



The role of debate in enhancing students' English-speaking skills in lower secondary schools of Nyabihu District, Rwanda

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed at assessing the extent to which debates are implemented in teaching and learning activities, identifying the benefits of debates in enhancing students' English-speaking skills, and evaluating the challenges faced in implementing debates during teaching and learning at G. S. Kareba and G. S. Jenda, selected in Nyabihu district. This research referred to constructivism and behaviorism theories. It employed a descriptive research design and targeted 1280 of the overall population from both schools. The sample size of 128, consisting of 93 lower secondary students, 31 teachers, and 4 administrative staff, was selected by using stratified probability and purposive sampling techniques. Quantitative data were collected from teachers and students by using questionnaires. On the other hand, qualitative data were collected from school leaders by using interviews. By the end, this study discovered that 73.4% of student participants participate in debates on a weekly basis, while 20.3% participate monthly. Furthermore, the students' pronunciation and responding skills were generally developed (100%) as a result of debates, followed by increased confidence in public speaking and vocabulary development. The most significant challenges include the students' lack of confidence in speaking English, reported by 100% of respondents, the lack of resources (93.0%), and fear of making mistakes (83.6%). Finally, the students are recommended to actively participate in debate sessions to enhance their English-speaking skills and take advantage of further opportunities related to practicing public speaking and engaging in discussions. Teachers, on the other side, should create an encouraging environment where students feel comfortable expressing their opinions, while the school leaders should provide necessary resources and follow up.

Keywords: Benefits of Debate, Challenges, Implementation of Debate, Lower Secondary Schools, Speaking Skills

I. INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, effective communication in the English language has become more fundamental because of its role as a transnational language in different areas of life, including business, education, and technology. According to Bakuriyehe et al. (2025) and Otieno and Saiteu (2023), the English language is used as a channel of teaching and learning in various nations. In line with that, debates have been identified as an efficient tool for improving language skills, specifically speaking (Santhosh, 2025). Different researches have shown that debates give learners a chance to apply critical thinking, argumentation, and oral communication—key aspects of language competence (Ghafar, 2024). Learning institutions have globally included debates in their curricula, accepting their effect on the development of students' self-confidence, fluency, and general language correctness (Normurodova et al., 2021). However, challenges



remain, particularly in countries where English is not a native language, where exposure to the language, resources, and teaching strategies are inadequate (Ghafar, 2024).

In Africa, the implementation of debates in schools as an educational strategy has recently gained momentum (Neza & Owino, 2025). As many countries in Africa have adopted English as either a medium of instruction or an official language in teaching, learning, and assessment (Bakuriyehe et al., 2025), the improvement of learners' speaking skills in English is a priority (Plonski et al., 2013; Baziganya et al., 2024). In Nigeria and Kenya, for example, studies have emphasized the role of debates in boosting learners' language skills, critical thinking, and academic performance (Neza & Owino, 2025; Baziganya et al., 2024). Notwithstanding these advantages, in many African countries, schools face challenges including insufficient training for teachers, inadequate resources, and overcrowded classrooms that hamper the effective execution of debates in teaching and learning activities (Arung & Jumardin, 2016).

In East Africa, the medium of instruction used in secondary schools is the English language (Otieno & Saiteu, 2023), particularly in Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, and Rwanda (Bakuriyehe et al., 2025). Debates have been incorporated as both a teaching method and an extracurricular activity that supports usual teaching and learning activities by fostering dynamic participation and enabling verbal communication abilities. In Uganda, research has highlighted that students who actively participate in debates demonstrate considerable improvement in vocabulary use, pronunciation, and confidence while speaking the English language (Neza & Owino, 2025). Similarly, evidence from Kenya and Nigeria has proved that debates considerably enhance English-speaking, self-confidence, fluency, and critical thinking skills among students who actively get involved (Jimenez et al., 2024). Nevertheless, gaps in access to training and resources between rural and urban schools frequently lead to unreliable outcomes in language learning across the area (Neza & Owino, 2025).

In Rwanda, after the English language became a medium of instruction at all levels of education in 2008, a significant shift in the education sector is remarkable (Nteziyaremye et al., 2024). Since then, significant efforts have been made to enhance students' ability in the English language, including training teachers and the revision of curricula (Habanabakize & Mukamazimpaka, 2021). On the other side, some schools have introduced debates as part of co-curricular activities for language enhancement. However, the incorporation of those debates into everyday teaching activities is still limited, with particular attention to the rural areas where teachers' competencies in the English language and resources are sometimes limited (Iradukunda & Mugiraneza, 2024). Regardless of these barriers, debates still have some educative implications as an instrument for advancing students' English oral skills, specifically in the lower secondary level where basic language skills are acquired.

At G. S. Kareba and G. S. Jenda in Nyabihu District, debates are sometimes performed; however, their effect on students' English-speaking skills has not yet been assessed. These schools, located in a rural area of Rwanda, face challenges including limited exposure to the English language, where Kinyarwanda is the most spoken language by the entire community. However, anecdotal evidence indicates that students who take part in the debate activities demonstrate more confidence and eloquence in spoken English compared to their counterparts. Therefore, this current study aimed at exploring the role of debates in enhancing students' English-speaking skills in both schools, providing evidence supporting the connection between debates and English-speaking skills.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

According to Neza and Owino (2025), efficient communication in the English language is a key skill in today's interlinked world, acting as a gateway to education, career opportunities, and international engagement. Even though Rwanda adopted English as the medium of instruction in 2008 (Ndizeye & Tabaro, 2023), students in the countryside, specifically in Nyabihu District, still struggle with limited English-speaking abilities. In this area, problems such as inadequate exposure to the English language, limited interactional learning opportunities, as well as the supremacy of Kinyarwanda communication outside the classroom, are noticed. As mentioned earlier, these barriers impede the students' capacity to perform academically and effectively compete at the national and international levels. The limited exposure is worsened by traditional instructional methods that prioritize grammar and rote learning over oral communication. As a result, secondary students graduate with limited English-speaking skills, undermining their capacity to meet the linguistic requirements of higher education and employment (Endriyat, 2019).

In addition, limited studies have been conducted on the impact of debates in the Rwandan context, particularly in rural secondary schools where students experience unique educational and linguistic challenges. Therefore, this study was conceived in order to address the identified gap by exploring the role of debates in improving English-speaking skills among lower secondary school students in Nyabihu District. The findings of this study are, hence, expected to have significant implications for refining English-speaking teaching and learning in rural schools.

Lastly, this study is essential as it offers an alternative means of exposing lower secondary students to the English language by examining the role of debates in enhancing students' English-speaking skills. Whereas,



universally and locally, debates are considered efficient tools for language enhancement, their implementation in rural schools in Rwanda is currently scarce and informal.

1.2 Research Objectives

- i. To assess the extent to which debates are implemented in teaching and learning activities at G. S. Kareba and G. S. Jenda;
- ii. To identify the benefits of debates in enhancing students' English-speaking skills at G. S. Kareba and G. S. Jenda;
- iii. To evaluate the challenges faced by teachers and students in implementing debates during teaching and learning activities at G. S. Kareba and G. S. Jenda.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

This research was conducted based on the following two theories:

2.1.1 Constructivism

According to Jean Piaget's 1980 constructivist learning theory (Waite-Stupiansky, 2017), students actively engage with their environment to construct knowledge. It views the learner as an active agent in the teaching and learning process (Bada, 2015). Debates align with this theory by providing students' opportunities to actively engage in discussions, analyze arguments, and construct knowledge through interaction. This process helps students develop critical thinking (Jimenez et al., 2024) and language skills while applying prior knowledge in real-world scenarios. This theory was deemed essential to study because debates have been observed to develop not only the language speaking skills but also the critical thinking abilities of students who actively participate in them (Neza & Owino, 2025; El Majidi et al., 2021).

2.1.2 Behaviorist Theory

The behaviorist theory by Skinner (1953), as discussed in Vargas (2017), focuses on learning through repetition and reinforcement. This closely relates to debates because students repeatedly use English to articulate arguments and respond to questions, receiving immediate feedback from peers and teachers. In the same context, positive reinforcement, such as encouragement or recognition of good performance, motivates students to improve their speaking skills and increases their confidence (Neza & Owino, 2025; Jimenez et al., 2024).

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Extent of Debate Implementation in Teaching and Learning Activities

The implementation of debates in teaching and learning activities varies significantly depending on factors such as teacher training, institutional priorities, and available resources. In many schools, debates are not systematically integrated into the curriculum but are occasionally used as a supplementary teaching method or as part of extracurricular activities (Normurodova et al., 2021). When implemented, debates are often informal and lack consistent planning or structured assessment. According to El Majidi et al. (2021), teachers may use debates to encourage active participation and critical thinking, but these sessions are sometimes limited by time constraints and a focus on traditional teaching methods that prioritize rote learning over interactive approaches. As a result, the extent of debate usage in teaching and learning activities remains limited, with considerable potential for further integration to enhance students' speaking and analytical skills (El Majidi et al., 2021).

2.2.2 The Benefits of Debates in Enhancing Students' English-Speaking Skills

Debates have been widely recognized as an effective tool in improving students' English-speaking skills, with numerous studies across the world demonstrating the association between the use of debates and the development of oral communication skills. In the United Kingdom, a study by Alasmari and Ahmed (2013) highlighted how debate activities in secondary schools fostered not only public speaking skills but also vocabulary acquisition and pronunciation accuracy. The research emphasized that debate clubs created opportunities for students to engage in discussions that challenged their linguistic abilities, thus promoting language growth. These findings underscore the global relevance of debates as an instructional strategy (Alasmari & Ahmed, 2013).

Various studies revealed debates as an essential pedagogical approach in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. Researchers found that students exposed to regular debates improved in their ability to convey arguments and engage in meaningful conversations in English. The emphasis on argument expression during debates contributed to increased confidence and fluency among learners (Neza & Owino, 2025). Students who participate in debates mostly have better pronunciation, vocabulary use, and confidence in English-speaking than their peers who do not.



The study attributed these improvements to the interactive and practice-oriented nature of debates, which allowed students to repeatedly use and refine their English language skills in realistic scenarios (Neza & Owino, 2025; Baziganya et al., 2024). Similarly, research conducted by Olanrewaju and Ogundare (2017) concluded that debates reduced language anxiety and fostered an environment conducive to active learning.

Globally, many studies emphasized the role of debates in building verbal communication skills in both English-speaking and non-English-speaking students. The studies found that debate participants were better at conveying ideas clearly and responding to questions effectively, demonstrating the universal applicability of debates in improving language skills (Abid et al., 2024). In the same context, research conducted on the impact of debates on English-speaking skills in Kenyan secondary schools indicated that students involved in debates demonstrated better fluency, coherence, and articulation compared to their counterparts. The study also highlighted the importance of school support and teacher training in maximizing the benefits of debates for language development (Neza & Owino, 2025).

2.2.3 The Challenges Faced by Teachers and Students in Implementing Debates during Teaching and Learning Activities

Teachers encounter several challenges when implementing debates during teaching and learning activities. One major issue revealed is the lack of adequate training and experience in facilitating debates effectively. This is a result of some teachers not having received specific professional development in conducting debates, leaving them uncertain about structuring and guiding debates to maximize student participation and learning. Additionally, the limited availability of teaching resources, such as debate prompts, relevant materials, or access to language aids, further hinders their ability to organize meaningful debate sessions. Time constraints within the academic schedule also pose a significant barrier, as teachers often prioritize completing the syllabus over incorporating debates, which are perceived as time-intensive activities (Alasmari & Ahmed, 2013).

For students, some challenges are equally pronounced. Many students struggle with a lack of confidence and fear of speaking in front of their peers, particularly in a second language like English (Neza & Owino, 2025). This fear often stems from limited vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties, and a lack of fluency, which can make participating in debates intimidating. Moreover, students from rural or less-privileged backgrounds may have fewer opportunities to practice English in their daily lives, further reducing their preparedness for debates (Neza & Owino, 2025). Group dynamics can also present challenges, as some students may dominate discussions while others remain passive, limiting equal participation and learning opportunities (Olanrewaju & Ogundare, 2017).

Despite the extensive literature highlighting the benefits of debates in enhancing students' English-speaking skills globally, there is limited research specifically focusing on the practical role of debates towards students' English-speaking skills in rural secondary schools in the Rwandan context. Furthermore, most existing studies emphasize urban or well-resourced schools, leaving a knowledge gap regarding how debates can effectively enhance students' speaking skills when integrated into teaching and extracurricular activities in rural contexts with limited resources. In rural settings like G. S. Kareba and G. S. Jenda, challenges such as limited exposure to English remain underexplored. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by examining the role of debates in improving English-speaking skills within a rural Rwandan context, offering localized insights and actionable recommendations to improve English language education in similar settings.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employed the descriptive research design, which is a systematic approach to exploring and documenting a phenomenon as it exists in its natural context, focusing on describing characteristics, behaviors, and patterns without altering the environment or variables. The researchers chose it because it let them get detailed information through methods like surveys, interviews, and observations. This helped them find patterns, connections, and new ideas about the topic they were studying. This design is particularly suitable for understanding the "what" and "how" of a situation rather than testing causation (Grove et al., 2015).

3.2 The Study Site

This research was conducted at Groupe Scolaire Kareba and Groupe Scolaire Jenda schools, referred to as G. S. Kareba and G. S. Jenda. Both schools are public, having lower secondary school level. They are located in the Jenda sector, Nyabihu district, Northern Province of Rwanda.



3.3 Population and Sampling

3.3.1 Target Population

The target population for this study includes students, teachers, and school administrative staff members from G. S. Kareba and G. S. Jenda schools. Students constitute the largest group, with a total of 1280 individuals (623 males and 657 females), of whom G. S. Kareba has 495 (254 males and 241 females), while G. S. Jenda has a larger number of 785 (369 males and 416 females). The 1280 individuals include 1245 students, 31 teachers who participate in debate activities, and 4 school leaders (2 headteachers and 2 deputy directors in charge of studies).

3.3.2 Sample Size

As it is commonly known in research, a sample size is determined based on factors such as the research objectives, population size, and desired level of accuracy (Ahmed, 2024). A well-calculated sample size ensures that the study findings are representative of the larger population and statistically valid, while also being manageable for data collection and analysis (Taherdoost, 2016; Ahmed, 2024).

Taro Yamane's (1967) formula of sample size calculation (Oluigbo et al., 2024; Ahmed, 2024) was employed in this study to determine the sample size for students. Therefore, researchers selected 128 participants, consisting of 93 lower secondary students, 31 lower secondary teachers, and 4 administrative staff.

Table 1

Selection of Participants from their Strata

Respondents' Categories	G. S. Kareba			G. S. Jenda		
	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3
Students	15	15	15	16	16	16
Teachers	15			16		
Leaders	2			2		

In Table 1, students from both G. S. Kareba and G. S. Jenda were stratified by grade level (S1, S2, and S3). From each grade, a proportional number of students was randomly selected. At G. S. Kareba, 15 students were chosen from each grade, resulting in a total of 45 students. At G. S. Jenda, 16 students were also chosen from each grade, making a total of 48 students. For the teachers, 15 were selected from G. S. Kareba and 16 from G. S. Jenda. This proportional distribution ensures that the sample accurately represents the larger population at each school. 4 school leaders also, as the smallest subgroup in the study, were all taken.

3.4 Sampling Techniques

In order to select participants, a probability sampling technique called stratified sampling was employed for students (Ahmed, 2024). This was done to ensure that all subgroups are adequately represented in the sample, increasing the accuracy and reliability of the study's findings (Kothari, 2004). Student participants were selected from their respective strata using a stratified random sampling technique, ensuring fair representation of each subgroup based on shared characteristics such as school and grade level (Ahmed, 2024). On the other side, for teachers and administrative staff, the purposive sampling technique was applied (Irakarama et al., 2024; Ahmed, 2024). This approach allows the researcher to capture diverse perspectives while maintaining the proportionality across different subgroups.

3.5 Data Collection and Analysis Methods

This study used both the quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis methods. On one hand, the quantitative data collected from teachers and students were analyzed by using descriptive statistics and presented in tables and figures to organize raw data and summarize and present numerical data in a meaningful way (Bhattacharjee, 2012). On the other hand, the qualitative data collected from the school leaders, through interviews and observations, offering depth and context to research findings (Patton, 2015), were analyzed by using thematic analysis techniques, and then after, were presented by using the paragraphing method. The last approach was preferred due to its flexibility and accessibility that allows researchers to make sense of complex qualitative data by uncovering underlying meanings and relationships.

3.6 Data Collection Tools

In addition to documentation, questionnaires, interview guides, and observation checklists were used to collect the necessary data for this study. As mentioned earlier, the questionnaires were mainly used to collect quantitative data, while the interview guides and observation checklist were applied to gather some qualitative data (Patton, 2015).



IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Demographic Information

As highlighted above, the sample size of this study was composed of 128 total participants. The following table gives the details of the gender distribution of those who willingly responded to the research questions.

Table 2

Gender of Respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	61	47.65
Female	67	52.35
Total	128	100

The findings on the gender of respondents in Table 2 show that the study had a nearly balanced representation of male and female respondents. Out of the 128 respondents, 61 (47.65%) were males, while 67 (52.35%) were females. The balanced distribution ensures that the findings reflect diverse experiences and insights from both male and female students, teachers, and school leaders at G. S. Kareba and G. S. Jenda. Apart from the gender consideration, the following table highlights the general overview of the respondents from both schools.

Table 3

Distribution of Respondents by School

School	Frequency	Percentage (%)
G. S. Jenda	66	51.56
G. S. Kareba	62	48.44
Total	128	100

The findings in Table 3 indicate that the respondents were fairly distributed between the two schools, with 66 (51.56%) from G. S. Jenda and 62 (48.44%) from G. S. Kareba. This near-equal representation ensures that the study captures perspectives from both schools, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of how debates are implemented, their benefits, and the challenges faced in enhancing students' English-speaking skills. The following table presents findings related to the teachers' experience in teaching at both schools.

Table 4

Teaching Experience of Teacher Respondents

Teaching experience	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1–3 years	2	6.4
4–6 years	6	19.4
More than 6 years	23	74.2
Total	31	100

The findings table 4 reveal that the majority of teacher respondents (74.2%) have more than six years of teaching experience, indicating a highly experienced teaching staff. A smaller proportion, 19.4%, has between four and six years of experience, while only 6.4% have between one and three years of experience. This indicates that the teachers are well experienced in teaching. However, since this study focuses on debates conducted in English, the researchers assessed how actively the English teachers participated in the debate implementation at both schools. The table below presents the findings.

Table 5

Area of Specialization of Teacher Respondents

Area of specialization	Frequency	Percentage (%)
English	9	29.0
Social Sciences	7	22.6
Sciences	9	29.0
Other	6	19.4
Total	31	100

The above findings (Table 5) shows that the largest proportion of teachers specialize in either English (29%) or sciences (29%), followed by social sciences (22.6%), while 19.4% specialize in other fields. The relatively high percentage of English specialists suggests that there is a strong foundation for implementing debates as a tool for enhancing students' English-speaking skills. However, the involvement of teachers from various disciplines indicates that debates may not be limited to English classes alone but could also be integrated into other subjects.

4.2 Extent of Debate Implementation at G. S. Kareba and G. S. Jenda

The first part of this study was to assess the extent to which debates are implemented in teaching and learning activities at G.S. Kareba and G.S. Jenda; the following table clearly shows the findings.

Table 6

The Level of Students' Participation in Debates

How often do students and teachers respondents participate in debates organized at school?	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Weekly	94	73.4
Monthly	26	20.3
Once per term	8	6.3
Never	0	0
Total	128	100

The findings in Table 6, generally, indicates that debates are frequently conducted at G. S. Kareba and G. S. Jenda. A majority of student respondents (73.4%) reported participating in debates weekly, while 20.3% participate monthly, and only 6.3% engage in debates once per term. This implies that debates are an integral part of the teaching and learning process at these schools, with regular engagement from both students and teachers. The high frequency of participation highlights the schools' commitment to using debates as a pedagogical tool to enhance students' learning experiences, particularly in developing their English-speaking skills. Furthermore, in line with the assessment of the reason behind some students' and teachers' rare participation in debates, the researchers assessed the occasions when the debates are mostly implemented. The next table presents the results.

Table 7

Debates Occasions

Debates are conducted as: (Select all that apply)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Learning activities	128	100
Extracurricular activities	67	52.3
Competitions	34	26.6
Club activities	40	31.3
Public speaking practices	23	18.0

The above data indicate that debates are primarily conducted as part of regular learning activities, with all respondents (100%) confirming their integration into classroom instruction. 52.3% of respondents noted that debates also function as extracurricular activities, while 31.3% participate in them through club activities. Competitions (26.6%) and public speaking practice (18%) are less common formats for debates. This suggests that debates are widely recognized as a valuable teaching strategy within formal education, reinforcing their role in enhancing students' English-speaking skills and providing opportunities for extracurricular engagement and skills development at the selected schools. Next, the researchers asked about the organization of the debate activities at both schools. The next table highlights the key findings.

Table 8

Individuals Involvement in Debates Organization

Who primarily organizes debates in your school? (Select all that apply)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Teachers	128	100
Students	66	51.1
Debate club leaders	16	12.5
School leaders	98	76.6

Table 8 indicates that teachers play a primary role in organizing debates, as all respondents (100%) acknowledged their involvement. Second, school leaders significantly contribute to debate organization (76.6%), suggesting strong administrative support. Students (51.1%) also participate in organizing debates. Their involvement is not as dominant, indicating that debates are largely teacher-led rather than student-initiated. Debate club leaders (12.5%) play a minimal role, which suggests the need to strengthen student-led debate initiatives to encourage independent critical thinking, leadership skills development, and debate implementation sustainability. Lastly, the researchers investigated the specific roles of the students in conducting the debates. The following table summarizes the findings.

Table 9*Role of Students in Debates*

Which roles do students play in debates? (Select all that apply)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Moderator	31	24.2
Minutes-taker	35	27.1
Participant/Audience	93	72.7
Timekeeper	95	74.2

The data in table 9 reveal that student participation in debates is substantial, with 74.2% actively engaging as timekeepers and 72.7% as participants/audience. This indicates that most students are involved in a supportive role. These findings suggest that while debates are widely attended, efforts could be made to encourage more students to take on leadership roles to further enhance their confidence and public speaking skills.

4.3 The Benefits of Debates in enhancing Students' English-Speaking Skills at G. S. Kareba and G. S. Jenda

Based on the second objective, this study presents some benefits of debates in enhancing the students' English-speaking skills.

Table 10*Skills Developed by Students through Debates at G. S. Kareba and G. S. Jenda*

Skills students developed through debates (Select all that apply)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Vocabulary	59	46.1
Pronunciation	128	100
Confidence in public speaking	79	61.7
Responding to others	128	100
Grammar use	97	75.8

Based on Table 10, in terms of specific skills, pronunciation and responding skills were universally developed (100%), followed by confidence in public speaking (61.7%) and vocabulary (44.1%). Grammar use was also said to be improved for 75.8% of students. These findings, therefore, confirm that debates serve as an effective pedagogical tool for improving students' speaking abilities (vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation) and confidence in oral communication in the English language.

4.4 The Challenges Faced by Teachers and Students in Implementing Debates during Teaching and Learning Activities

In relation with the third objective, the participants were asked about challenges to debate implementation at school. The table below summarizes their responses.

Table 11*Challenges Hindering Effectiveness of Debates at G. S. Kareba and G. S. Jenda*

Challenges hindering effective implementation of debates (Select all that apply)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Lack of student confidence in speaking English	128	100
Fear of making mistakes among students	107	83.6
Insufficient preparation time for debates	95	74.2
Lack of resources or materials for debates	119	93



The data in Table 11 present the major challenges hindering the effective implementation of debates in teaching and learning activities. The most significant issue identified is the lack of student confidence in speaking English, cited by 100% of respondents. This factor is closely followed by lack of resources or materials (93%) and fear of making mistakes (83.6%), both of which contribute to students' hesitation and reduced participation. Insufficient preparation time is also a concern, affecting 74.2% of the respondents. Overall, the above data show that psychological barriers and inadequate resources are the main obstacles, suggesting that boosting students' confidence and providing more learning tools and preparation time are essential for improving debate effectiveness.

4.5 Data from Interviews

All four school leaders reported that debates are sometimes conducted daily as learning and teaching activities and weekly or once a month as formal structured debates at both G. S. Kareba and G. S. Jenda. One of them stated, "We schedule debates every last Friday of the month to allow students enough time to prepare." Another one explained that debates are integrated into English, science, and social studies lessons, where teachers assign motion topics in advance. Briefly, their responses about the implementation of debates revealed that while some teachers actively use debates, others struggle due to time constraints, leading to irregular implementation in certain classes.

Regarding the benefits of debates, a head teacher noted, "Debates have significantly improved students' confidence and fluency in English." Another leader added that structured debate through clubs and inter-class competitions helps promote participation. Two among the school leaders highlighted that schools have debate committees, teacher moderators, and rewards for best speakers to encourage engagement. Another one mentioned, "We also invite guest judges from nearby schools to make debates more competitive. These mechanisms reportedly motivate students to practice speaking English more frequently."

Finally, the leaders also acknowledged some challenges, such as limited time, student shyness, and the lack of resources. One head teacher said, "Some teachers find it hard to manage debates alongside the syllabus due to the limited time." To address these challenges, schools have introduced teacher training workshops during CPD and CoP and allocated specific periods for debates. He further indicated that schools also use peer mentoring, where confident students assist weaker ones, and incorporate simpler debate formats to ease participation. One emphasized, "We encourage teachers to integrate mini-debates in regular lessons to make them less intimidating. These measures aim at sustaining debate activities despite existing difficulties."

4.6 Data from Observations

Via the structured observations, the researchers apparently found that debates are reasonably executed in both schools, with different regularity. We observed that the debates are more structured, occurring monthly as planned in one of the schools, whereas, in another, they were occasionally adjourned due to time constraints. Teachers predominantly used debates in English, science, and social science courses. But certain classes lacked appropriate organization, with their students appearing not ready. The sitting arrangements often followed a classroom discussion and debate format, which promoted collaborative engagement.

The observations reaffirmed that debates considerably improve students' English-speaking skills. The active participation of students noticeably displayed their improvement in fluency, pronunciation, and the structure of their arguments. For instance, in one observed debate on "Should school uniforms be mandatory?" the student participants uttered their arguments with effective expressions and coherent ideas, though some struggled with fear of committing some mistakes. Introverted students progressively increased confidence after being encouraged by their colleagues and facilitating teachers. Inter-class debate competitions also encouraged motivation at both schools, with students practicing during informal sessions. Furthermore, in well-organized sessions, students were actively engaged, demonstrating enhanced speaking confidence and critical thinking.

Even though the above practices and benefits were observed, some difficulties were also experienced among students and some teachers. Students faced challenges including stage fright, inadequate confidence, fear, anxiety, and poor management of time during their argumentation. Due to inadequate language background, junior students showed a need for particular debate activities based on their lower level of language than the experienced ones. Some of the junior ones heavily depend on written notes that reduce their expression freedom. On the other hand, teachers tended to struggle with some large class sizes, unsatisfactory trainings on how to conduct debates, and tight syllabi, making it difficult to allocate time for debates. Some teachers also chose to avoid debates because of classroom-related management problems such as noise or disengaged students that disturb the sessions.

4.7 Discussion

The first objective of this study was to assess the extent to which debates are implemented in teaching and learning activities at Groupe Scolaire Kareba and Groupe Scolaire Jenda. This research revealed that the majority of respondents (73.4%) participate in debates on a weekly basis, while 20.3% of them participate at least once a month.



The analysed data indicate that debates are mainly conducted as part of normal learning activities, as confirmed by all respondents (100%). This indicates that debates are more commonly known as a valued teaching and learning tactic in formal education than as an extracurricular activity. Conversely, some other researchers identified that the extent of debate implementation in teaching and learning activities was very limited, with significant potential for further incorporation to improve students' English-speaking and critical skills (El Majidi et al., 2021). Likewise, in Singapore, debates are not systematically integrated into the curriculum in many schools, but are occasionally used as an additional method of teaching or as part of extracurricular activities (Normurodova et al., 2021). Moreover, the analysed data reveal that students' involvement in debates is substantial, with 74.2% actively engaged as timekeepers and 72.7% as audience. This means that most students play a supportive role in debates. As a result, these findings suggest that while debates are commonly attended, efforts could be made to inspire more students to take on leadership roles to further boost their confidence and public speaking skills, as highlighted above (Neza & Owino, 2025).

As highlighted above, the second objective of this study was to identify the benefits of debates in enhancing students' English-speaking skills at G. S. Kareba and G. S. Jenda. The presented data strongly indicate that debates play a vital role in improving students' English-speaking skills. A substantial number of student-participants (100%) testified that debates advance their English-speaking abilities, particularly in pronunciation and responding skills. Grammar use is also enhanced, as confirmed by 75.8% of the respondents. Additionally, respondents indicated that debates improve their fluency, underscoring the importance of constructive criticism in language enhancement (Neza & Owino, 2025). Similarly, in the United Kingdom, a study by Alasmari and Ahmed (2013) highlighted how debates in secondary schools promoted not only public speaking skills but also vocabulary acquisition and pronunciation accuracy. The study stressed that debate clubs, lesson discussions, and competitions were opportunities for students to participate in English-speaking exercises that enhanced their language abilities, thus promoting their language development (Alasmari & Ahmed, 2013; Neza & Owino, 2025). Other researchers, in South African secondary schools, found that students who attended regular debates improved in their capacity to convey their opinions and engage in meaningful discussions in English. Hence, the continuous emphasis on argument expression during debate activities will always help the student-participants increase their confidence and fluency (Neza & Owino, 2025), leading to their overall performance across subjects as English is the medium of instruction in Rwanda (Nteziyaremye et al., 2024).

The third and last objective was to evaluate the challenges faced by teachers and students in implementing debates at G. S. Kareba and G. S. Jenda. In relation to this objective, the most important challenges identified include the students' lack of confidence in speaking English, reported by 100% of the respondents, followed by the lack of resources (93%), fear of making mistakes (83.6%), and insufficient time for preparation (74.2%). Similarly, these challenges were emphasized by the school leaders throughout the interviews conducted with them. In the same context, other studies found that many students struggle with a lack of confidence and fear of speaking in front of their peers in a second language like English (Neza & Owino, 2025; Alasmari & Ahmed, 2013). On the other hand, according to Olanrewaju and Ogundare (2017), the key challenges that teachers face include inadequate training and experience in facilitating debates, limited teaching resources, lack of access to language support, and time constraints within the school timetable.

V. CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusions

This study sought to generally investigate the role of debates in enhancing students' English-speaking skills in lower secondary schools of Nyabihu District of Rwanda, specifically at Groupe Scolaire Kareba and Groupe Scolaire Jenda. It was carried out based on a descriptive research design, employing quantitative and qualitative research approaches. The first specific objective sought to assess the extent to which debates are implemented in teaching and learning at both schools. Generally, the findings revealed that debate activities are commonly conducted weekly for the majority and inserted into regular classroom activities, specifically in English lessons. Nevertheless, their use is still basically teacher-led, with inadequate student independence or club-based organization. This shows a need to strengthen student-led initiatives and broaden debate practices outside formal class contexts. The study also found overwhelming evidences that debate activities help students improve their pronunciation, responding skills, and building vocabulary, grammar, and public speaking confidence in English language. Respondents agreed that debates foster oral fluency, help in organizing their opinions, resulting into the enhancement of classroom engagement. Furthermore, school leaders suggest that debates not only support in linguistic competence, but also critical thinking and overall academic confidence of active participants. In relation to the third objective, which was to evaluate challenges faced in implementing debates at the identified schools, this research found out significant challenges such as the lack of confidence in speaking English, fear of making mistakes, limited time and resources. Despite these



challenges, this study also noted strong support from teachers and school leaders towards the debates' success. Therefore, the study concludes that debates play a significant role in improving English-speaking skills among students nevertheless some challenges still persist at the selected schools of Nyabihu district.

5.2 Recommendations

This study recommends that the students should actively participate by taking lead-roles in debate sessions in order to enhance their English-speaking skills, confidence, as well as critical thinking abilities. They should always take advantage of available opportunities in debates to practice public speaking and engage in meaningful discussions because this will help them overcome the fear of making mistakes. On the other side, secondary school teachers are encouraged to regularly integrate debates into as many of their lessons as possible to boost active learning and language enhancement; to provide suitable guidance and support to their students, including efficient trainings on debate strategies instead of always taking a lead-role. We also urge the school leaders and other stakeholders in education to provide more resources such as debate materials, create a positive speaking environment, encourage students-led debate clubs, and integrate debate activities across more subjects. These steps and efforts would, further, strengthen students' English-speaking skills in rural Rwandan schools of the same context.

Lastly, as this study was limited in terms of time and resources, we do recommend that the future researchers may conduct further researches on "The effects of continuous participation in debates to students' overall academic success in advanced level of education" or "A comparative study on debate-based teaching and learning and the traditional teaching and learning methods in enhancing students' English overall proficiency".

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