

POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF DEBATES: PERCEPTIONS OF EFL PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT: This qualitative case study explores the perceptions of EFL pre-service teachers regarding the potential benefits of using in-class debates. 17 students of an English Teacher Education Programme at a private Chilean university were interviewed via focus groups conducted after each debate activity. The results reveal that debates are considered to promote academic, linguistic, and soft skills and to trigger positive feelings and reactions among students. Although these findings confirm previous studies, there was a unique benefit that emerged from this group of students who also considered debates as a pedagogical tool for their future teaching practice. This new finding emphasises the relevance of incorporating debates in the training of future English teachers.

KEY WORDS: in-class debate activities, benefits of debates, EFL pre-service teachers

POSIBLES BENEFICIOS DEL DEBATE: PERCEPCIONES DE DOCENTES DE INGLÉS EN FORMACIÓN

RESUMEN: El propósito de este estudio de caso cualitativo es explorar las percepciones de estudiantes de inglés en formación con respecto a los posibles beneficios del uso del debate en la sala de clases. 17 estudiantes de un Programa de Pedagogía en inglés pertenecientes a una universidad privada en Chile fueron entrevistados mediante grupos focales realizados después de cada actividad. Los principales hallazgos indican que los debates promueven el desarrollo de habilidades blandas, lingüísticas, y académicas, además de provocar sentimientos y reacciones positivas. Estos resultados confirman los hallazgos de estudios previos, sin embargo, hubo un nuevo beneficio que emergió de este grupo de participantes:

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Los debates como herramienta pedagógica útil en su futura práctica docente. Este nuevo hallazgo enfatiza la relevancia de los debates en la formación de futuras y futuros docentes de inglés.

PALABRAS CLAVE: uso de debates en aula, beneficios del debate, docentes de inglés

1. INTRODUCTION

As part of the teaching and learning process, students benefit when their teachers use learning strategies that promote active participating and engagement with the lesson (Kennedy, 2007). Furthermore, beyond simply learning course content, 21st century education also requires developing “skills that prepare all learners to be life-long creative, connected and collaborative problem solvers and to be healthy, happy individuals who contribute to the common good in today’s globally interdependent world” (Fullan & Langworthy, 2013, p.2).

In that regard, Onen (2016) claims that effective teaching implies a wide repertoire of strategies that foster the development of communication and interpersonal skills and critical thinking. Within this repertoire, debates are a suitable activity that allow students to develop a variety of competences due to the multiple cognitive demands and skills that are required to successfully perform all of the stages of a debate.

Debates have been used as part of the language learning process to foster language skills and improve fluency (Somjai & Janssem, 2015) because they fit within “what constitutes effective pedagogy for the acquisition of a second language” (Ellis, 2005, p.1). Ellis’ (2005) revision of the theoretical and empirical basis of second language acquisition and the practical implications for instruction, helps L2 instructors understand its main principles and hence, to orient their teaching practices to include meaning-focused, task-based activities, input exposure, and output production, among other aspects of language instruction. In this respect, in-class debates may well be seen as a practical pedagogical activity reflecting what we know about how second or foreign languages are learned and what classroom tasks can best meet language learning goals.

However, given that the linguistic and interactional demands as well as the public performance aspect of debate activities can trigger feelings such as language anxiety (Fallahi & Haney, 2007), it is prudent to examine the viewpoint of those who actively participate in this task: the students. From that perspective, the purpose of this study is to explore debates as a pedagogical activity and the perceptions that pre-service EFL teachers have regarding the potential benefits when learning English as a foreign language in the Chilean context.

2. MAIN BENEFITS OF IN-CLASS DEBATES

According to the literature, there are numerous benefits associated with debates when used as a pedagogical tool. Due to the interactive and collaborative nature of debates, several types of skills can be fostered, such as, academic, linguistic and soft skills; in addition, the experience of debating can generate positive feelings.

2.1. Academic skills

For the aims of this study, academic skills will be understood as the basic and complex skills needed to access and interact with content-specific knowledge (Van Wieren, 2011). In this regard, several studies have shown that debates promote various academic skills that students need to develop, critical thinking being one of the most important among these. (Aclan, Aziz & Valdez, 2016; Alén, Domínguez & de Carlos, 2015; Brown, 2015; Darby, 2007; Kennedy, 2007; Najafi, Motaghi, Nasrabadi & Heshi, 2016; Oros, 2007; Othman, Sahamid, Zulkefli, Hashim & Mohamad, 2015; Rashtchi & Sadraeimanesh, 2011; Roy & Macchiette, 2005; Scott, 2008). Specifically, debates allow students to enhance their critical thinking through “investigating arguments, engaging in research, gathering information, performing analysis, assessing arguments, questioning assumptions, and demonstrating interpersonal skills” (Scott, 2008, p.43). Furthermore, students develop the capacity to see and evaluate both sides of the same issue and empathise with the opposite standpoint (Yang & Rusli, 2012; Roy & Macchiette, 2005). This aspect encourages students to widen their perspectives and opinions about different issues and forget their prejudices –at least while debating.

In their study about students’ and experts’ perceptions of debates, Aclan *et al.* (2016) assert that critical thinking is the most important skill in all stages of a debate. This is indeed reflected in the students’ discussions resulting from their own analysis of the various arguments presented and in the way they need to relate the information when debating.

Closely related to critical thinking, research skills can also be developed through the use of debates as a learning activity (Alén *et al.*, 2015; Onen, 2016). Research skills, also referred to as lifelong learning and information management (Aclan *et al.*, 2016), are reinforced –especially in the pre-stage of debate– because preparing debates entails a thorough process of information gathering from different sources. Therefore, students must be able to do serious research and learn how to manage information autonomously.

2.2. Linguistic skills

For the purposes of this study, the concept of linguistic skills will refer to the four skills traditionally developed in foreign language learning, namely, reading, listening, writing and speaking, as well as other aspects that belong to the linguistic dimension, such as vocabulary and grammatical accuracy. Because the use of specific lexis is crucial to discuss any topic accurately, vocabulary learning is one of the language skills that students need to train in the preparation stage and in the actual debate (Aclan & Aziz, 2015b; Aclan *et al.*, 2016). Along the same lines, Aclan and Aziz (2015b) claim that having a good vocabulary base improves fluency in the target language. In fact, the participants in Onen’s (2016) study asserted that debates helped them communicate fluently with others. Similarly, Alasmari and Ahmed (2012) claim that regular practice of debate will improve students’ fluency and pronunciation in the target language. Zare and Othman (2013) assert that debates foster these language-

related abilities because they require a considerable amount of speaking practice and discussion among participants.

Debates also seem to promote overall communication skills (Aclan *et al.*, 2016). On one hand, debating reinforces listening skills; students require a high degree of concentration and are encouraged to listen carefully while opponents are presenting their arguments, so they are able to link ideas and not duplicate points already made by their team-mates (Roy & Macchiette, 2005; Zare & Othman, 2013). Interaction is relevant in this respect because the pressure to reply or intervene encourages students to be coherent and cohesive when providing counter-arguments. In addition to oral skills, Rashtchi and Sadraeimanesh's (2011) quantitative study demonstrated an improvement in reading comprehension skills among debaters. Similarly, Alasmari and Ahmed (2012) claim that the preparation stage involves gathering information from different sources - which enhances students' reading habits.

2.3. *Soft skills*

Soft skills, a concept often difficult to define (Matteson, Anderson & Boyden, 2016), will be understood here as skills that are “nontechnical and not reliant on abstract reasoning, involving interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities to facilitate mastered performance in particular contexts” (Hurrell, Scholarios & Thompson, 2013). Some examples of soft skills are problem-solving, teamwork, an ability to improve personal learning and performance, judgment, leadership, and initiative (Grugulis & Vincent, 2009).

Due to the nature of debates, in which students work in groups, where each participant has a pivotal role in the process, teamwork and collaboration are two of the soft skills required to perform successfully at all three stages of parliamentary debates (Alén *et al.*, 2015). Oros (2007) states that the process of giving opinions and expressing thoughts encourages interaction and learning among peers. Students tend to feel encouraged by their team-mates (Fallahi & Haney, 2007) and may even feel responsible for their team-mates' learning in addition to their own learning during the process of debate (Aclan & Aziz, 2015a). Hence, participating in debates may foster collaborative learning, as students are pushed to work together to achieve their team goals (Brown, 2015). Goodwin (2003) also asserts that debates promote good group discussion because the desire for a good grade encourages students to keep focused and cooperate with each other to achieve the goals of the activity.

To work successfully as a team, students must also develop social or interactional skills. In Al-Mahrooqi and Tabakow's (2015) study, the participants reported that social interaction while debating –with both team-mates and opponents– was stimulating and satisfying. Similarly, the participants of Onen's (2016) study asserted that debates encouraged them to interact with their classmates and teachers. These social skills can then be applied in real life, as illustrated by a participant in Walker and Warhurst's (2000) study, who stated that debates helped students learn how to deal with difficult

or problematic people because they had to learn how to manage situations in which others are not willing to do something.

Aclan *et al.*'s (2016) findings reveal that leadership skills can also be developed in the debate activity by choosing team-leaders to better organise arguments, assign tasks and roles, and give clear directions. Furthermore, leadership can be reinforced when learning how to persuade others and by being open-minded and tolerant (Najafi *et al.*, 2015). Self-confidence also increases when it comes to debates. Both Onen's (2016) and Keller, Whittaker and Burke's (2001) studies reveal that students' confidence in their public speaking skills increased following the debates, which made them feel satisfied with the activity.

2.4. Positive feelings and reactions

Because students must be engaged and take an active role in an academic activity such as a debate, the personal dimension, i.e., how students feel about the activity is also relevant. According to Field (2017), students feel more genuinely willing to participate in their own learning if they are given the opportunity to express their opinions and feelings.

According to several studies, participants have evaluated debates as fun and enjoyable, intrinsically motivating, and exciting, because participants never know what might happen during the activity or what the opposite team is going to say (Darby, 2007; Fallahi & Haney, 2007; Field, 2017; Goodwin, 2003; Kennedy, 2009). Although having fun is not the main goal of debates, it is a positive aspect that may encourage teachers to consider debates as a suitable activity to achieve the academic goals of a lesson.

3. DEBATES AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Current recommendations regarding appropriate pedagogical strategies for the second/foreign language learning are taken from the theoretical understandings in the field of second language acquisition, and are then translated into principles for practical application in the language classroom (Dörnyei, 2013; Ellis, 2005; Nation & Newton, 2009; Ortega, 2009). Because of the wide range of potential skills that can be developed through the use of debates in the language learning classroom, the debate process meets the criteria to be considered one of these principled pedagogical strategies.

For example, among these principles, experts agree that optimal language learning conditions should provide large amounts of input; that is, language learners should be exposed to the target language through tasks that involve listening or reading. In addition to extensive input, language learners need to produce language, to be "stretched to express messages clearly and explicitly" (Ellis, 2005, p. 218). Many opportunities for output in the classroom are short drills; however, as Ellis explains "controlled practice exercises typically result in output that is limited in terms of length and complexity". The benefit of production in an activity like a debate is that it offers

learners “opportunities for the kind of sustained output that theorists argue is necessary for interlanguage development” (p. 218). Because debates involve teamwork, they also fit with principles related to interaction and cooperation between learners (Dörnyei, 2013; Ellis, 2005; Nation & Newton, 2009).

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. *Study setting and research questions*

This study was carried out in tertiary education within a Second Language Teacher Education programme (SLTE) offered by a large private university in central Chile. The length of this programme is eight semesters, throughout which, in addition to developing pedagogical knowledge, the students develop their English language proficiency. For developing the latter, students attend language modules in which the main objective is to provide students communication tools that will allow them to express themselves clearly and accurately in the foreign language, based on their proficiency level (B1). It is within the speaking module that the study was conducted.

This qualitative case study focuses on analysing the perceptions of a group of EFL pre-service teachers on the use of in-class debate as part of their English language module. The research questions guiding this study were the following:

1. What are the perceptions that first-year students of an English teaching programme have about the academic benefits that debates foster in the English language class?
2. How do first-year students of an English teaching programme feel about participating in in-class debate activities?

4.2. *Research design*

A qualitative case study was adopted for an in-depth examination and understanding of the participants’ perceptions of in-class debate activities (Creswell, 2012). Case studies allow for a more detailed examination of an issue in a particular context, thus providing a general understanding of that issue (Stake, 1995). For this case study, focus groups were conducted to gather the participants’ opinions on the topic under investigation.

4.3. *Participants*

17 EFL pre-service teachers enrolled in their first year of a SLTE programme volunteered to participate in the study. All the participants spoke Spanish as their first language and their level of L2 proficiency ranged between elementary to pre-intermediate as assessed by their placement in this language module. Their ages ranged between 17 and 23. They were all attending a language module which

consisted of six components, namely, reading, writing, listening, phonetics, use of English, and speaking. This language module was carried out during the second semester of these students' program and lasted approximately 4 months. The rationale for selecting this particular group of students was based on the teacher's interest in using in-class debate activities as part of the speaking component as a way of fostering communicative skills.

4.4. Focus groups

Focus group interviews were used to gather the participants' perceptions on the use of in-class debates. These interviews are useful as an interactive data collection method and were chosen because they can be used as a method on their own or in combination with other methods (Flick, 2009). The rationale for using this method was also based on the organisation of the debate activity by team (4 students per team), which led to the decision to interview each team of participants.

4.5. In-class debate activities

The debate activities were carried out during a 5-week period during which the topics to be discussed varied in terms of difficulty. The first debates were fairly brief and involved discussing simple everyday issues (e.g., 'dogs are better than cats'); then the assigned topics became more complex (e.g., 'the death penalty'), with the last debate activity focusing on the ongoing educational reform. The teacher's justification for assigning topics in this way was to first let students get acquainted with the Parliamentary debate format and structure and then to focus on the language aspects, thus eliminating extra pressure during the first activities. In each 2-hour class, each group of students (3 groups of 4 and 1 group of 5) participated in one debate activity, two teams debating while the other groups acted as audience and evaluators of their classmates' performance. These students also asked the debating teams questions.

4.6. Data collection procedures

As a first step, the aims of the study were explained to the group of students attending the language module described above. They were then asked to sign a consent form to confirm their participation in the focus groups which were conducted after the in-class debates. Authorisation to carry out the study was also obtained from the Head of the English SLTE Programme. Once the debating activities started, one of the researchers observed each class and then interviewed and audio-recorded each team of students immediately after they had participated in the debate activities. Hence, one focus group per team was conducted in each weekly class. This made it possible to gather their immediate opinions of the activities they had just performed. These focus groups were conducted weekly during the 5-week period in which these activities lasted. The

last focus groups were carried out after the students participated in a public debate which was the culmination of this speaking section. To prompt students to give their perceptions regarding this activity, the researcher asked some general questions and statements to start the conversation in each focus group, such as, *how did you feel in the activity you just performed? Did you enjoy it? Why? Why not? Please share your opinions about this type of activity.*

All in all, 10 focus groups were conducted with a recording time of approximately 15 to 20 minutes each. The length of the interview was sufficient and avoided keeping students out of the classroom for too long, given that they had to continue with class activities. It should be added that these interviews were carried out in the participants' native language to help them feel more comfortable and able to reflect on the activity just performed and express their opinions (Mackey & Gass, 2005).

4.7. Data analysis

The data collected from the focus groups were first transcribed verbatim, then read several times and analysed following thematic analysis. This method identified those common recurring elements that participants expressed in the focus group interviews. This method is useful for reporting data patterns as it allows for organising and describing the information obtained in more detail (Creswell, 2012). It also provides flexibility in that a complex amount of data can be divided into different themes or categories, which can either emerge from the analysis or be predetermined by the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Both these types of codes were used in this study: pre-set codes were elicited from the literature and additional themes were also identified through the reading of the transcripts, thus allowing for codes to emerge during this first process. Consequently, main themes and codes were added as the data were being analysed. This procedure was carried out separately by two researchers for reliability purposes. For this analysis, the Software ATLAS.ti was used. The following tables show the pre-set codes and subcodes taken from the literature, which facilitated the data analysis.

The pre-set codes presented above were the starting point in analysing the data. However, we decided to include emergent codes as well, specific to the data collected in this study. These emerging codes will be presented in the following section.

| Guiding category | Pre-set theme | Pre-set code |
|---------------------|---------------------------------|---|
| Skills | Academic skills | critical thinking research skills lifelong learning information management argumentation skills collaborative learning |
| | Linguistic skills | vocabulary learning fluency/speaking skills listening skills communication skills |
| | soft skills | teamwork social skills leadership self-confidence open-mindedness tolerance |
| Emotional dimension | Positive feelings and reactions | Excitement Enjoyment/fun Intrinsic motivation |

Table 1 *Main benefits of debates*
 source: self-elaboration

5. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Data analysis showed that the pre-service teachers recognised various benefits resulting from their participation in the in-class debate activities, as can be seen in Table 2.

As can be seen in Table 2 above, some of the themes and codes that were identified in the data were also found in the literature. However, from the data analysed, an extra theme emerged, that of *future teaching practice*, which resulted from the notion of debating as a helpful pedagogical tool for the participants’ future teaching profession. In addition, *grammatical accuracy* also emerged as a new code within the *linguistic skills* theme. These codes will be now described and analysed in more detail.

| Guiding category | Main themes | Codes |
|---------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| Skills | Academic skills | critical thinking research skills |
| | Linguistic skills | speaking skill/fluency vocabulary learning <i>grammatical accuracy</i> |
| | soft skills | teamwork self-confidence |
| Emotional dimension | Positive feelings and reactions | Enjoyment/fun intrinsic motivation |
| Pedagogical tool | future teaching practice | learning/teaching tool learning strategy |

Table 2. *Perceived benefits of in-class debate activities¹*
source: self-elaboration

6. PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF IN-CLASS DEBATE ACTIVITIES

6.1 Academic skills

Among the academic skills that the participants acknowledged as beneficial before and when debating, it was observed that they referred particularly to research skills and critical thinking. They mentioned, for example, how the preparation stage pushed them to seek appropriate information on the web; this, in turn, required them to be selective and analytical because not all the websites they found were reliable or suitable for the task objectives. These characteristics are, in fact, part of the *research skills* required for gathering and organising information (Alén *et al.*, 2015; Onen, 2016; Aclan *et al.*, 2016). As can be seen in the comments below, these skills were particularly useful in the preparation stage where the gathering of information requires searching for, reading through, and analysing different sources.

One has to be careful when researching because sometimes a website can present false information, so we need to look for lots and lots of information for the assigned topic and try to select what is best or summarise everything and try to make conclusions of what we are looking for (P.5)

I found it really useful to search for information and on that basis make our own arguments [...] because we usually read a paper and that's it, but here it was like:

¹ The concepts in italics represent the emergent categories, themes and codes.

why is it so? Why not? Which are the important aspects? To find what was useful to help us answer a specific question (P.10)

From the second comment, it is also possible to see how debates encourage students to analyse and apply academic material by making real use of it. Using their research skills in this way also allows them to train their critical thinking, a skill that they also acknowledged as important when debating - as shown in the first comment. They recognised the importance of being well informed and prepared in order to develop their own opinions on relevant issues. Being more critical was also perceived as beneficial for their future teaching practice as seen in one of the comments below.

One develops critical thinking more because we need to have opinions and the necessary knowledge and all that, so I think that I have also improved in this aspect like looking for information and getting informed more about different issues (P.1)

I think this is really useful for developing critical thinking and using it when for example the students ask questions or when there are topics related to education which are like controversial, and not only with students but also with colleagues at schools (P.8)

From the various academic skills that debate activities foster, critical thinking is considered to be the most beneficial in the literature. This may be explained by the fact that it is a skill required not only in the preparation stage but also while debating (Aclan *et al.*, 2016); and yet it is also useful in everyday life, as mentioned by the participants. This latter aspect can be evidenced in the fact that the students felt the need to have their own opinions by being more inquisitive and analytical (Scott, 2008) and being able to evaluate more than one position (Yang & Rusli, 2012).

6.2 Linguistic skills

The participants also mentioned the linguistic benefits they gained through debating. They felt that they could use the L2 more, widening their vocabulary by using a more formal type of lexis and attempting to be more grammatically accurate when expressing their opinions.

This has helped me to speak more, to be more confident, to have an opinion (P.7)

I feel that through presenting topics and arguments, all that has helped us to use vocabulary which is much more formal than what we use daily (P.16)

One is even more concerned about whether what I am saying is grammatically correct (P.12)

The first comment briefly illustrates that debates encourage participants to speak more, highlighting how they perceive they are improving their speaking skills and fluency - which does not necessarily entail accuracy. The emergence of this skill in the participants' speech is positive, as speaking is the means they need to carry out the discussion and perform successfully. Regarding vocabulary learning and grammatical accuracy, the participants acknowledged the relevance those aspects have for the success of the activity. In that sense, debates also work as a tool to raise awareness of the concrete use these language systems may have. Finally, even though these participants

did not refer explicitly to other linguistic aspects mentioned in the literature, one of them also refers –implicitly– to communicative skills when stating that debates help them to have an opinion, which is supposed to be coherent with the arguments the participants discuss. As evidenced above, reading and analysing specific information in the L2 and communicating that information to others will indeed, not only broaden students' vocabulary, but also help them express themselves more accurately (Aclan & Aziz, 2015b; Aclan *et al.*, 2016; Onen, 2016).

6.3 Soft skills

The participants also mentioned that the debate activities encouraged them to build their self-confidence. They commented on how nervous and insecure they felt in the first activity, and how those feelings decreased as they gained more experience. Debating even helped them feel more confident when performing other types of academic activities, as can be seen in a comment below.

I think these activities helped me most in building my self-confidence, in the last debate activity I didn't feel so insecure or nervous as in the other presentations I had done before (P.13)

I also felt more self-confident in the last debate as I knew what I had to do, and I was familiar with the structure [of the debate], and I also learned how to control it because before I used to have stomachache before debating, I felt awful, awful but now I feel like I learned to control it (P.3)

I think it was very useful for me to be able to stand in front of an audience and speak confidently [...] after that activity I had to do a presentation [in another module] and I felt more comfortable (P.9)

According to these participants, self-confidence increases over time due to the debate exercise (Onen, 2016; Keller *et al.*, 2001). The positive consequence of increased self-confidence is that students can transfer the confidence they gained through debates to their performance in other courses and tasks. This is of paramount importance since debates help students overcome speaking anxiety, which in many cases prevents them from performing well even when they have the academic skills to do so.

Teamwork was also seen as being promoted through debates because the students felt the need to organise themselves and work as a team to be able to do well. Some participants mentioned that this organisation was a bit problematic when they first started working together on debates, which forced them to identify each member's strengths and to then assign roles and duties.

I think we learned how to work as a team, to get to know us better and also to know our own abilities to be able to stand in front of people, to speak and not to panic, those are skills that take time to develop, it was very useful as we rehearsed quite a bit (P.4)

I think that we learned a lot, particularly, in the organisation aspect [...] we learned how to organise ourselves better (P.11)

From the participants' comments, it can be seen that debating made them reflect on their performance as a team, which also helped them recognise each member's strengths. This kind of organisation is crucial before, while, and after debating since every member in a group has a role to play for a successful outcome (Alén *et al.*, 2015; Aclan *et al.*, 2016). Through debating, participants feel a sense of responsibility, not only for their own, but also for their teammates' learning (Aclan & Aziz, 2015a), and also for achieving good grades (Goodwin, 2003), which similarly encourages collaborative work among team members (Fallahi & Haney, 2007).

6.4 Positive feelings and reactions

The debates also touched upon the emotional dimension of these students' learning. Even though most of them perceived these activities as stressful, they acknowledged that they were also fun and motivating. In fact, from the comments below, it can be inferred that debating was seen as quite challenging, not only for all the data-gathering, preparation and practise it required beforehand, but also for what the performance entailed. In fact, it seems that this feeling of being challenged provoked in them a sort of positive stress, which in the end made them enjoy the activities and feel rewarded by their final achievement, despite all the demands.

It is stressing but at the end it's entertaining because we sort of need to organise and communicate our ideas very quickly and when [the debate] is about to end we need to summarise everything and conclude the idea appropriately, so it's stressing but still entertaining in some moments (P.15)

I like debates very much so for me it was fun and I love the thing about researching about topics because that's good for me and I like to make the arguments, so this wasn't stressing for me (P.9)

The nerves, rehearsing and the preparation, we stayed many hours at university preparing for this [public debate], this is why it went so well (P.2: and we also practised before the presentation, timing us...), it was motivating, very motivating (P.1)

These types of activities, which foster and enhance students' autonomy and active learning (Kennedy, 2007; Onen, 2016), are more likely to generate these kinds of feelings and/or reactions as the students are in control of their learning process, thus of their final academic outcome (Field, 2017). Since the emotional dimension is also important in learning, these findings are quite illuminating and useful because EFL teachers could consider including debates in their repertoire of learning strategies due to the positive feelings this activity triggers.

6.5 Future teaching practice

As future English teachers, the participants were also able to perceive the benefits of debating as a learning/teaching tool that they will be able to implement in their future teaching practice. They saw debates as a complete pedagogical strategy because they foster different types of skills and in addition, serve as a motivating and entertaining

way of encouraging students to use the language. They also mentioned that through these activities they would be able to learn more about their own students.

I think that it is very useful as a pedagogical tool because it is very complete, it involves many aspects of learning and at the same time it is very entertaining so I think it would be very useful for other students, it would be good to use it in the future (P.3)

I think that students at schools are not motivated and this type of activities would help them as they are not common in schools, so it would be a good learning strategy (P.9)

As a teacher I also see this as useful in that apart from making students work together as groups it allows us to see what characteristics each of our students have, perhaps someone has got more charisma for working on the conclusion or s/he is stronger for presenting arguments (P.11)

In the context of this study, these reflections are extremely significant due to the pedagogical implications that pre-service teachers identified; these future teachers went beyond their own experience as debaters and were able to foresee how they could contribute to the learning process of their future students by using debates as a teaching tool. Particularly, P3 acknowledged that there are a wide variety of linguistic skills that are fostered thanks to debates (Aclan & Aziz, 2015b; Aclan *et al.*, 2016; Zare & Othman, 2013). In that sense, this student-teacher appreciated the fact that, with only one type of activity, many linguistic skills can be tackled. On the other hand, P9 perceived debates as a motivating instrument to which s/he could resort when teaching. This finding reveals that pre-service teachers are not only concerned about what they will teach, but also about their future students' feelings regarding the English lesson, thus their learning engagement. Finally, P11 saw the potential of debates in terms of collaborative learning as stated by Brown (2015) and Goodwin (2003). Clearly, group work is also considered a pedagogical tool for pre-service teachers, which is particularly relevant when it comes to learning a second language due to the social nature of language. In summary, it seems that the experience these student-teachers had with in-class debating was not only seen as source of language practice and further academic development but also, and most importantly, as a teaching tool which they may include as part of their personal repertoire of strategies to use in their professional life.

7. CONCLUSION

From the analysis presented above, it can be concluded that the benefits of this activity are manifold when it comes to these participants' training as pre-service teachers and their future teaching practice. The participants not only enjoyed the experience but also felt that the activities promoted various skills necessary for their academic success as well as for everyday life. In addition, they were able to see the relevance of these activities as future EFL teachers; this is perhaps the most relevant finding of this study, given that it has not been reported in previous research. This finding is particularly interesting because even pre-service teachers who are in their first-year

of teacher preparation are able to identify the potential of debates as a pedagogical tool and learning strategy. The participants were able to see the motivating and entertaining aspects that the activity may present to their future students. These aspects may in turn help them engage their own students in learning the language through the several linguistic and academic dimensions that can be developed by performing such activity. In brief, it could be argued that debates are a suitable activity that EFL teachers should consider due to the positive perceptions that these participants –and others in the literature– have reported.

Regarding the limitations of this study, one of them is related to the time it took, i.e., it was a small scale study conducted for only a month. It would have been more enlightening to present results after a longer period of time, in which students had the possibility to be more familiar with debates and, therefore, provide opinions based on a more solid experience with the process.

Despite the small scale of this study, the comments provided by the participants support the fact that this type of activity is an excellent pedagogical strategy, and particularly relevant for EFL learners. The teaching advantages lie in the active, process-based nature of debates, which thus encourage independent as well as collaborative work. In the particular case of these participants, the most relevant pedagogical implication has to do with the usefulness debates have for their future career as EFL teachers. Through the discussions they had in the focus groups, these participants could understand the benefits debates provide for learning English - a reflection that will encourage them to use this activity with their future students. Such outcome relates directly to SLTE programmes as well as EFL teaching contexts similar to the Chilean setting. It suggests that in-class debates are indeed activities to be incorporated in teacher preparation since through them future English teachers will develop and enhance various academic and linguistic skills necessary for using the language. In addition, debating practice gives them confidence to improve their oratory skills, which are crucial for their future teaching work. This outcome also points to the usefulness of promoting debates among in-service teachers or including them among the activities programmed by the Ministry of Education because they may serve as motivating activities to engage EFL students, not only with the language, but also with their world around them –considering the social issues that can be debated.

Finally, since the focus of this study was to discover the potential benefits of debates, studying the other side of the coin could be a relevant topic to tackle. In other words, exploring in depth the negative feelings or barriers that students face when performing debates in English would be enlightening for teachers to know how to deal with those issues. Future studies could also complement these student-teachers' views by enquiring the perceptions of students in other years of the program and also by analysing the use of these activities on a longitudinal basis. This would allow identifying the usefulness of in-class debating across levels and over the years of study. Our assumption is that the perceived benefits of debates on the part of first-year students could be considerably different from those in the last years of the programme due to the amount of time studying and practising English at university.

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