



Exploring Students' Engagement in Critical Listening through Debates and Discussions

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Abstract

This study explores students' engagement in critical listening through debates and discussions in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. This study involved 17 undergraduate students at a private university in Indonesia. The research employed a qualitative case study design, utilizing interviews and classroom observations to capture the behavioral, emotional, and cognitive aspects of engagement. The findings indicate that debates and discussions significantly foster behavioral engagement, with most students reporting increased attentiveness and active participation. Emotional engagement was also evident, as 59% of students expressed higher motivation and curiosity when topics were relevant and competitive. Moreover, cognitive engagement emerged through students' analytical strategies, such as evaluating arguments and questioning evidence. Challenges, including limited vocabulary and speech speed, were also reported but were mitigated through scaffolding strategies, peer support, and note-taking. The study highlights the potential of debate-based activities in promoting critical listening, offering pedagogical implications for integrating interactive tasks into listening instruction. It also contributes to the growing body of literature by demonstrating how debates enhance multidimensional engagement in EFL classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

Listening has long been recognized as a crucial component of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, yet it often receives less pedagogical attention compared to reading and writing (Fitria, 2021; Gilakjani, 2016). In recent years, scholars have highlighted that listening should not be viewed as a passive skill but rather as an active, interpretive, and critical process requiring students to evaluate information and meaning (Vandergrift, 2007; Field, 2010; Rost, 2024). This reconceptualization underscores the importance of critical listening as an essential skill for students navigating the complexities of academic discourse and global communication. However, despite its

significance, critical listening is still underexplored in classroom practices, particularly within the Indonesian EFL context (Ramadhana, 2024).

One way to enhance students' critical listening is by embedding them in interactive activities such as debates and discussions. Research has demonstrated that classroom debates promote student engagement, critical thinking, and deeper understanding of spoken input (El Majidi et al., 2021; Nurakhir et al., 2020). Similarly, classroom discussions have been found to facilitate active listening, reflection, and interpretation of meaning, allowing students to co-construct understanding through interaction (Tania & Jein, 2022). These interactive formats encourage students not only to listen but also to challenge, clarify, and negotiate meaning, thereby strengthening their ability to listen critically.

The importance of student engagement in the listening process has been widely acknowledged (Graham, 2017). Engagement can involve multiple aspects, such as paying attention, showing interest in topics, and analyzing arguments critically. For instance, when students actively participate in debates, they tend to be more attentive and motivated to respond. For instance, when students actively participate in debates, they exhibit behavioral engagement; when they connect emotionally with topics, they display emotional engagement; and when they analyze arguments critically, they demonstrate cognitive engagement. Studies in online and hybrid listening classrooms further confirm that engagement mediates the effectiveness of listening comprehension and critical thinking (Afiyattena et al., 2024; Khan & Khan, 2024; Jiang et al., 2021).

Despite the emerging attention, gaps remain in how engagement in critical listening is fostered through debates and discussions in local EFL classrooms. Previous studies have primarily focused on general listening comprehension or the use of technology to support extensive listening (Li, 2025). While these studies provide valuable insights, they often neglect the deeper aspect of listening as an evaluative skill. The study indicates that classroom discussions can enhance students' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement in listening activities (Novita et al., 2022). However, research that directly investigates how students themselves perceive their engagement in critical listening during debates and discussions is still limited, especially in Indonesian higher education contexts (Suwandi, 2023).

Therefore, this study aims to explore students' engagement in critical listening through debates and discussions in an Indonesian EFL classroom. By focusing on the lived experiences of learners, the research seeks to uncover not only the challenges they face but also the strategies they employ to remain engaged. Such an inquiry is expected to provide a nuanced understanding of how interactive activities can shape critical listening development, offering insights for both teachers and curriculum designers. The novelty of this study lies in its specific examination of engagement dimensions in the practice of debates and discussions, extending previous works that largely treated listening as a receptive skill rather than a critical and dialogic one.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore students' engagement in critical listening through debates and discussions. A qualitative approach was adopted to investigate how students engaged in critical listening through debates and discussions in one EFL classroom (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Miles et al., 2014). The participants consisted of 17 undergraduate students enrolled in the English Education program at a private university in Indonesia. These students were in their second year and had prior experience with academic listening and speaking courses. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that participants had direct exposure to debates and discussions as part of their classroom activities (Ramadhana, 2024). The inclusion criteria required that participants: (1) were enrolled in an English listening and speaking course; (2) had participated in at least two debate or discussion sessions during the semester; and (3) demonstrated willingness to reflect on their learning experiences through interviews and classroom observations.

Data were collected primarily through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Interviews were conducted individually and lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, allowing participants to elaborate on their perceptions of engagement during debates and discussions. Guiding questions focused on three dimensions of framework of student engagement proposed by Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004), which includes engagement: behavioral (participation and attention), emotional (motivation and interest), and cognitive

(analysis and evaluation of ideas). Classroom observations complemented the interviews by documenting actual behaviors and interactions during listening activities (Lai et al., 2022; Suwandi, 2023).

Thematic analysis was applied to the data following Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase framework: familiarization, coding, theme development, reviewing themes, defining themes, and reporting. This method was chosen for its flexibility in identifying both explicit and implicit patterns in qualitative data. The analysis focused on themes related to how debates and discussions fostered engagement, what challenges students encountered, and what strategies they used to sustain critical listening.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings from the interviews and observations revealed three major themes: (1) behavioral engagement through active participation in debates and discussions, (2) emotional engagement shaped by interest and motivation, and (3) cognitive engagement reflected in students' critical responses to peers' arguments. These results demonstrate that debates and discussions provide a meaningful platform for fostering critical listening in EFL classrooms.

These themes emerged through an inductive analysis of interview transcripts and observation notes, where recurring patterns of students' statements and behaviors were grouped according to behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of engagement. Thematic analysis was applied to the data following Braun & Clarke's (2021) six-phase framework. To ensure the credibility of the findings, data from interviews and observations were cross-checked through triangulation, and emerging interpretations were verified with participants during informal discussions. For instance, expressions related to attention, focus, and participation were coded as behavioral engagement. Statements indicating enthusiasm or enjoyment, such as "I felt excited when the topic was familiar," reflected emotional engagement. Meanwhile, comments showing analysis or evaluation of peers' ideas, such as "I tried to identify strong evidence in their arguments," were categorized as cognitive engagement.

First, the majority of students reported that debates and discussions encouraged them to participate more actively. Out of 17 participants, 12 (about

70%) stated that they felt more attentive and focused when listening to their peers during debates because they needed to respond critically.

Student A : when I know I have to give feedback, I listen more carefully and try to find weaknesses or strengths in my friends' arguments.

This behavioral engagement findings reveal that classroom discussions increase participation and attentiveness in listening tasks. Observational data confirmed that students often leaned forward, took notes, and asked follow-up questions behaviors that signaled engagement with the listening input.

Second, emotional engagement emerged as students described how debates heightened their motivation and interest. Ten students (59%) highlighted that the competitive aspect of debates made them more eager to listen critically, while 8 students (47%) admitted that discussing real-life issues increased their curiosity and enjoyment. This result supports Ucan & Özmen (2023), who argue that dialogic teaching fosters emotional involvement by linking classroom content to learners' personal and social contexts. Similar to Suwandi's (2023) study in an online listening class, emotional engagement in this study was reinforced when topics were relevant to students' lives, such as social media use and environmental concerns.

Third, cognitive engagement was reflected in the strategies students used to analyze and evaluate spoken content. Eleven students (65%) reported that they consciously compared peers' arguments with their own, while 9 (53%) mentioned that they questioned evidence and reasoning presented during debates.

Student B : I try to check whether my friend's argument has strong evidence or just opinion.

Such responses illustrate the critical listening skills emphasized by Fitria (2021), which involve judgment, evaluation, and problem-solving.

Despite some challenges such as linguistic difficulties, speed of delivery, and nervousness, students reported that peer support, repetition, and note-taking helped them maintain engagement. Overall, the findings confirm that

debates and discussions serve not only as a tool for promoting verbal interaction but also as a medium to enhance critical listening engagement across behavioral, emotional, and cognitive domains.

Despite some challenges such as linguistic difficulties, speed of delivery, and nervousness, students reported that peer support, repetition, and note-taking helped them maintain engagement. Overall, the findings confirm that debates and discussions serve not only as a tool for promoting verbal interaction but also as a medium to enhance critical listening engagement across behavioral, emotional, and cognitive domains. Compared to previous studies that focused predominantly on speaking skills in debates, this research highlights the often-overlooked role of listening as an active, critical, and evaluative process.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This study concludes that debates and discussions play a significant role in fostering students' engagement in critical listening across behavioral, emotional, and cognitive domains. Behaviorally, students demonstrated increased attentiveness and active participation during listening tasks. Emotionally, they showed greater motivation and curiosity when engaged with competitive and relevant topics. Cognitively, they applied evaluative and analytical strategies to assess peers' arguments, which reflects the development of critical listening skills. Although challenges such as linguistic difficulties, speed of delivery, and nervousness were identified, strategies like peer support, repetition, note-taking, and lecturer scaffolding proved effective in mitigating these obstacles.

Based on these findings, several suggestions can be proposed. Lecturers should continue using debates and discussions as a method to promote active and critical listening. Choosing relevant topics can sustain students' motivation, while scaffolding techniques such as pre-teaching vocabulary and guiding questions can support their comprehension. Future research may extend this study with larger groups or compare debate-based instruction with other strategies to deepen insights into fostering critical listening.

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