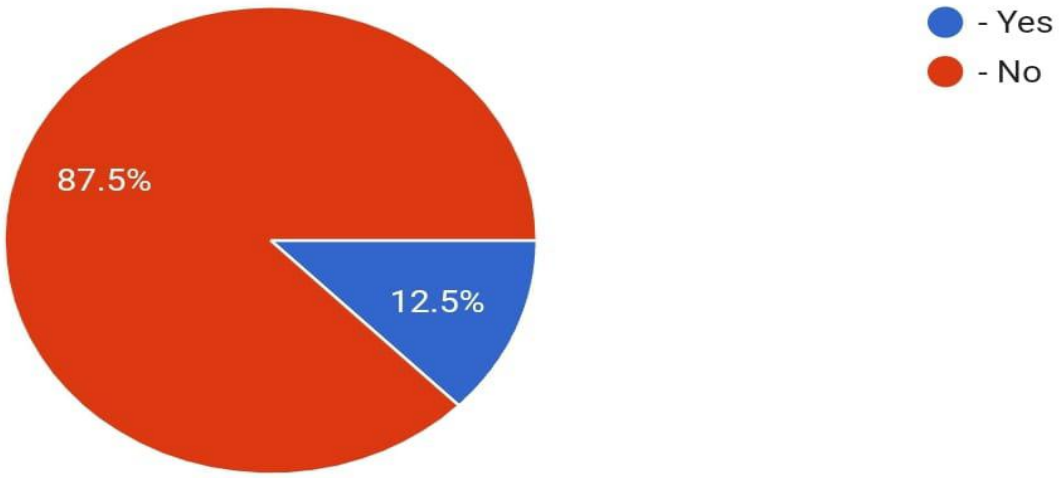


Figure 4: Teachers' Training

The importance of teacher preparation becomes particularly evident when the findings are considered alongside recent research conducted in the Moroccan educational context. Eddimani and Brigui (2024) investigated the use of reading materials to cultivate critical-thinking skills and dispositions among 292 Moroccan public high-school EFL teachers. Although the teachers expressed positive views regarding the value of critical-thinking instruction, the study revealed that a substantial proportion demonstrated inadequate knowledge of critical-thinking skills and dispositions and that the vast majority did not regularly develop or select materials specifically intended to cultivate such abilities. The parallel with the present findings is significant. In both cases, a distinction emerges between the recognition of the pedagogical value of higher-order thinking and teachers' practical capacity to operationalize it. The exceptionally high proportion of teachers without formal training in debate may therefore reflect a broader professional-development challenge rather than a lack of interest in innovative pedagogy.

This distinction is further illuminated by Baddane (2025), whose study examined the implementation of Socratic pedagogy among student teachers at ESEF Berrechid, Morocco. The study conceptualizes dialogic and reflective teaching as approaches capable of fostering higher-order thinking, critical awareness, ethical reasoning, empathy, and a more questioning orientation among future teachers. Importantly, the study emphasizes the need to incorporate dialogic and inquiry-based approaches into teacher-preparation programmes so that prospective educators develop not only linguistic and pedagogical competencies but also the capacity to cultivate reflective and critical forms of classroom interaction. This perspective has direct implications for the present findings. If teachers are expected to use debate as a vehicle for critical-thinking development, such pedagogical practices need to be embedded more systematically within teacher education and continuing professional development rather than left to individual teachers to discover and implement independently.

The relevance of Baddane's findings extends beyond the specific use of Socratic pedagogy. Debate and Socratic dialogue share an important pedagogical principle: both position questioning, reasoning, interaction, and reflection at the centre of the learning

process. Effective debate requires teachers to formulate thought-provoking questions, encourage students to justify their claims, facilitate interaction between contrasting positions, and create opportunities for reflection following the discussion. Consequently, insufficient preparation in dialogic pedagogy may limit teachers' confidence in implementing debate-based activities. The present finding that nearly nine out of ten teachers have received no formal training therefore suggests a potentially important weakness in the professional preparation necessary for shifting from predominantly teacher-directed instruction towards more dialogic classroom practices.

The findings of Eddimani and Brigui (2024) further strengthen this interpretation because their study demonstrates that positive teacher attitudes towards critical thinking do not necessarily translate into corresponding classroom practices. This distinction is particularly important for the present investigation. The limited implementation of debates identified among the teachers surveyed should not automatically be interpreted as evidence that teachers reject debate or do not appreciate its potential educational benefits. Rather, the findings may indicate that teachers have not been provided with sufficient opportunities to acquire the procedural and pedagogical knowledge necessary to transform an abstract appreciation of critical thinking into concrete instructional practices. In this sense, the training deficit identified in Figure 4 may be one of the factors underlying the limited classroom use of debates identified in the preceding findings.

The 12.5% of teachers who reported having received formal training also deserve particular consideration. Although this represents a relatively small proportion of the sample, their responses demonstrate that formal preparation in debate pedagogy is not entirely absent. More importantly, this subgroup could provide a useful basis for examining whether training is associated with teachers' subsequent implementation of debates. If the trained teachers are disproportionately represented among those who actively employ debates, this would provide stronger empirical support for the proposition that professional preparation facilitates classroom implementation. Such a relationship, however, would need to be established through a direct comparison of the relevant variables rather than inferred solely from the descriptive statistics.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings suggest that professional development should address the practical dimensions of debate implementation, rather than concentrating exclusively on its theoretical benefits. Teachers need opportunities to develop competencies in selecting appropriate and curriculum-relevant topics, designing clear propositions, preparing students for opposing positions, organizing participation, managing disagreement, encouraging evidence-based reasoning, and assessing the quality of students' arguments. Equally important is the development of strategies for transforming debate from a predominantly speaking-oriented activity into a structured opportunity for critical inquiry. This is consistent with Baddane's (2025) emphasis on dialogic and reflective approaches that encourage learners to question, examine, and reconsider ideas rather than merely reproduce established knowledge.

The findings also have implications for the broader conception of teacher professional development in Moroccan EFL education. The evidence provided by Eddimani and Brigui (2024) suggests that teachers may acknowledge the importance of critical thinking while still experiencing difficulties in translating this principle into appropriate classroom materials and practices. The present study adds another dimension to this issue by demonstrating that formal preparation specifically devoted to debate pedagogy is extremely limited among the teachers surveyed. This suggests that professional development initiatives should not simply encourage teachers to incorporate more critical-thinking activities; they should provide hands-on, context-sensitive training through which teachers can experience, practise, evaluate, and adapt such pedagogical strategies to their own classrooms.

Moreover, the findings invite consideration of the role of teacher education institutions in preparing educators for more dialogic forms of pedagogy. Baddane's (2025) research demonstrates the potential of sustained Socratic engagement within teacher education to cultivate critical awareness and reflective dispositions among future educators. This suggests that exposure to dialogic pedagogies during initial teacher preparation may help teachers develop greater familiarity and confidence with interactive approaches before entering the profession. Continuing professional development could subsequently consolidate these competencies by providing practising teachers with opportunities to adapt debate and related strategies to the realities of Moroccan secondary-school classrooms.

Nevertheless, the present results should be interpreted with some caution. The absence of formal training reported by 87.5% of respondents constitutes strong evidence of a training gap, but it does not by itself establish that lack of training is the sole or principal cause of limited debate implementation. Other factors, such as curriculum demands, class size, available instructional time, assessment requirements, students' previous learning experiences, and teachers' individual pedagogical preferences, may also influence implementation. The training deficit should therefore be regarded as one potentially significant explanatory factor within a broader constellation of contextual constraints.

Overall, the findings demonstrate a pronounced deficiency in formal preparation for debate-based pedagogy among the teachers surveyed. The fact that only 12.5% had received formal training, compared with 87.5% who had not, points to a considerable professional-development gap. When interpreted alongside recent Moroccan research, particularly Eddimani and Brigui (2024) and Baddane (2025), the findings suggest that the challenge extends beyond the specific teaching technique of debate and

concerns the broader capacity of teacher education and professional development to equip educators with practical strategies for cultivating critical and reflective thinking. Accordingly, expanding access to sustained, practice-oriented training in debate, dialogic teaching, and critical-thinking pedagogy could represent an important step towards enabling Moroccan EFL teachers to move from awareness of learner-centred and higher-order-thinking approaches to their confident, systematic, and pedagogically purposeful implementation.

4.5 Impact of debates on learners' engagement: Teachers' perspectives

The findings regarding student engagement reveal a clear positive perception of the contribution of classroom debates to learners' participation in the learning process. According to the survey data, 54.5% of the students reported a significant increase in their engagement when participating in debates, while a further 27.3% perceived a moderate improvement. Taken together, these responses indicate that a substantial majority of the students associated debate-based activities with increased involvement in classroom learning. This quantitative finding is reinforced by the qualitative data obtained from the teacher interviews, in which participants generally acknowledged that debates have the potential to make classroom interaction more dynamic and encourage greater student participation. The convergence between the two sources of data strengthens the interpretation that debate is perceived as a more interactive pedagogical practice than predominantly teacher-directed forms of instruction.

This finding is particularly relevant within the Moroccan EFL context, where the distribution of classroom interaction between teachers and learners has been identified as an important pedagogical issue. Riad (2025), in an analysis of teacher and student talk in Moroccan EFL classrooms in Agadir, found that teacher talk tends to occupy a dominant position in classroom interaction. The study highlights the importance of classroom interaction for students' understanding and speaking development while drawing attention to the predominance of teacher discourse over student participation. This observation provides an important contextual explanation for the positive responses obtained in the present study. If students are accustomed to classroom environments in which teachers occupy much of the communicative space, the introduction of debate may represent a significant shift towards greater student agency, interaction, and participation.

The findings are also consistent with El Karfa's (2019) investigation of the communicative orientation of English-language teaching classrooms in Moroccan secondary schools. His classroom-based research found that non-communicatively oriented practices remained dominant, while only a proportion of the observed classrooms displayed strong communicative features. The study identified several constraints affecting communicative classroom practice, including the formal nature of the classroom environment, assessment procedures, insufficient teaching resources, and large class sizes. These contextual constraints are particularly relevant to the present findings because one of the teachers interviewed explicitly attributed the limited implementation of debates to time constraints. Thus, the discrepancy between students' positive perceptions of debate and its limited classroom implementation may reflect not a lack of pedagogical value, but the difficulty of sustaining interactive approaches within institutional and curricular conditions that continue to favour more conventional forms of instruction.

The qualitative evidence further suggests that teachers themselves recognize this potential but experience difficulties in translating it into regular classroom practice. The statement that "Debates could definitely make the class more interactive, but it's difficult to prioritize them with the time constraints we face" is particularly revealing. Rather than expressing opposition to debate, the teacher acknowledges its potential contribution to classroom interaction while simultaneously identifying time as a practical constraint. This distinction is important because it suggests that teachers' limited use of debate may be better understood as an implementation problem than as an attitudinal rejection of the approach. The finding therefore complements the quantitative evidence by revealing a tension between the pedagogical potential of debate and the structural realities of classroom practice.

The relationship between learner-centred pedagogy and contextual constraints has also been documented in Moroccan EFL research. Ghaicha and Oulad Daoud (2018) found that Moroccan secondary-school EFL teachers generally possessed positive perceptions and a good understanding of learner-centred teaching, yet constraints such as standardized curricula, examination requirements, insufficient materials, and large class sizes encouraged teachers to retain elements of traditional teaching. This finding offers a particularly useful interpretation of the present results. Debate is inherently compatible with learner-centred instruction because it transfers a considerable portion of classroom responsibility to learners; however, its successful implementation requires time for preparation, interaction, argumentation, and feedback. Consequently, even teachers who recognize its potential may find it difficult to incorporate it regularly when curricular and assessment pressures encourage more time-efficient teacher-fronted practices.

4.5.1 Debates as a tool for understanding different perspectives: Teachers' recognition of value

The quantitative findings indicate an exceptionally strong student endorsement of the role of debates in broadening their understanding of different perspectives. All students surveyed (100%) either agreed or strongly agreed that debates help them understand different viewpoints, with 66.7% expressing strong agreement. This result is corroborated by the teacher interviews, in which most participants recognized that debate provides learners with opportunities to encounter alternative positions and examine issues from multiple angles. The convergence between student and teacher perspectives is particularly significant

because it demonstrates that the perceived value of debate is not confined to one participant group. Rather, both learners and teachers appear to recognize its potential to expand the range of ideas to which students are exposed.

The qualitative responses suggest that teachers associate this process of perspective-taking with the development of reasoning. One participant observed that "Debates encourage students to see issues from multiple angles, which is crucial for developing their reasoning skills." This observation is pedagogically significant because understanding alternative perspectives constitutes more than simply being exposed to different opinions. It requires learners to listen attentively, identify the assumptions underlying competing positions, evaluate the arguments presented, and consider whether their initial interpretation remains defensible in light of new information. Debate can therefore provide a structured context in which disagreement becomes a resource for learning rather than merely an obstacle to classroom harmony.

This interpretation is consistent with Baddane's (2025) Moroccan research on Socratic pedagogy and dialogic teaching. Her study, conducted with student teachers at ESEF Berrechid, conceptualizes sustained questioning and dialogue as means of fostering critical awareness, higher-order thinking, ethical reasoning, empathy, and culturally sensitive perspectives. Although Socratic dialogue and formal classroom debate are not identical pedagogical practices, they share an emphasis on questioning, justification, reflection, and engagement with alternative perspectives. Baddane's findings therefore provide a useful theoretical and contextual basis for understanding why teachers in the present study associate debate with the ability to view issues from multiple angles.

The importance of perspective-taking can also be understood through recent Moroccan research on teachers' conceptions of critical thinking. Merabti and Benmhamed (2024) found that Moroccan EFL university professors viewed critical thinking as important for fostering independent thought, problem-solving, and active and reflective learning. These findings complement the present qualitative evidence by demonstrating that critical engagement with ideas is increasingly recognized by Moroccan educators as an important educational objective. The present study adds a pedagogical dimension to this broader recognition by suggesting that teachers perceive debate as one possible classroom mechanism through which such cognitive engagement can be encouraged.

Nevertheless, the interviews reveal a significant qualification: teachers' recognition of the value of debate does not necessarily correspond to their confidence in implementing it. Several participants emphasized the need for appropriate training and guidance before they could incorporate debates effectively into their lessons. This finding is important because it reveals an implementation paradox: teachers may recognize the cognitive and pedagogical benefits of debate while simultaneously feeling insufficiently prepared to use it. Thus, the challenge does not appear to be a simple lack of appreciation of debate but rather a lack of the practical knowledge required to transform that appreciation into sustained classroom practice.

4.6 Perceived role of debates in enhancing critical thinking: Teacher recognition

The interview data further indicate that the majority of teachers recognize the potential contribution of debates to the development of students' critical-thinking abilities. Teachers described debate as an activity that encourages learners to analyse arguments, question information, evaluate competing claims, and reconsider their initial positions. One participant explained that "Debates push students to think critically, question what they hear, and even change their perspectives based on new ideas." This response captures several central dimensions of critical thinking, particularly questioning, evaluation, analysis, and intellectual reconsideration. The teachers' perceptions therefore correspond closely with the cognitive processes that the present study seeks to investigate.

The findings are particularly relevant when considered alongside Astaifi and El Kirat El Allame's (2024) investigation of Moroccan high-school EFL teachers' perceptions and practices concerning critical thinking. Their study examined not only teachers' perceptions of critical thinking but also the ways in which it was implemented in classroom practice and the challenges encountered in doing so. The relevance of their research to the present findings lies in the distinction between recognizing the importance of critical thinking and effectively embedding it within classroom practice. The teachers interviewed in the current study appear to share this tension: they recognize debate as a potentially effective means of developing critical thinking, yet report barriers that prevent them from employing it systematically.

A similar pattern can be observed in the broader Moroccan literature. Research by Rouijel and Bouziane (2020) examined Moroccan EFL teachers' and lecturers' perceptions of critical-thinking concepts and instruction and highlighted the complexity involved in moving from knowledge of critical thinking to effective classroom instruction. This distinction is particularly relevant to the current findings because debate should not be treated as automatically synonymous with critical-thinking instruction. A debate may encourage students to speak extensively without necessarily requiring them to evaluate evidence, examine assumptions, or construct logically justified arguments. The teacher's role is therefore crucial in transforming debate from a communicative activity into a structured cognitive exercise.

The recent study by Khalil and Hellalet (2024) provides further evidence of this implementation challenge among Moroccan EFL teachers. Their research involving 127 high-school EFL teachers found generally positive attitudes towards integrating critical thinking into argumentative-writing instruction, while identifying lack of expertise and training, crowded classrooms, and outdated textbooks among the principal challenges encountered by teachers. The parallel with the present findings is striking. Teachers in the current study similarly recognize the potential of debate for promoting critical thinking but emphasize the absence of adequate training and institutional support as barriers to its implementation. The findings consequently suggest that the issue is not necessarily teachers' unwillingness to promote higher-order thinking, but rather the conditions under which they are expected to do so.

The combined quantitative and qualitative evidence therefore points to an important tension between pedagogical potential and practical implementation. On the one hand, students report substantial benefits from debate in terms of engagement and perspective-taking, while teachers recognize its capacity to promote reasoning and critical thinking. On the other hand, teachers' actual use of debate remains limited, partly because of time constraints, insufficient preparation, and broader institutional pressures. This discrepancy is particularly important because it suggests that the effectiveness of debate cannot be considered independently of the conditions in which it is implemented. The pedagogical value attributed to debate by both students and teachers may only be fully realized when teachers have sufficient time, methodological knowledge, institutional support, and flexibility to design and facilitate meaningful debate activities.

Taken together, the findings from the student survey and teacher interviews provide a coherent picture of the potential of debate as a learner-centred and cognitively engaging pedagogical strategy. Students perceive debates as contributing to greater engagement and a broader understanding of alternative perspectives, while teachers recognize their potential to stimulate analysis, questioning, reasoning, and critical reflection. However, the limited classroom implementation identified elsewhere in the study reveals that positive perceptions alone are insufficient to transform pedagogical potential into regular practice. The evidence therefore points towards the need for a more supportive environment in which teachers are equipped with appropriate methodological knowledge and provided with sufficient curricular and institutional flexibility. In the Moroccan EFL context, strengthening such conditions could enable classroom debate to function not merely as an occasional speaking activity, but as a deliberately structured pedagogical practice through which learners participate actively, encounter divergent viewpoints, evaluate arguments, and progressively develop more sophisticated forms of critical thought.

5. Summary of key findings

The findings of the study can be synthesized around three major conclusions.

First, students demonstrate a strongly positive perception of debate-based learning. The high proportions of students reporting increased engagement and recognizing the role of debate in understanding alternative perspectives suggest that debate may provide a meaningful departure from predominantly teacher-fronted classroom interaction. This is especially relevant in EFL contexts, where opportunities for sustained student-to-student interaction may otherwise be limited.

Second, the findings indicate that students associate debate with several dimensions of critical-thinking development, particularly perspective-taking, questioning, analysis, and evaluation of alternative positions. This perception is consistent with empirical research demonstrating that debate can support argumentation and higher-order reasoning when learners are required to justify claims and respond to competing arguments. Research on online group debates has similarly shown that students' depth of critical-thinking processing can increase progressively through repeated debate activities.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, the study reveals a substantial gap between perceived pedagogical value and actual classroom implementation. Teachers generally recognize that debates can promote engagement and critical thinking, yet many lack the training, time, confidence, and institutional conditions required to incorporate them consistently. This gap constitutes one of the most significant findings of the study because it demonstrates that pedagogical innovation cannot be achieved solely by encouraging teachers to adopt new methods. It requires an enabling environment in which teachers have the knowledge, resources, time, and institutional legitimacy necessary to implement those methods effectively.

The study therefore suggests that the limited presence of debate in Moroccan baccalaureate classrooms should not necessarily be interpreted as evidence of teachers' resistance to learner-centred pedagogy. Rather, it may reflect a structural and professional implementation gap. Teachers may recognize the educational value of debate while simultaneously perceiving it as difficult to reconcile with existing curricular demands, classroom conditions, assessment expectations, and their own limited preparation.

6. Pedagogical implications

The findings carry several important implications for EFL pedagogy in Moroccan baccalaureate education.

6.1 Debate should be conceptualized as a pedagogical strategy rather than an occasional speaking activity

The findings suggest that debate should not be reduced to a supplementary activity used when instructional time permits. If debate is expected to contribute to critical-thinking development, it needs to be deliberately integrated into the learning process.

Debate can be linked to reading, speaking, writing, vocabulary, research, and even assessment. For example, students can read several sources before a debate, identify claims and evidence, prepare arguments, participate in the discussion, and subsequently produce reflective writing. In this way, debate becomes connected to multiple language-learning objectives rather than functioning as an isolated classroom event.

6.2 Teacher education needs to place greater emphasis on pedagogical implementation

The exceptionally high proportion of teachers without formal debate training demonstrates the importance of professional development. Training should be practical and sustained rather than limited to one-off workshops. Teachers need opportunities to observe model debates, participate in debates themselves, design activities collaboratively, experiment with different formats, and reflect upon the effectiveness of their practice.

This is particularly important because international research indicates that debate outcomes vary depending on how activities are structured. A systematic review of structured debate, for instance, found considerable variation in debate topics, timing, group formation, and evaluation procedures across studies. Teacher training should therefore focus on how to design effective debate, rather than simply encouraging teachers to use it.

6.3 Debate should be connected explicitly to critical-thinking outcomes

The findings suggest that teachers and students already perceive a relationship between debate and critical thinking. However, this relationship should be made explicit through pedagogical design. Teachers can establish learning objectives related to analysing evidence, distinguishing claims from opinions, identifying assumptions, evaluating counterarguments, and constructing logically coherent positions.

This is important because debate does not automatically generate critical thinking. The international literature provides evidence of positive effects but also indicates that the strength of these effects varies according to instructional design. Consequently, teachers should use debate as a vehicle for explicitly teaching and practising critical-thinking processes, rather than assuming that critical thinking will emerge simply from classroom disagreement.

6.4 Curriculum flexibility is essential

The teachers' concerns regarding time constraints and curricular rigidity have important implications for curriculum planning. If debate is perceived as an additional activity that competes with the completion of prescribed content, teachers are unlikely to implement it consistently. Debate should instead be embedded within existing curricular objectives.

The recent direction of Moroccan curriculum reform is relevant here. The Ministry of National Education has explicitly identified the strengthening of critical thinking and innovation, together with competency-based education, as orientations within its current curriculum-revision process. This creates an important policy opportunity for debate-based pedagogy: rather than being regarded as an external innovation, debate can be positioned as one practical means of operationalizing broader competency-based and critical-thinking objectives.

6.5 Assessment practices

The findings of the present study also have important implications for assessment practices within Moroccan baccalaureate EFL classrooms. The limited integration of debates may be partly related to the predominance of assessment practices that tend to prioritize measurable linguistic knowledge and examination-oriented outcomes over more complex cognitive and communicative competencies. If classroom assessment places limited value on students' ability to analyse information, formulate arguments, evaluate evidence, respond to counterarguments, and consider alternative perspectives, teachers may understandably devote greater instructional time to activities that correspond more directly to assessed curricular outcomes. Consequently, the integration of debate should be accompanied by a broader reconsideration of how learning is assessed. Rather than treating debate as an optional enrichment activity, assessment frameworks could recognize the cognitive, communicative, and reflective competencies developed through structured participation in debate.

In this respect, debate could be incorporated primarily as a formative assessment strategy, enabling teachers to monitor students' development throughout the learning process rather than relying exclusively on final performance. A carefully designed debate rubric could evaluate dimensions such as the relevance and quality of evidence, logical organization of arguments, clarity of reasoning, responsiveness to opposing viewpoints, ability to distinguish evidence from unsupported claims, active listening, and reflection following the debate. Such an approach would allow assessment to capture dimensions of learning that are difficult to measure through conventional written examinations. Importantly, the purpose should not be to reward students simply for speaking frequently or confidently, but to assess the quality of their reasoning and their ability to engage constructively with competing perspectives.

Assessment should also incorporate a reflective dimension. Following a debate, students could be asked to evaluate the arguments presented, identify the strongest evidence used by opposing participants, reconsider aspects of their own position, and explain whether and why their understanding of the issue has changed. Such post-debate reflection would be particularly

valuable because it would transform debate from a competitive speaking exercise into a more explicitly metacognitive learning experience. Students would consequently be encouraged not only to defend a position but also to examine the reasoning underlying that position and recognize the possibility of modifying their views in response to persuasive evidence. This would correspond closely with the broader objective of developing independent and reflective learners.

At the same time, the integration of debate into assessment should be approached cautiously. Given the competitive and potentially subjective nature of oral performance, teachers would require transparent and standardized assessment criteria to ensure fairness and reliability. Clear rubrics, explicit performance descriptors, opportunities for peer and self-assessment, and appropriate teacher moderation could help minimize subjectivity. Furthermore, assessment should take into account the fact that students differ in confidence, linguistic proficiency, and willingness to speak publicly. A student's critical-thinking ability should therefore not be equated exclusively with oral fluency. Combining oral debate performance with written preparation, argument maps, reflective writing, or individual follow-up tasks could provide a more comprehensive representation of students' cognitive development.

Ultimately, the incorporation of debate into assessment would contribute to greater alignment between pedagogy, curriculum, and evaluation. If Moroccan EFL education increasingly emphasizes critical thinking, learner autonomy, communication, and competency development, these objectives need to be reflected not only in curriculum documents but also in the ways students are evaluated. Assessment has a powerful influence on classroom practice; consequently, when higher-order thinking and reasoned argumentation become visible and valued components of assessment, teachers and students are more likely to devote sustained attention to developing them.

7. Recommendations

In light of the findings of this study, the first recommendation concerns the systematic strengthening of teacher professional development. The finding that 87.5% of the teachers surveyed had never received formal training in conducting debates points to a substantial gap that cannot be addressed simply by encouraging teachers to use debate more frequently. Professional-development programmes should therefore provide teachers with both theoretical knowledge and practical training in debate pedagogy. Such programmes could address topic selection, debate formats, classroom management, argument construction, evidence evaluation, questioning techniques, equitable participation, assessment procedures, and post-debate reflection. Importantly, professional development should be continuous rather than limited to isolated workshops, allowing teachers to experiment with debate in their classrooms, reflect on their experiences, and receive feedback from colleagues or trainers.

The second recommendation concerns the integration of debate more explicitly into the EFL curriculum. The findings suggest that teachers often perceive debate as difficult to accommodate within an already demanding curriculum. This perception may be reduced if debate is embedded within existing curricular units rather than presented as an additional activity. Debate topics can be connected to themes already addressed in textbooks and learning materials, thereby allowing teachers to pursue linguistic objectives while simultaneously developing critical-thinking and communicative competencies. Such integration would also help reposition debate from an optional pedagogical innovation to a legitimate component of regular classroom practice.

The third recommendation relates to curriculum flexibility and instructional time. The teachers' accounts indicate that time constraints constitute a significant obstacle to the regular implementation of debate. Consequently, curriculum planners and educational policymakers should consider whether sufficient flexibility exists for teachers to devote instructional time to interactive and cognitively demanding activities. Rather than expecting teachers simply to "find time" for debates, curriculum planning should recognize that meaningful debate requires preparation, participation, feedback, and reflection. Shorter and more flexible debate formats could also be incorporated into ordinary lessons, making debate feasible without requiring teachers to sacrifice substantial portions of the prescribed curriculum.

The fourth recommendation concerns the need to develop context-sensitive debate models for Moroccan classrooms. Large class sizes represent a practical challenge to traditional debate formats in which two teams engage in extended oral exchanges. Teachers should therefore be introduced to alternative structures, including small-group debates, rotating discussion groups, fishbowl debates, structured academic controversy, panel discussions, and debate-to-writing activities. Such approaches can distribute participation more equitably and make debate more manageable in large classes. Developing materials specifically adapted to Moroccan baccalaureate learners would further reduce the preparation burden experienced by teachers.

The fifth recommendation concerns institutional support. The successful implementation of debate should not be regarded exclusively as an individual teacher responsibility. School administrations and educational authorities should create conditions that facilitate experimentation with learner-centred and dialogic pedagogies. This may involve providing access to appropriate teaching materials, allocating time for collaborative planning, encouraging peer observation, supporting professional learning communities, and recognizing innovative classroom practices. Institutional support would be particularly important for teachers who are interested in implementing debate but lack confidence or experience in doing so.

The sixth recommendation is that assessment reform should accompany pedagogical reform. As long as assessment practices primarily reward the reproduction of linguistic and factual knowledge, teachers may remain under considerable pressure to prioritize examination-oriented instruction. The incorporation of critical-thinking, argumentation, communication, and perspective-taking into appropriate forms of formative and summative assessment would create stronger alignment between the pedagogical objectives advocated in curriculum policy and the actual incentives operating within classrooms. Debate should consequently be considered as one possible mechanism through which these competencies can be both developed and assessed.

Finally, the findings suggest the importance of fostering a broader institutional culture of critical inquiry and dialogue. Debate should not be viewed as an isolated classroom technique but as part of a wider pedagogical orientation that encourages students to question, justify, listen, evaluate, and reflect. Such a culture requires teachers to move progressively towards classroom environments in which students are not merely recipients of knowledge but active participants in constructing and evaluating meaning. Within the Moroccan baccalaureate context, this shift could contribute not only to improved EFL learning but also to the development of learners who are better prepared to engage thoughtfully with complex issues, divergent viewpoints, and the demands of further academic and social participation.

8. Limitations of the study

This study is subject to several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the relatively small sample size and the geographical concentration of participants in the Marrakech region may limit the generalizability of the findings to Moroccan classrooms more broadly. Second, the study relied primarily on self-reported data, which may be susceptible to response bias. Teachers, for instance, may have underreported their use of debate-based activities or, conversely, overstated the challenges associated with their implementation. Furthermore, the study did not incorporate systematic classroom observations, which could have provided richer and more objective insights into how debates are enacted in practice, including the pedagogical strategies employed by teachers and the contextual constraints they encounter. These limitations suggest that the findings should be interpreted within the specific context and scope of the study.

9. Suggestions for future research

Future research could build upon the present findings by addressing these limitations and extending the scope of investigation. First, studies involving larger and more geographically diverse samples, including schools from different regions of Morocco, would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the opportunities and constraints associated with integrating debate into classroom practice. Second, longitudinal research could examine the sustained effects of debate-based instruction on students' critical thinking development, academic achievement, and engagement over time. Third, incorporating systematic classroom observations, alongside interviews and other qualitative methods, would offer deeper insight into how debates are implemented in authentic classroom settings and the practical challenges teachers encounter. Finally, further research could explore the use of debate across subject areas beyond English and investigate students' perspectives more extensively, particularly their experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of how debate contributes to the development of critical thinking and learning.

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