



RESEARCH ARTICLE

EXAMINING THE EFFECTS OF BLENDED LEARNING, INCLUDING EXTEMPORE AND DEBATE TECHNIQUES, ON ENHANCING THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING SKILLS OF SIXTH GRADE STUDENTS: A STUDY CONDUCTED AT TRASHIGANG MIDDLE SECONDARY SCHOOL

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 19th February, 2023
Received in revised form
25th March, 2023
Accepted 15th April, 2023
Published online 30th May, 2023

Key words:

English, Debate, Extempore, Speaking Skills, Blended learning, Technique.

ABSTRACT

The study aimed to investigate the impact of blended learning on the English-speaking abilities of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners, utilizing debate and extempore techniques. The research followed a quasi-experimental design with three stages: pre-observation, intervention, and post-observation. The study included a total of 42 participants, comprising 20 girls and 22 boys in the sixth grade. The experimental group engaged in blended learning activities within a designated classroom, while the control group received traditional English language training. Pre- and post-intervention evaluations of the speaking abilities were conducted for both groups. The experimental group received instruction through integrated learning techniques, which incorporated elements of both online and face-to-face instruction. The study's results revealed that blended learning had a positive impact on students' English-speaking skills. Additionally, the research demonstrated that both extempore and debate techniques were effective in improving English speaking. Based on the findings, the study recommends that teachers incorporate blended learning approaches to enhance their students' speaking abilities. Furthermore, English language instructors are encouraged to explore new methods and employ blended learning to improve student learning outcomes. It is important to note that the study was conducted at a single school, and therefore, the conclusions should not be generalized to other educational settings without further research or replication of the study in different contexts.

INTRODUCTION

In an era of internationalization and globalization, English has become a universal communication tool that connects people (Shih, 2010). Despite English being a second language for Bhutanese, the Royal Education Council, the highest decision-making body in developing curriculum, has considered English as a major subject across all grades. Therefore, students from grades PP-XII in Bhutan are required to pass both summative and formative assessments in English subject in order to promote to the next level. Moreover, Shih (2010) pointed out that due to the globalization of commerce and education, the ability to speak a second language has become an essential skill in workplaces worldwide. Consequently, to pursue their academic journey in higher grades in native English-speaking countries, Bhutanese students must pass an English language test. Therefore, this study aims to find strategies to enhance students' English-speaking skills and investigate the effect of blended learning in improving English speaking, thereby improving the students' chances of success in higher education and in the global job market (Shih, 2010).

Problem Statement: English is a crucial subject in Bhutan, as it serves as the medium of instruction for various subjects such as science, arts, mathematics, and information technology. However, language comprehension issues hinder students' ability to answer questions, even if they understand the underlying concepts. Furthermore, proficient English-speaking skills are in high demand by employers, and graduates pursuing further studies in English-speaking countries must pass language proficiency tests. Blended learning is a relatively new concept in Bhutan, where schools lack proper ICT facilities and internet connections. Nonetheless, the Royal Government of Bhutan has initiated the Digital Drukylul Flagship Programme to provide schools with better ICT classrooms and internet access (Dorji, 2020). A recent study conducted by Wangmo et al. (2023) revealed that both rural and urban students lack adequate opportunities to practice English speaking. This study aims to investigate the effectiveness of blended learning in improving English speaking skills among grade six students and addressing their language comprehension issues.

Objective of the study: Given the rapid development of information and technology, many developing nations have shifted from traditional to blended learning in their education systems. Bhutan has followed this trend, with the introduction of internet and television in 1999 and the recent adoption of online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Against this backdrop, the objective of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of blended learning in enhancing the English-speaking skills of students in Bhutan.

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Research questions

The researcher aims to answers following questions.

- What are the effective techniques that can be blended to enhance students' English-speaking skills?
- In what ways does blended learning contribute to the improvement of students' English-speaking skills?
- How do debate and extempore techniques specifically improve the speaking skills of EFL students?
- Which technique, debate or extempore, is more effective when blended with traditional teaching methods to improve English speaking skills?

Literature Review

Blended Learning

According to Graham (2006), blended learning systems combine face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction, emphasizing the central role of computer-based technologies. Garrison and Vaughan (2008) also noted that blended learning combines traditional classroom lecture and online learning in the teaching and learning process. Lalima and Dangwal (2017) stated that blended learning embraces the advantages of both traditional teaching in the classroom and ICT-supported learning, including both offline and online learning. Graham (2006) identified four levels at which blended learning can occur: activity, course, program, and institutional. At the activity level, it includes both face-to-face and computer-mediated elements. Course level blending involves combining distinct face-to-face and computer-mediated activities. Program level blending often entails a model in which participants choose a mix between face-to-face and online courses or one in which the combination between the two is prescribed by the program. Institutional level blending is committed to blending face-to-face and computer-mediated instruction. Although there are different levels at which blended learning can occur, Graham (2006) also pointed out that teachers and students determine the nature of the blend. Learners can often choose the blend at the institutional and program levels, while the blend at the course and activity levels is said to be prescribed by the teacher.

English speaking skills: According to Asakereh and Dehghannezhad (2015), English speaking skills are crucial for international communication. Lumbangaol and Mazali (2020) added that these skills enable students to express themselves effectively, regardless of language, culture, or country. However, Arung (2016) noted that many students struggle with speaking English due to various factors, including vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and fluency. As such, it is essential for language teachers to find effective ways to help EFL students improve their communication skill.

English speaking skills enhancement through debate and extempore speech: Arung and Jumardin (2016) suggest that debate is an effective technique for improving students' speaking skills, as it allows them to practice speaking and become actively engaged in class. However, students must learn to cooperate and defend their team to become more confident speakers. Similarly, Somjai and Janssem (2015) believe that debate fosters responsibility, creativity, and deeper friendships, while strengthening students' rapport with their teacher. Participating in debate also improves students' ability to speak freely and engage in conversations. Lumbangaol and Mazali (2020) found that the debate technique improved students' ability to ask questions and give explanations. Likewise, Somjai and Janssem (2015) believe that debate is a challenging and highly rewarding activity for those who participate. According to Deepa S (2012), extempore speech helps students think on their feet and express their creative ideas with precision. Furthermore, Assaf and Yunus (2021) assert that extemporaneous speech has a positive impact on students' speaking abilities, helping them to organize their thoughts, expand their vocabulary, and improve their grammar and pronunciation.

Importance of blended learning in speaking skills: Ehsanifard et al. (2004) found that compared to traditional learning, blended learning

results in higher engagement among students. Their research revealed that learners who received blended education performed better in oral proficiency and engagement tests than the control group. Similarly, Pramila and Thomas (2019) conducted a study to evaluate the effect of blended learning on oral communication abilities of students learning English as a foreign language. They discovered that frequent implementation of blended learning led to consistent improvement in the students' speaking abilities. Additionally, Rachmijati et al. (2019) found that incorporating YouTube videos into blended learning was beneficial for students' speaking abilities. Banditvilai (2016) stated that blended learning allows students to enhance their English language proficiency at any time and any place as long as they have access to the Internet. This method also enables them to review lessons without facing criticism or pressure.

Blended learning in Bhutanese classroom: In line with the e-Gov Masterplan 2012, the Ministry of Education (MoE) developed the Education Sector ICT Master Plan iSherig (2014-2018) to leverage ICT as a tool for teaching and learning, as well as to streamline ICT activities, systems, and projects across the education sector (Lhendup, 2020). Despite efforts to integrate ICT into schools, many teachers lack competence in using ICT for teaching and learning, and students are prohibited from carrying electronic devices like mobile phones and tablets during school hours (Dorji, 2020). Additionally, Sherab et al. (2022) argue that teacher education institutions must prioritize improving overall ICT skills and facilities, as well as incorporating blended learning, to fully realize the transformative potential of ICT in education. Furthermore, Wangmo et al. (2020) found that students consider E-learning useful and interactive when supported by teachers and parents. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the effectiveness of blended learning in teaching English to Grade Six students.

METHODOLOGY

Research design and methods: For this study, quasi-experiment was used. In quasi-experiments, the researcher uses both control and experimental group. The researchers have randomly assign participants to the groups. This is mainly done as per the convenient of a teacher to teach in the class. The researchers also interviewed 10 students before the pre-test to check student's prior knowledge on debate and extempore. Interview was used as an additional data information for further validation of the study.

Research participants: Table 1 shows the number of students who participated in the study, which consisted of two sections of grade six students studying at Trashigang Middle Secondary School in the Trashigang District. One section was selected as the experimental group, while the other served as the control group.

Table 1. Number of student participants

Grade	Girls	Boys	Total
Six (A-Experimental group)	9	13	21
Six (B-Control group)	11	9	20
Total students	20	22	42

Research instrument: To achieve the research objectives, the researchers used a mixed-methods approach. For qualitative data, they designed interview questions (Appendix-A) and used them during the pre-test to understand students' prior knowledge of debate and extempore speech. The intention was to gain additional information to determine if students had understood the concept of debate and extempore speech from the PowerPoint presentation and video clips. For quantitative data, students were asked to participate in debates and extempore speeches, and the tests were evaluated using rubrics and observations (Appendix B)

Procedure: The researchers obtained approval from the school research committee, as well as consent from both the students and the school principal. The intervention period lasted for 12 class periods of 40 minutes over 2 months (April 1, 2021-June 4, 2021), and the experimental and control groups were differentiated by a special classroom with proper internet connection, projector, and computers

Table 1. IELTS band descriptors from 0 to 5 Name of the student:

Band	Fluency	Lexical resources	Correct use of Grammar and accuracy	Pronunciation
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> maintains flow of speech but uses repetition, self-correction and /or slow speech to keep going may over-use certain connectives and discourse markers produces simple speech fluently, but more complex communication causes fluency problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Manages to talk about familiar and unfamiliar topics but uses vocabulary with limited flexibility attempts to use paraphrase but with mixed success 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> produces basic sentence forms with reasonable accuracy uses a limited range of more complex structures, but these usually contain errors and may cause some comprehension problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> shows all positive features of Band 4 and some, but not all, of the positive features of Band 6
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cannot respond without noticeable pauses and may speak slowly, with frequent repetition and self-correction. link basic sentences but with repetitious use of simple connectives and some breakdowns in coherence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> is able to talk about familiar topics but can only convey basic meaning on unfamiliar topics and makes frequent errors in word choice rarely attempts paraphrase 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> produces basic sentence forms and some correct simple sentences but subordinate structures are rare errors are frequent and may lead to misunderstanding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> uses a limited range of pronunciation features attempts to control features but lapses are frequent mispronunciations are frequent and cause some difficulty for the listener
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Speaks with long pauses has limited ability to link simple sentences gives only simple responses and is frequently unable to convey basic message 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> uses simple vocabulary to convey personal information has insufficient vocabulary for less familiar topics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> attempts basic sentence forms but with limited success, or relies on apparently memorized utterances makes numerous errors except in memorized expressions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> shows some of the features of Band 2 and some, but not all, of the positive features of Band 4
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> pauses lengthily before most words little communication possible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> only produces isolated words or memorized utterances 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> cannot produce basic sentence forms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> speech is often unintelligible
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> no ratable language as students did not speak properly. 			
0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> does not attend 			

for the former, and conventional instruction for the latter. The experimental group was able to share links and videos for extra information through social media platforms such as Telegram, WeChat, and WhatsApp. The procedure of the action research conducted is as follows:

The pre-test: Planned and developed questionnaire for both pre-test and post-test. The pre-test was conducted for both the groups, experimental and controlled group (Appendix A and B). To test the students' speaking skills, the rubrics was adopted from Pramila and Thomas (2019). The detail of the rubrics is mentioned below.

Intervention Phase: The intervention was provided to both groups, but the control group received traditional lecture-based teaching, while blended learning was implemented for the experimental group. During the intervention phase, the teacher provided instruction on debating and preparing for extempore speeches. However, the interventions were conducted in different settings. The experimental group received online learning through videos and was conducted in a special classroom with proper internet connection, while the control group received traditional teaching in a regular classroom.

The post-test: The post-test was conducted for both the group to study the impact of blended learning. The data were analyzed and evaluated to find out how far the strategy has solved the problem. Further, for experimental group, children were also made to discuss in social media forum such as WeChat, telegram and Facebook.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The data for this study were collected through interviews and from rubrics used to evaluate debate and extempore speeches. The interview questionnaire served two purposes: to assess the students' understanding and knowledge of debate and extempore, and to evaluate their speaking skills in both the pre-test and post-test. The rubrics were used by the researchers to grade the speaking skills of the students, and the same rubrics were used for both extempore and debate. The researchers kept the excerpts from the students' interviews as they were, without correcting grammar, to show the difference between the pre-test and post-test results.

Pre-test and post-test from extempore speech: The study involved recording, coding, and transcribing interviews with students, both before and after the study.

The results included scores for both extempore speech and debate, which were analyzed separately. Before the study, a short classroom interview was conducted to assess the students' prior knowledge of extempore speech. The study revealed that only a few students had a clear understanding of the concept of extempore speech. Additionally, the study found that only 10 out of 41 students had participated in an extempore speech competition previously. Further analysis of the interviews revealed that students had limited knowledge of extempore speech. This was evident from their responses to questions such as "What is extempore speech to you?" and "What is the most important thing to keep in mind when you participate in extempore?". We pick up the topic and speak to everyone. We should not be scared and always be prepared. (S36). Extempore is like picking the topic and talking (41) I think extempore speech is just a regular speech. Before speaking, we need to think twice. We must be intelligent enough for the given topic (S7). As the students had limited knowledge on extempore, during the intervention phase, the experimental group was taught speaking skills tips, language usage, and how to use intonation through power-point slides, YouTube videos, and other English language learning websites. However, the control group was taught through traditional face-to-face teaching, by taking notes on the board. The debate scores of the participants are presented in Table 3 and Table 4

Table 3. Descriptive statistic of pre-test

	N	Maximum	Minimum	Mean	Standard deviation
Control group	21	80	40	50.95	12.90
Experimental group	21	75	30	49.76	13.36

Table 4. Descriptive statistic of post-test

	N	Maximum	Minimum	Mean	Standard deviation
Control group	21	90	55	70.9	9.4
Experimental group	21	90	60	75.2	8.7

The pre-test results revealed no significant difference in the means of the control and experimental groups, with scores of 50.95 and 49.75, respectively. However, following the intervention using blended learning strategies, the experimental group achieved a mean score of 75.2, while the control group achieved a mean score of 70.9.

These findings suggest that students learned more effectively through blended learning strategies than through traditional modes of teaching.

Pre-test and post-test from debate: Based on the students' interviews, it was discovered that many of them had limited knowledge on the topic. Additionally, the researchers observed that the students' speaking skills were poor, with numerous grammatical errors and pronunciation issues. However, the study did reveal that some students had a good understanding of the debate topic but struggled with expressing their thoughts verbally. This was evident during the interviews, where some students found it challenging to speak and provide explanations.

Debate is arguing about the question, say wrong or right. (S1). Debate is the thing where two or more groups talk on a single subject. They could be for the motion or against the motion. (S10). Debate of people talk and challenge to win. (S11). For the question, *have you ever participated in debate*, 17 out of 41 students has mentioned that they did participated once in other subject. For the question, what are the important thing they need to keep in mind while debating, many students agreed that speaking skills and confidence are important. This was evident from students responds:

We need skills to talk and understanding. When we participate we need confidence, speaking, listening and eye contact. (S20). The important thing is we should not be ashamed, we should tell the pronunciation correctly. (S16). We should remember what they said and focus on everyone (S2). During the intervention phase, the experimental group was taught debating skills, language use, and how to debate using PowerPoint slides, YouTube videos, and other English language learning websites. In contrast, the control group received traditional face-to-face teaching, where notes were written on the board. In both the experimental and control groups, students were divided into groups of two, with 10 students assigned to argue for the motion and 10 students assigned to oppose the points. In both groups, one student was designated as a moderator. Students were given three minutes to speak during the debate. During the pre-test, students were given a topic to debate without any intervention. It was found that the students' speaking skills were not sufficient. Table 5 and Table 6 illustrate the pre-test and post-test scores of the debate.

Table 5. Descriptive statistic of pre-test (Debate)

	N	Maximum	Minimum	Mean	Standard deviation
Control group	21	75	45	56.6	9.1
Experimental	21	75	45	56.1	9.06

The Table 5 indicated that control group and experimental group has no difference in the score during debate.

Table 6. Descriptive statistic of post-test (Debate)

	N	Maximum	Minimum	Mean	Standard deviation
Control group	21	90	55	67.1	9.5
Experimental	21	95	55	73.5	10.5

The table presented in this study demonstrates that blended learning has a significant impact on enhancing English speaking skills compared to the traditional method of teaching and learning. The post-test results revealed that the experimental group scored an average mean of 73.5, while the control group scored 67.1, indicating the effectiveness of blended learning in enhancing speaking skills. The findings of this study are consistent with Guangying's (2014) assertion that blended learning is effective in promoting teacher and student initiative and enhancing learner autonomy, as well as Albiladi and Alshareef's (2019) findings that blended learning helps to develop language skills, improve the English learning environment, and boost students' motivation to learn the language. The pre-test and post-test results showed that the experimental group outperformed the control

group in both extempore and debate, indicating that blended learning is a more effective mode of teaching and learning compared to the traditional method. It was observed that both extempore and debate techniques can be blended to enhance EFL students' speaking skills, and the study showed no significant difference in means between the control and experimental group in the post-test and pre-test for these two different techniques.

CONCLUSION

To enhance students' English-speaking abilities, the study utilized quasi-experiments to explore blended learning methodologies that incorporated debate and the extempore technique. The initial data was collected in April 2022, and the researchers implemented the blended learning strategies for the experimental group over a period of two months, providing 120 minutes of intervention per week. Meanwhile, the control group received traditional face-to-face instruction. The data for this study was collected in July 2022, and the findings revealed that blended learning had a positive impact on improving students' speaking abilities. Furthermore, it highlighted the effectiveness of utilizing extempore and debate techniques in enhancing students' English-speaking skill.

Recommendation

The findings of this study suggest the following recommendations for further research:

- Further investigation can be done to explore the effectiveness of blended learning in enhancing English speaking skills by incorporating other techniques in addition to debate and extempore.
- Future studies can explore the potential of different blended learning strategies to enhance speaking skills of EFL students.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of debate and extempore techniques in improving speaking skills of EFL students in other grade levels and with larger sample sizes.

Limitation: The findings of this study are limited to the sample size of one school and cannot be generalized to other schools. Furthermore, the researchers were not native English speakers, and thus, future studies with diverse samples across different grade levels are recommended to validate the results.

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Appendix A

Here is an edited version: This interview questionnaire was used before the pre-test to gather information about students' conceptual understanding of debate and extempore speech. Part I - Debate:

- What is your understanding of 'Debate'?
- Have you ever participated in a debate before?
- What are the important things to keep in mind when participating in a debate?

Part II - Extempore Speech:

- What does 'Extempore Speech' mean to you?
- Have you ever participated in an extempore speech before?
- What are the important things to keep in mind when participating in an extempore speech?

Appendix B

The following topics are used for extempore speech. The students were given total of 4 minutes, 1 minute for preparation and 3 minutes to speak.

1.Best day of my life	2.School life
3.Flower	4.Talk about student life
5.Picnic	6.If I am principal of this school
7.Teacher	8.My favorite book
9.If I win lottery, what will I do?	10.Good things about me
11.My favorite sports	12.Value of time
13.Why I thank my parents	14.Importance of forest
15.Importance of hard work	16.What you have to do during covid-19 period
17.Water	18.Waste management
19.Examination	20.Love
21.Technologies and its impact	22.Education
23.Good students	24.Teacher

Debate topics

- Health is more important than wealth.
- City life is better than rural life.
- Reading is a better method for learning language than writing.
