Qabul qilindi: 14-noyabr 2026-yil • Ma’qullandi: 16-noyabr 2026-yil • Nashr qilindi: 18-noyabr 2026-yil

BUILDING ARGUMENTATIVE SPEAKING SKILLS IN INTERMEDIATE EFL STUDENTS THROUGH FORMAL DEBATE

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Abstract: This article is dedicated to exploring the pedagogical effectiveness of formal debate in developing the argumentative speaking skills of intermediate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. Through the framework of methodological decision-making–analyzing *who* to teach, *what* to teach, and *how* to teach–this paper investigates the cognitive, linguistic, and psychological challenges that intermediate learners face in spoken argumentation. The primary objective is to evaluate how structured debate formats foster communicative competence, critical thinking, and the spontaneous articulation of reasoned claims. Conducted as a literature-based conceptual study, the research highlights the critical role of scaffolding, role assignment, and interactive peer dynamics in mitigating speaking anxiety and overcoming vocabulary limitations. The findings underscore the advantages of shifting from rote communicative activities to structured debate, ultimately providing actionable pedagogical strategies for educators seeking to cultivate robust academic discourse and linguistic resilience in the EFL classroom.

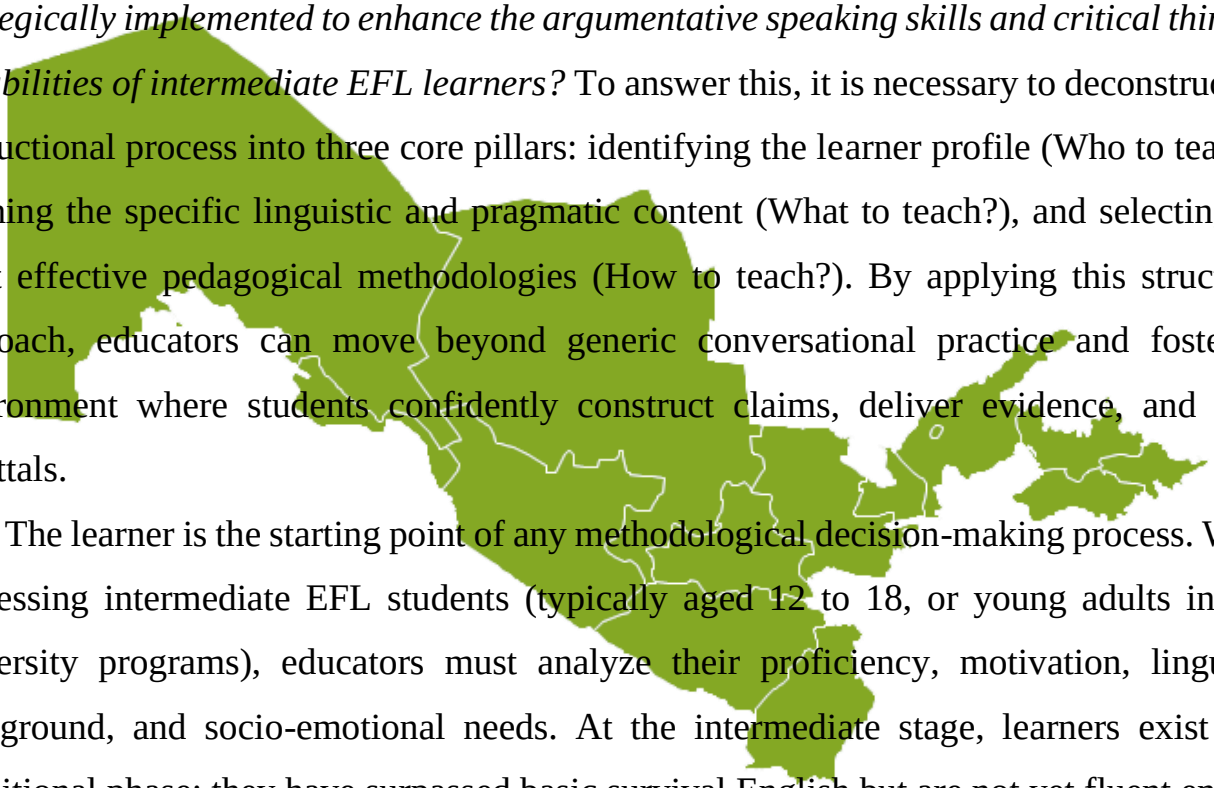
Key words: EFL students, formal debate, argumentative speaking, communicative competence, critical thinking, pedagogical scaffolding.

INTRODUCTION

Effective oral communication in a foreign language requires more than grammatical accuracy; it demands pragmatic competence, the ability to interpret implied meanings, and the capacity to construct logical responses dynamically. For intermediate EFL students,

engaging in argumentative speaking represents a significant cognitive and linguistic leap. While these learners typically possess foundational lexical and syntactic knowledge, they frequently struggle to synthesize this knowledge into coherent, on-the-spot arguments. As a result, communicative breakdowns often occur not from a lack of vocabulary, but from a lack of structured reasoning and interactional confidence.

The central research question guiding this article is: *How can formal debate be strategically implemented to enhance the argumentative speaking skills and critical thinking capabilities of intermediate EFL learners?* To answer this, it is necessary to deconstruct the instructional process into three core pillars: identifying the learner profile (Who to teach?), defining the specific linguistic and pragmatic content (What to teach?), and selecting the most effective pedagogical methodologies (How to teach?). By applying this structured approach, educators can move beyond generic conversational practice and foster an environment where students confidently construct claims, deliver evidence, and issue rebuttals.



The learner is the starting point of any methodological decision-making process. When addressing intermediate EFL students (typically aged 12 to 18, or young adults in pre-university programs), educators must analyze their proficiency, motivation, linguistic background, and socio-emotional needs. At the intermediate stage, learners exist in a transitional phase: they have surpassed basic survival English but are not yet fluent enough to navigate complex academic or abstract discourse without substantial cognitive load.

One of the defining characteristics of this demographic is high speaking anxiety, particularly concerning public performance and peer evaluation. Intermediate learners often hesitate to participate in unstructured discussions because they fear making grammatical errors or failing to find the right words under pressure. This anxiety is compounded in argumentative contexts, where students must not only produce accurate English but also defend a position against opposition. Therefore, stereotyping these learners as "passive" or "reluctant" is an inaccurate hypothesis; rather, their silence is often a defense mechanism against a lack of linguistic scaffolding.

Furthermore, cognitive development at this stage allows for higher-order abstract thinking. Intermediate students, especially those preparing for advanced secondary or pre-university standardized assessments, possess the cognitive maturity to engage with complex social, ethical, and global issues. Their primary need is a structured pedagogical environment that bridges the gap between their complex internal thoughts and their developing English proficiency. When determining what to teach, educators must align content with the specific demands of argumentative speaking. This goes beyond teaching isolated vocabulary and grammar rules; it encompasses receptive and productive skills, pragmatic competence, and discourse organization. Argumentative speaking requires the integration of propositional content, reasoning, and interactional performance into a unified whole.

The core curriculum for this objective must center on the architecture of an argument. Students need explicit instruction on how to build a claim, support it with empirical or logical evidence, and conclude with a reinforcing statement. Frameworks such as the AREL model (Assertion, Reason, Evidence, Linkback) provide a tangible structure for students to follow. Rather than simply expressing an unsupported opinion (e.g., "I think technology is bad"), students learn to articulate a structured claim (e.g., "Technology causes classroom distraction [Assertion] because it interrupts focus [Reason]. For instance, a recent study showed... [Evidence]. Therefore, usage should be restricted [Linkback]").

In addition to structural competence, the curriculum must address functional language and pragmatic markers. Intermediate learners frequently lack the transitional vocabulary needed to signal agreement, disagreement, concession, and rebuttal. Teaching specific linguistic gambits–such as "While I acknowledge your point regarding...", "The evidence suggests otherwise because...", or "In contrast to the affirmative team’s claim..."–equips students with the tools to navigate the interactive elements of a debate. Research demonstrates that mastering these oral argumentative frameworks profoundly impacts students' broader academic competencies, revealing a strong foundational relationship between argumentative speaking and structured academic writing.

Teaching choices–encompassing approaches, techniques, scaffolding, and feedback–dictate the success of building argumentative skills. While Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) provide a theoretical foundation, formal debate serves as the specific pedagogical vehicle. Debate operates as a highly structured task that necessitates both independent cognitive preparation and dynamic, interactive execution.

To lower the affective filter and reduce anxiety, debate cannot be entirely improvisational. The pedagogical approach must normalize preparation. Students should be provided with clear, declarative position statements (e.g., "Standardized testing does more harm than good") rather than vague open questions. Assigning specific roles–such as first affirmative speaker, first negative speaker, or rebuttal specialist–ensures that all students, regardless of personality type, have a guaranteed, equitable opportunity to speak. This differentiation prevents dominant students from monopolizing the conversation and provides quieter students with a predictable timeframe to prepare their contributions.

The most cognitively demanding aspect of debate for intermediate EFL learners is the rebuttal, which requires spontaneous listening comprehension and rapid response formulation. Teachers must scaffold this process heavily. During the initial stages of instruction, educators can employ formats like the "Four Corner Debate," a kinesthetic activity where students physically move to corners of the room representing their stance, allowing them to test their arguments in small groups before addressing the whole class. Furthermore, providing "rebuttal frames" on practice worksheets allows students to focus on the logical flaw in their opponent’s argument rather than struggling to build a sentence from scratch.

The method of feedback is crucial in shaping the learning experience. In a formal debate setting, the teacher’s assessment should prioritize communicative task completion, fluency, and the logical organization of ideas over strict grammatical perfection. Over-correcting minor syntactic errors during a debate stifles the flow of argumentation and reinforces anxiety. Instead, educators should utilize peer-assessment rubrics. Involving the

non-debating "audience" as judges who evaluate arguments based on clarity and evidence keeps the entire classroom engaged and hones their receptive critical thinking skills. This collective reflection fosters a supportive learning community built on the norms of accountability and mutual reasoning.

CONCLUSION

Integrating formal debate into the intermediate EFL curriculum represents a critical shift from passive language reception to active, intellectually rigorous language production. By carefully analyzing *who* the learners are, educators can anticipate the psychological barriers of speaking anxiety and address them through targeted scaffolding. By defining *what* to teach–focusing on the structural anatomy of an argument and the pragmatic markers of discourse–teachers provide the necessary linguistic toolkit. Finally, by determining *how* to teach through role assignments, structured preparation, and peer evaluation, educators create a safe yet challenging environment for language risk-taking. Ultimately, formal debate transcends traditional speaking exercises. It forces learners to think critically about multiple sides of an issue, interact meaningfully with their peers' ideas, and articulate complex thoughts under pressure.

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