



## Improving students' speaking ability through debate contest: A case in Islamic boarding school

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### Abstract

The paper analyzes the effectiveness of debate techniques in the process of learning English as a foreign language and how such effectiveness improves students' speaking ability in the Darul Arafah Raya Islamic Boarding School. Teaching English was previously based on teacher's centered methods focusing only on teachers so learning process seemed boring. As a result, the students were weak in speaking. The study used a qualitative descriptive method as well as class room action research. Data were obtained from responses by the sixth grade students who were given pre- and post-tests. The results show that the students are able to choose and use suitable dictions and construct various types of sentences to express their arguments on the occasions of different motions. Thus, students' speaking ability in the school indicate sufficient improvement after teachers chose and applied debate techniques in learning English.

**Keywords:** debate techniques, speaking ability, islamic boarding school, class room action research, diction

### 1. Introduction

Students' abilities in speaking English well and properly <sup>[1]</sup> may indicate success in foreign language learning and become target the teachers have; students are also proud of having capabilities in speaking local, national or foreign language. In the era of globalization, foreign language learning, for instance English foreign learning (EFL), is paid attention since English is widely used for the interaction among people of various nations and indicates the most widely spoken in the world. In Asia, for example, the implementation of Asian Economic Community Program (AEC) demands the Indonesian human resources to be more creative and competitive; this can only be achieved by mastering a foreign language such as English.

In terms of language abilities, the speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills <sup>[2]</sup> must be mastered by students and of all, speaking skill receives the highest attention in social interactions or daily life <sup>[3]</sup>. Speaking is the most important and the main focus of language teaching <sup>[4]</sup> because speaking skill may involve linguistic elements such as phonetics, phonemics, grammar, semantics, and pragmatics. With these elements, foreign language teachers are required to be more creative in teaching speaking skill <sup>[5]</sup>. Moreover, they face classic problems from students, ranging from students who are shy, or fearful, or who do not believe in themselves. All these obstacles and problems must be resolved by teachers.

A technique that can be applied to improve students speaking skill is a debate technique <sup>[6,7,8]</sup>. From the perspective of health, a debate<sup>9</sup> may also improve students critical thinking and also improve the quality of students psychological health. Furthermore, through a debate, students can obtain other abilities, such as strengthening and enhancing students knowledge on a particular topic, which can attract the attention of students in the learning process, and can help students in analyzing a problem, able to work cooperatively

and collaboratively, training listening skill as well, and can raise a sense of confidence when students are exposed to a problem to solve.

Islamic boarding schools are one of many formal and informal education institutions in Indonesia that implement foreign language teaching in their curriculum. They are better known by general public in Indonesia as '*pesantren*' that prefer formal Islamic education in their base line. But not only subjects on Islamic teaching, they also equip their students with foreign language mastery such as Arabic and English. The Darul Arafah Raya Islamic Boarding School is located in the village of Lau Bakeri Kutalimbaru, Deli Serdang regency, established since 1986, and produced many alumni. Until now the number of students who are studying in this school amounted to 2806 students.

Based on preliminary observations in the school, most students were very enthusiastic in learning English. This is supported by the requirement that all students should communicate in both Arabic and English in their daily activities. During initial observation, I found teaching foreign languages still used teacher oriented method that looks very monotonous focusing only on practices and exercises in a language laboratory where the materials have been displayed repeatedly. The result of interviews shows English teachers have done many things to improve students' speaking but deems not significant and maximal.

It is interesting to run this debate program in the process of foreign language teaching in this Islamic boarding school, since most of the debate motions were about current controversial issues, where normally students are restricted to the access of information. The school prohibited the use of tv, internet or any communication gadgets. Surely, it would be more interesting and challenging for students and demanding the students to be more active and creative when they present their arguments in the debate process. The students were

required to be able to use suitable dictions or choose good words related to the motion, context and situation that they may have never heard earlier and supposed to arrange them into good and intelligible sentences in accordance with the English sentence structure<sup>[10]</sup>. It is therefore become the main objective of this research, namely, to find out whether Islamic boarding school Darul Arafah Raya students can improve their speaking skill after the application of debate techniques.

The research is conducted to answer three research questions formulated as its base line, namely; (1) How are students able to choose suitable dictions for their debate? (2) How are students able to construct grammatical sentences used? (3) Is debate an effective way to improve students' speaking skills?

## 2. Method

In this research, I used class room action research (CAR) method<sup>[11]</sup>. Data collection techniques include observation, interviews, and documentation. The first was conducted to determine the process of how students understand the debating techniques; the guidelines were emphasized on aspects of the techniques and the learning process. Observation was also equipped with observation forms or rubrics which were used as assessment. The second were conducted to know some aspects that are less observable at the time of observation. The questions were arranged with certain guidelines referring to the aspects that needed further attention, such as the students' comprehension on speaking during a debate. The third amplified the data obtained from the observations. Documentation consisted of the students' attendance, daily assessment scores, list, and grades the students obtained in every semester. This was done to acquire a concrete details about the students' English language learning process in their classes as well as the improvement and technique implementation in the debating activities.

Interviews involved teachers and students who acted as informants and determined how far the students could improve their English speaking skill after learning and applying the debate techniques. The documentation was also used as the reinforcement and evaluation tools during the implementation of teaching and learning activities that supported the implementation of research results. Data analysis techniques referred to the flow models, namely data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion.<sup>12</sup>

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1 Students ability in choosing the correct dictions

Having trained the students about debating techniques for three months, I discovered their abilities in choosing the correct dictions to build up their arguments during debate remained a bottleneck on a particular topic. As mentioned earlier at the end of the background, the debates were focused on controversial issues or topics in the community. So, in the implementation of the training, especially when they delivered their arguments, the students often asked for the precision of diction before they organized the dictions into different types of sentence structure. In other words, it was difficult for them to participate in the debate and to build arguments for a motion since they had no previous knowledge about it. For them this was unique because at the same time they had to challenge with other team. They had such problems because

of their limitations in receiving knowledge and information about the motions that I had prepared and given to. There were three motions, such as (1) legalizing abortion, (2) legalizing death penalty, and (3) legalizing polygamy. It seems that they feel difficult in catching the message and this is relevant to what Pawiro argued that message can be translated as having several meanings<sup>[13]</sup>.

During the first motion, I found out some students who joined the training had never heard the word *abortion*, therefore, they seem to be laid down or embarrassed in the debate. Consequently, this situation created difficulties for them in selecting appropriate dictions. Another thing that was discovered was that when delivering their arguments, the students who were supporting the motion apologized in advance to the opposition team, for they were supporting a motion that would be legalized. Their reason for asking apology was because they knew that their support on this motion was against to the teachings of Islam.

In the second motion, students did not experience difficulties in finding appropriate dictions because the motion was familiar to them. But the researchers found out that they often used the verses of the Qur'an and Hadith in building an argument for a debate. Surely, this was a especial concern for me, because in the process of debating it was not allowed to cite religious rules in building an argument. On the third topic they did not experience difficulties anymore in choosing the dictions, because the topic was familiar. Similar to the second topic, I found that they often built their arguments using the verses of the Qur'an and Hadith to emphasise their values and belief. Surely, this needs special concern from me, because in the process of debating, the debaters were not supposed to build up their arguments based on religious verses and rules.

### 3.2 Students ability in sentence construction

The students' ability in making various types of sentences is related to their ability in mastering and choosing the words. At the first session, I asked them to build arguments based on the motion given; from their argument, they seem to use more simple sentences rather than other types of sentences. After evaluation and interview, it was understood that they used more simple sentences due to the limitations of students in mastering the motion and dictions related to it. It was the first time for them to discuss on THE LEGALIZATION OF ABORTION as described above. The students' ability of can be seen in Fig. 1.

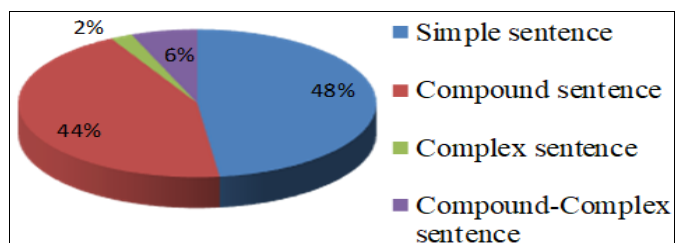


Fig 1: Students' ability in sentence construction at the first session

Unlike the previous session, during the second meeting students showed an increasing ability to construct arguments; this can be seen when they used many compound sentences as well as complex sentences and compound-complex sentences

although while the use of simple sentence decreased in numbers.

The increasing use of complex and compound-complex sentences at the second motion dues to the previous knowledge and informations that they had in relation to the motion focusing on The Legalization Of Death Penalty in the second meeting. Based on direct observations and interviews to the students, they were more aware and interested in this motion. Not only are they interested in this motion but also had they proper knowledge about such motion since they had learned Islamic jurisprudence which allowed death penalty for specific reason. That what made them more motivated to talk and build argument for the debate. The result was that they used long and complex sentences to express their opinions and ideas in the motion. The students' ability is shown in Fig. 2.

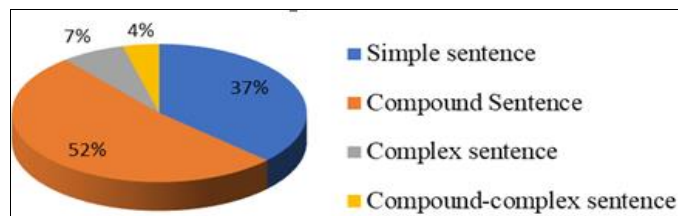


Fig 2: Students' ability in sentence construction at the second session

At the third session, the students showed a significant increase in ability of building argument during the debate. they often used more compound and compound-complex sentences. At this meeting, they showed a significant increase in the use of complex and compound-complex sentences, while the use of simple sentences continued to decline compared to previous sessions. Motion in the third session was The Legalization of Polygamy. Based on observations and interviews directly, the students said they were more aware and interested in such a motion which was related to the subjects that they studied at school. They had good information and proper knowledge related to the motion. Therefore, they had good choice of dictions and able to construct different type of sentences. Their treasury of expressions for this motion was also numerous and diverse, so that they were more motivated to talk and involved in the debate. The implication was that they used long and complex sentences to express their opinions and ideas in the motion. From this third session it was also assessed that the students were no longer shy and embarrassed to speak and expressed their opinions. Changes in attitude and motivation to learn the debate was also seen increasingly and they became more serious. in this third session, I also saw students' mutual and intense interruptions between the group who supported and the group who opposed the motion (see Fig. 3).

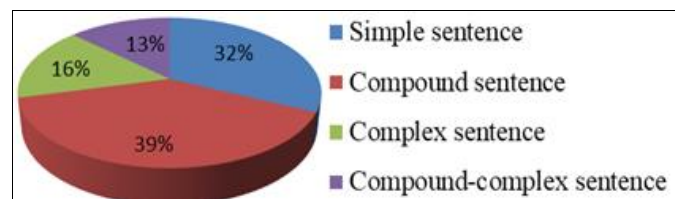


Fig 3: Students' ability in sentence construction at the third session

Another important point found during this research was that building arguments for debate could also improve students ability in writing. It was found from the notes that the students wrote while building arguments. Needless to say that debate could also be a medium to increase students writing ability.

### 3.3 Effectiveness of debating techniques to improve speaking ability

The students' ability to speak English increased significantly since they were initially embarrassed and hesitated to speak but then they were more confident, after going through the learning process carried out using debate techniques. This was in line with the increasing ability of students in choosing the dictions and expressions and compiling them into various types of sentence structures used for the debates. Thus, the use of debating techniques in the process of learning English was an effective solution to improve speaking ability of students at the Darul Arafah Raya Islamic Boarding School.

### 4. Conclusions

Having discussed the importance of debating techniques, I draw several conclusions. Before this research, the students in the school experienced difficulties in speaking and choosing the correct dictions so they were difficult to build arguments. Now, they can be actively involved in the debate with a motion that is not really understood by them or a motion which is not in consonance with their lesson. After learning the techniques of good debate they begin to speak easily and are able to construct simple, complex and compound sentences. When confronting with motions that they have good knowledge about them, the students show no difficulties to run a debate but sentences that they build are of bad structures. After applying the techniques of good debate, the students start speaking and constructing sentences with good structures. The students' ability in constructing sentences are considered good. The improvement can be seen from three sessions. The students were able to speak and were capable of using various types of English sentences. The use of simple sentences which are commonly seen at the first session is of 48% and 37% during the second session and continues to decrease to 32% at the third session. The use of the compound sentence in the first session is of 44%, increases to 52% at the second session, and decreases to 39% at the third session. The use of complex sentence continues to increase right from the first session upto the third session (2%, 7% upto 16%). Whereas, the use of compound-complex sentence which was of 6%, decreased to 4% at the second session and significantly increase of 13% in the third session. In short, debating techniques can be effective ways to improve students' speaking skills.

I suggest that Islamic boarding schools need recognition and fundamental understanding on the debating techniques. Students at the boarding school need a disclosure of proper and sufficient information to support their speaking ability. The information helps them in building arguments for debate. Those who are in charge of maintaing quality of education in Darul Arafah Raya Islamic Boarding School are expected to provide means for students to form a debate forum in the school.

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