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STRUCTURED DEBATES AS A PEDAGOGICAL TOOL IN ARAB HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

Abdellatif Sellami¹, Fouad Karnichi^{2*}, Igor Michaleczek³

¹Qatar University, Doha, Qatar. asellami@qu.edu.qa, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0357-8217>

²Sohar University, Sohar, Oman. FKarnichi@su.edu.om, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3841-6613>

³Qatar University, Doha, Qatar. imichaleczek@qu.edu.qa, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6891-7112>

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Corresponding Author: Fouad Karnichi

(FKarnichi@su.edu.om)

ABSTRACT

This systematic review examines the current state of research on the use of debate and debating activities in higher education institutions in the Arab region. The study addresses four main research questions focusing on publication trends, research methodologies, skills associated with debate activities, and challenges in implementing these activities. The review followed PRISMA guidelines, utilizing Web of Science, ERIC, and Scopus databases. After screening, 8 relevant articles were identified, primarily from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, published mostly from 2017 onwards. The research approaches were mainly quasi-experimental or mixed quasi-experimental and qualitative. The studies consistently reported benefits of debate in enhancing various skills, with critical thinking being the most frequently cited. Other skills included communication, problem-solving, decision-making, and analytical skills. Challenges in implementing debate activities included students' unfamiliarity with the approach, difficulties in measuring developed skills, faculty roles in facilitation, curriculum integration, and cultural factors specific to the Arab world.

KEYWORDS: Debate, Higher Education, Arab States.

1. INTRODUCTION

Debate has long been recognized as a valuable educational tool, with origins dating back to ancient Greece. It serves as a pedagogical strategy that enhances students' analytical and communication skills while providing a platform for intellectual discourse, allowing students to engage critically with content. (Yang & Rusli, 2012) Recent research supports this view, highlighting the transformative nature of debates in educational settings. In an era of rapid global change and increasing interconnectedness, university students require robust research, critical thinking, and communication skills to succeed academically and professionally. However, there is a lack of cross-cultural research on effective strategies to develop these essential skills within Arab world higher education settings. Structured debate activities have been identified as a promising pedagogical approach that cultivates essential competencies in higher education.

Empirical evidence suggests that well-designed debate exercises within a relevant and conducive learning environment can significantly enhance students' critical thinking abilities, verbal and non-verbal communication skills, decision-making, and capacity to construct balanced, evidence-based arguments (Dewangga et al., 2024). Furthermore, debates offer an engaging, active, and learner-centered instructional method that has been shown to enhance students' self-confidence and self-efficacy. These skills have been found to be lacking among the student population in the target countries. Engaging in structured debates requires students to analyze information, evaluate arguments, and formulate reasoned judgments, which are essential components of critical thinking.

The learner-centered nature of debates contrasts with traditional lecture-based approaches by encouraging active learning and self-driven study. In the specific context of the Arab world, the development of debating skills has the potential to enhance linguistic, communicative, and cultural competencies among higher education students. (El Majidi et al., 2024) Current structured debate practices promote successful strategies including organization, clarification, and argumentation. However, implementing debate as a teaching method presents challenges – particularly in assessing student performance and ensuring effective preparation – which are especially

pronounced in the Arab world context.

In the specific context of the Arab world, the development of debating skills has the potential to enhance and reinforce linguistic, communicative and cultural competencies among higher education students. Current structured debate practices promote successful strategies, including organization, clarification, and argumentation. The implementation of debates has been identified as contributing to the development of these areas. (Fikri et al., 2021)

This study offers a review of the existing research on debates and debating activities within higher education institutions in Arab countries. It examines trends in publication, research methods, skills linked to debate participation, and the challenges faced in organizing these activities. The study emphasizes the potential of debating activities to enhance critical thinking skills among university students in the Arab world.

1.1 Educational Impact of Debate

Research conducted by Patel, Smith, and Brown revealed sustained enhancements in critical thinking skills among students who participated in debate programs. (Brown et al., 2015) Participation in debates also enhances students' ability to articulate ideas clearly and respond effectively to opposing viewpoints, which is crucial for academic and professional success.

Other research indicates that participation in debates can positively affect academic performance. For instance, a study involving middle and high school students from low-income neighborhoods in Boston found that debate participation led to significant gains in English language arts (ELA) competencies requiring critical thinking skills. (The Debate Impact. 2023) Furthermore, debate programs have been linked to higher rates of high school graduation and postsecondary enrollment. The impact was notably significant among students who were previously low achieving, suggesting that debate can be an effective tool for reducing educational inequality. (Schueler & Larned, 2023)

Debates are particularly effective in fostering critical thinking skills by requiring students to engage deeply with compelling topics, evaluate diverse arguments, and develop well-reasoned conclusions. As Patel, Smith, and Brown suggested, participation in debate programs encourages cognitive development by prompting students to question assumptions and explore complex issues from multiple

perspectives. (Brown *et al.*, 2015) Debates contribute significantly to hard and soft skill development by enhancing students' abilities to structure arguments, use evidence effectively, and communicate persuasively. They also promote teamwork and self-confidence, preparing students for professional challenges.

1.2. Research Question

The present research intends to identify the current state of academic publications on the implementation of debate and debating activities within higher education institutions in the Arab World.

To gain a better understanding of current research in the field of debating in higher education, three main research questions guided our study:

- Q1:** What is the current state of academic publication in the Arab World on debating in higher education in terms of years of publication and country of affiliation?
- Q2:** What are the main research methodologies promoted in studying the implementation of debate in Higher Education institutions in the Arab World?
- Q3:** What are the main skills associated with debate activities in higher education?
- Q4:** What are the main challenges identified in current research in implementing and developing debate in higher education?

2. METHODS

2.1. Search Strategy

Relevant research articles were sourced from three main databases Web of Science, Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), and Scopus. To guide the search process, relevant keywords were carefully identified to respond to the research project using Boolean operators: ("debate" OR "debating") AND ("communication skills" OR "academic performance" OR "student learning" OR "student outcomes" OR "critical thinking" OR "problem-solving" OR "decision making" OR "higher order thinking skills") AND ("Higher Education" OR "university" OR "universities"). There were no set dates for the research as the number of published articles was limited. The systematic review adhered to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Page *et al.*, 2021) to identify, screen, and select relevant articles. The PRISMA methodology was

applied in three distinct phases, as illustrated in Figure 1.

An initial search using targeted keywords yielded 242 articles from the databases Scopus (n = 87), ERIC (n = 121), and Web of Science (n = 34) after reducing the results to the Arab World including the following countries (Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen). After exporting the retrieved articles, a de-duplication process was performed, leading to the removal of 101 duplicate entries. Additionally, a further 63 articles were excluded due to reasons such as irrelevance to the topic, lack of sufficient methodological rigor, or inadequate data reporting.

The remaining articles underwent a systematic screening process. Initially, their titles and abstracts were evaluated for relevance to the study's objectives. Subsequently, articles that passed this initial screening were subjected to a detailed content evaluation to determine their matching with the review's scope and objectives. This evaluation was conducted based on a set of predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria specifically designed to ensure the selected studies directly contributed to the research aims and aligned with the review's objectives.

2.2. Study Selection

Titles and abstracts of all the articles found were screened independently by two authors using the pre-specified inclusion criteria. When abstracts were not available or eligibility was unclear based on the abstract, the full papers were obtained and assessed. Some studies were excluded on the basis of the title or abstract; for all others, full papers were obtained and reviewed by the same two authors, with each assessor blind to the decision of the other. Discrepancies in assigning studies as eligible were resolved by mutual agreement or by a third-party arbitrator. We identified duplicate publications by reviewing study name, authors, study population and study dates. The articles meeting the inclusion criteria and passing both stages of screening (title /abstract and full text) were selected for the systematic review.

2.3. Inclusion Criteria

The systematic review followed a set of inclusion criteria to ensure the selection of

high-quality and contextually relevant studies. Articles were included only if they were published in English and explicitly focused on or incorporated research at the higher education level. To maintain cultural and contextual relevance, the review was focused on studies conducted by researchers affiliated with higher education institutions located in Arab World countries, specifically Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. Eligible studies were required to report outcomes centered on students and to address the integration of debate activities into higher education curricula. Furthermore, only peer-reviewed articles in their final stage of publication were included to ensure methodological rigor and the inclusion of thoroughly vetted research.

2.4. Exclusion Criteria

To uphold methodological focus a comprehensive set of exclusion criteria was applied. The review excluded secondary sources such as review articles, reports, conference papers, errata, opinions, and book chapters to prioritize original study articles. Studies that exclusively addressed educational levels outside higher education, including primary, secondary, or K-12 education were excluded to maintain the focus on higher education level. Additionally, research with outcomes unrelated to students, was excluded to preserve a student-centered analytical framework. These outcomes included the perspective of parents, educators, or other stakeholders. Finally studies unrelated to debate practices or their implementation in higher education curricula were excluded to ensure alignment.

By systematically applying these inclusion and exclusion criteria, the review identified eight studies that met all the predefined requirements for inclusion, thereby ensuring the relevance, quality, and alignment of the selected literature with the research objectives

2.5. Data Extraction

To ensure uniformity across all studies reviewed, data extraction was carried out using a standardized form. The data for each study was extracted independently by two authors and subsequently confirmed by two other authors. The data sheet contained the following details; names of authors; articles'

titles; data about critical thinking, students' engagement, learning, listening, public speaking, research, decision making skill, collaborative working, argument elaboration and rebuttal, problem solving skills, analytical skill, reading comprehension, job skills and real-life experiences.

2.6. Analytical Framework

The articles were further analyzed using a rigorous thematic synthesis process with multi-stage analysis. Initial Coding involved a two-researcher coding the identified outcomes and challenges by themselves, using descriptive codes. In the Developing Descriptive Themes stage, the initial codes were systematically grouped by related areas to provide broader themes (e.g. "critical thinking," "problem-solving," and "decision making" were coded under the higher-order theme of "Higher-Order Cognitive Skills"). The final stage, Generating Analytical Themes, involved interpreting and synthesizing the descriptive themes to develop new, higher-level analytical themes that addressed systematic review specific objectives.

To provide intercoder reliability for the thematic analysis, 20 percent of the identified codes for the identified skills and challenges were coded independently by the second author. Cohen's Kappa (k) was calculated to measure the level of agreement yes, with good agreement at $k = 0.82$. All disagreements in the data extraction and coding were resolved by a third-party arbitrator consensus. Data categorization was a cyclical process of researcher agreement through dialogue and consensus to rectify inconsistencies in interpretation. The joint endeavor catalyzed a systematic and objective investigation where patterns and insights emerged to enhance understanding of the role of debate activities and challenges in education, specifically in an Arab context.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Study Selection

Our systematic search identified a total of 242 records from the targeted databases. After removing duplicates, 78 records remained for screening. Following title and abstract screening, we identified 20 potentially relevant records. After full-text screening, we included 8 studies in the systematic review.

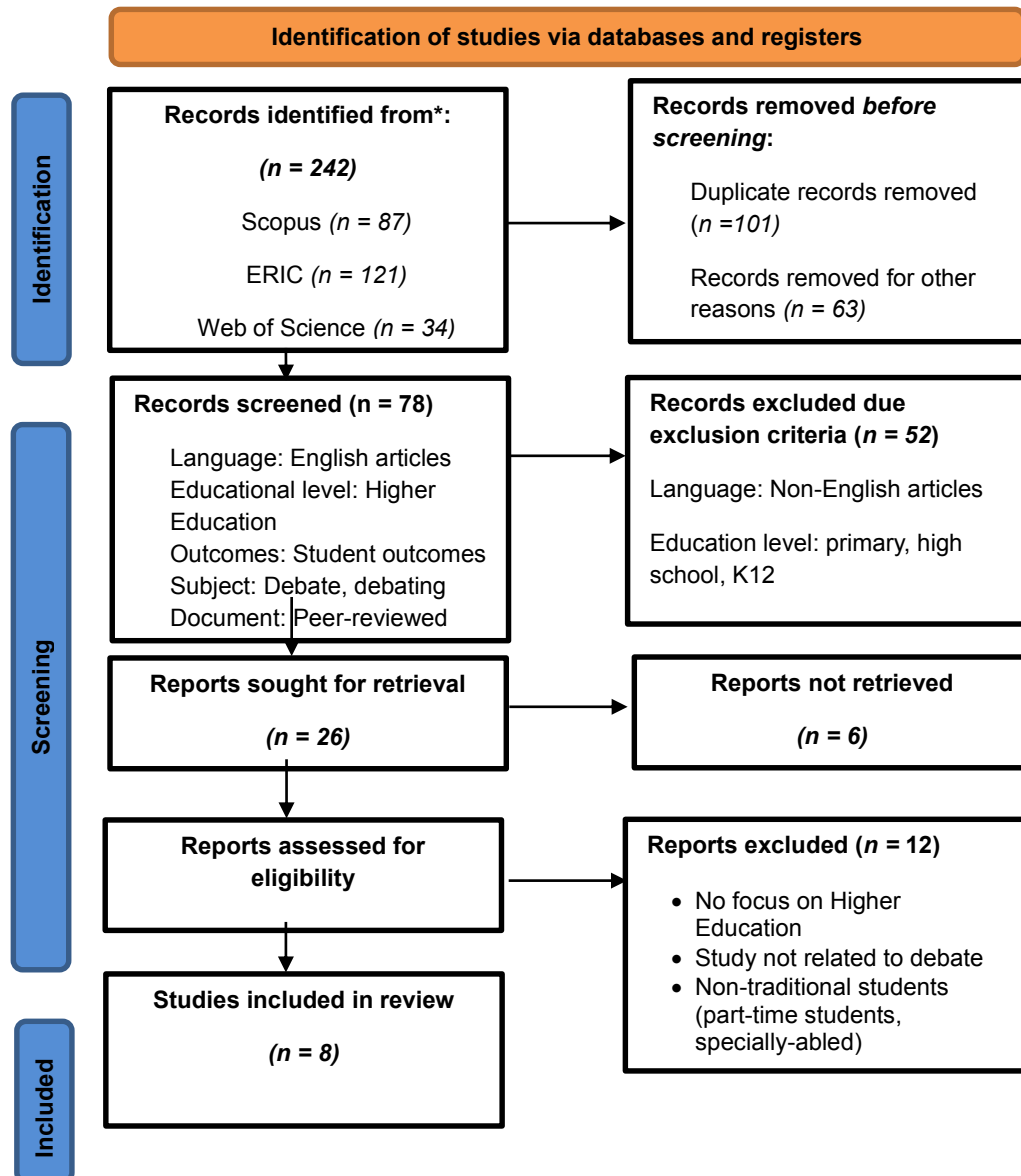


Figure 1: PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram Depicting the Process of Study Selection Through the Four Phases: Identification, Screening, Eligibility, And Inclusion (Page, M.J., Et Al., 2021).

3.2. Geographical And Time Repartition of Research Publication

Academic research on debate in the Arab World is

limited in number as only 8 research have been identified after the screening. Research papers were mainly published from 2017 with the highest number in 2021.

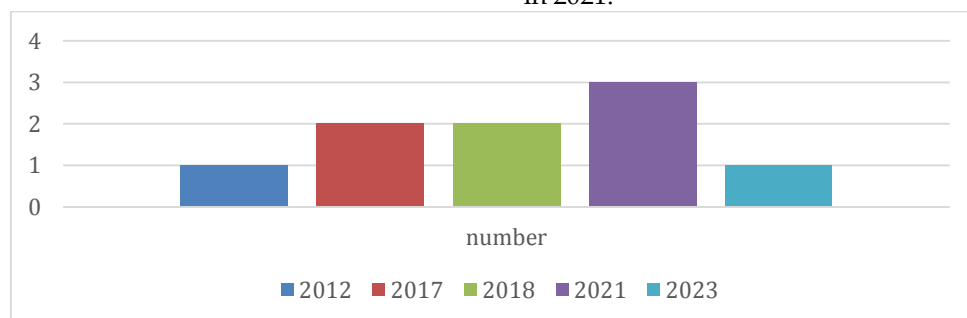


Figure 2: Repartition Of Peer-Reviewed Articles by Year.

Regarding the country of affiliation of researchers, most of the research are conducted

and published by researchers based in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates. All research focused on case studies in the country of affiliation apart from one, in Lebanon, which focuses on the Arab World. It is

worth noticing that no research relevant to the present screening was found in North Africa, countries of the Levant, or the rest of the GCC apart from UAE and Saudi Arabia.

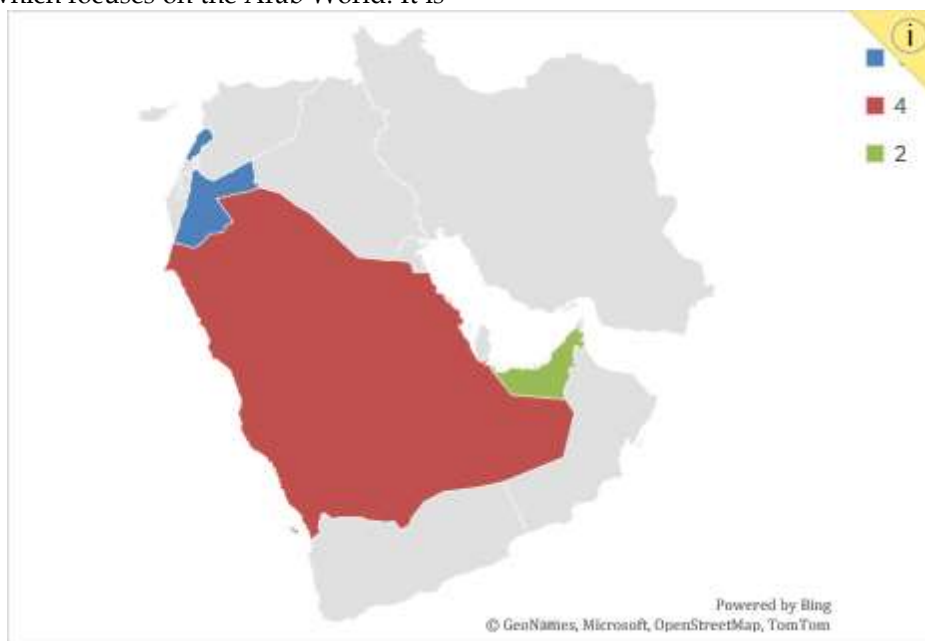


Figure 3: Repartition of Peer-Reviewed Articles by Country of Affiliation.

3.3. Research Approach

Research selected for this review is primarily either quasi-experimental or quasi-experimental and qualitative. This group of research consists of developing and implementing debating

activities within the existing curriculum of taught modules in different programs, medicine, dentistry, EFL. They consist of organized debate, sometimes alongside other pedagogical approaches such as Problem-Based Learning, role play, and classroom discussion.

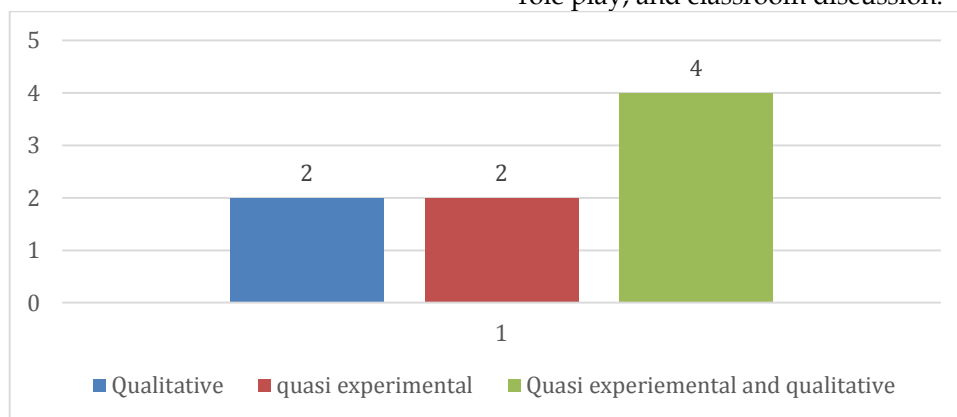


Figure 4: Repartition Of Peer-Reviewed Articles by Research Approach.

3.4. Enhanced Skills among the Students through Debate Practices

The identified research agreed on the benefits of introducing debate in teaching and learning activities within the existing curriculum. In agreement with existing literature, several key skills have been named across the different articles. As shown in Tables 1a and b, a wide range of skills are mentioned with various frequencies. The most acknowledged skill associated with debate practice is critical thinking, as all but one research refers to the importance and centrality of critical thinking in this approach. Within the 8 research, all but one agree that critical thinking is enhanced by the introduction of debate activities. The next most cited skill

enhanced by debate practice is communication as 5 research find that debating reinforces it. By communication, present research refers to the ability to speak, present, and defend arguments in public. It is also the ability for students to share ideas or points of view as well as the capacity to listen to a different position.

Alongside Critical Thinking, other higher-order thinking skills are identified. Problem-solving, decision-making, and analytical skills are all mentioned with the same frequency. It demonstrates the admitted relevance of introducing debate for developing higher-order thinking skills among students and the attention that teachers attribute to both the importance of developing these skills and the relevance of debate to contribute to doing so.

Table 1a: Identified Skills Enhanced by Debating Practice.

| | Author(s) | Title | Critical thinking | Students' engagement | Learning | Listening | Public speaking /communication | Research skills | decision making |
|---|--|--|-------------------|----------------------|----------|-----------|--------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| 1 | Abouchedid K. | The pedagogy of inquiry and deliberation in higher education in the Arab region (Abouchedid, 2017) | 1 | | | | | | |
| 2 | Mumtaz S.; Latif R. | Learning through debate during problem-based learning: An active learning strategy (Mumtaz & Latif, 2017) | 1 | | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| 3 | Spaska A.M.; Savishchenko V.M.; Komar O.A.; Hritchenko T.Ya.; Maidanyk O.V. | Enhancing analytical thinking in tertiary students using debates (Spaska et al., 2021) | | | | | | 1 | |
| 4 | Latif R.; Mumtaz S.; Mumtaz R.; Hussain A. | A comparison of debate and role play in enhancing critical thinking and communication skills of medical students during problem based learning (Latif et al., 2018) | 1 | | | 1 | 1 | | |
| 5 | Alghamdi Hamdan A.K.; Aldossari A.T. | Debate Learning Strategy in female postgraduate School: A Saudi Case Study (Alghamdi Hamdan & Aldossari, 2021) | 1 | | 1 | | 1 | | |
| 6 | Hysaj A.; Hamam D. | Understanding the development of critical thinking through Classroom debates and Online Discussion Forums: A Case of higher education in the UAE (University of Wollongong, Dubai, UAE et al., 2021) | 1 | 1 | 1 | | 1 | 1 | 1 |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|------------------|--|---|--|--|--|---|--|--|
| 7 | Naser-Najjab N. | Palestinian youth and the Arab Spring. Learning to think critically: A case study (Naser-Najjab, 2012) | 1 | | | | | | |
| 8 | Al-Hawamdeh, BOS | Incorporation of critical thinking for developing reading skills in EFL classroom teaching (Salameh Al Hawamdeh, 2023) | 1 | | | | 1 | | |

Table 1b: Identified Skills Enhanced by Debating Practice.

| | Author(s) | Title | Collaborative working | Argument elaboration and rebuttal | Problem-solving | Analytical skills | Reading comprehension | Job skills | Real life experience |
|---|---|--|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------|-------------------|-----------------------|------------|----------------------|
| 1 | Abouchedid K. | The pedagogy of inquiry and deliberation in higher education in the Arab region (Abouchedid, 2017) | | | 1 | | | | |
| 2 | Mumtaz S.; Latif R. | Learning through debate during problem-based learning: An active learning strategy (Mumtaz & Latif, 2017) | | | 1 | | | | |
| 3 | Spaska A.M.; Savishchenko V.M.; Komar O.A.; Hritchenko T.Ya.; Maidanyk O.V. | Enhancing analytical thinking in tertiary students using debates (Spaska et al., 2021) | | | | 1 | 1 | | 1 |
| 4 | Latif R.; Mumtaz S.; Mumtaz R.; Hussain A. | A comparison of debate and role play in enhancing critical thinking and communication skills of medical students during problem-based learning (Latif et al., 2018) | 1 | | | | | | 1 |
| 5 | Alghamdi Hamdan A.K.; Aldossari A.T. | Debate Learning Strategy in female postgraduate School: A Saudi Case Study (Alghamdi Hamdan & Aldossari, 2021) | | 1 | | | | | |
| 6 | Hysaj A.; Hamam D. | Understanding the development of critical thinking through Classroom debates and Online Discussion Forums: A Case of higher education in the UAE (University of Wollongong, Dubai, UAE et al., 2021) | 1 | | | | | | |
| 7 | Naser-Najjab N. | Palestinian youth and the Arab Spring. Learning to think critically: A case study (Naser-Najjab, 2012) | | | | | | | |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|------------------|--|--|--|--|--|---|--|--|
| 8 | Al-Hawamdeh, BOS | Incorporation of critical thinking for developing reading skills in EFL classroom teaching (Salameh Al Hawamdeh, 2023) | | | | | 1 | | |
|---|------------------|--|--|--|--|--|---|--|--|

Current research also identified several skills deemed to develop students' ability to learn and to increasingly be active in the learning process. These are research skills and collaborative working skills. Debate is deemed as positively contributing to reinforcing students' ability to work with others and be more apt at searching for information. Overall, some research concludes that debate increases students' learning and appropriation of information.

3.4. Challenges In Implementing and Developing Debate Activities Within the Arab World

Besides identifying benefits from debate practices in enhancing a wide array of skills within Higher Education students, the research also identified several challenges in developing and integrating debate.

Challenges associated with the development and implementation of debate activities in the Arab World within the identified research can be grouped into several categories. The first is linked to the novelty of the approach for the students. They seem to be unsettled as it is a first-time experience or it requires new learning strategies. Alongside this difficulty to adapt to the new approach, listening and comprehending the argument and different viewpoints can prove challenging for some of the students.

Another group of challenges is linked to the difficulty in measuring and identifying the skills assumed to be developed and enhanced with debate practice. Several studies highlight the difficulty for students and faculty to identify these skills, mainly higher-order thinking skills. Alongside identifying, measuring the skills developed with debate is also difficult.

The next key challenge identified within the selected research is linked to the role and expectations of the faculty in supporting, facilitating, and organizing debate activities. Facilitation is the

most frequently cited challenge among the studies this research identified. The active and demanding role of facilitator, organizer, support, and referent that faculty are supposed to take during debate activities are perceived as a major challenge within the region.

Selected research has also identified another important challenge, namely the impact of integrating debate activities within the existing curriculum. Indeed, the quasi-experimental intervention mainly consisted in adding debate activities atop already existing pedagogical and learning strategies such as Problem-Based Learning, lecturing, and, as such, required allocation of time that could not be used as it was prior to debate incorporation. Selected research also identified that the topic understanding and selecting it for debate could be challenging in some specific contexts.

Two studies identified that student engagement in debating activities can be perceived as a challenge and be difficult, requiring additional efforts from the faculty to ensure that students fully participate and benefit from the approach. This can be connected to another challenge, the emotional dimension for students taking part in a debate. Emotion can relate to the topic but also to the ability for students to accept and adapt to being confronted with different points of view and accept contradiction. The emotional dimension can limit, influence or prevent student engagement in the debate activities.

Finally, the last challenge identified among three of the three selected research is the contextual and cultural dimension specific to the Arab World. Culture and learning practices can be perceived as impediments to the possibility of developing and implementing debate. The lack of a democratic environment where expressing different or confrontational opinions can be negatively perceived is a potential obstacle in fully benefiting from the debating potential in developing and enhancing students' skills.

Table 2a: Identified Challenges in Implementing the Debating Practice.

| Author(s) | Research title | New Learning strategies | First time experience | Listening and comprehension | Skills development | Skills improvement measure | Facilitation/management | Teachers training |
|-----------|----------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|
|-----------|----------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|--|--|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
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| 6 | Hysaj A.; Hamam D. | Understanding the development of critical thinking through classroom debates and online discussion forums: A Case of higher education in the UAE (University of Wollongong, Dubai, UAE et al., 2021) | | | | | | 1 | 1 |
| 7 | Naser-Najjab N. | Palestinian youth and the Arab Spring. Learning to think critically: A case study (Naser-Najjab, 2012) | | | | | | | |
| 8 | Al-Hawamdeh, BOS | Incorporation of critical thinking for developing reading skills in EFL classroom teaching (Salameh Al Hawamdeh, 2023) | | 1 | | 1 | | | |

Table 2b: Identified Challenges in Implementing Debating Practice.

| | Author(s) | Research title | Curriculum restructuring | Low engagement | Topic understanding and selection | Emotional Dimension | Cultural/ contextual Dimension | Insufficient resources |
|---|---------------------|---|--------------------------|----------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------|
| 1 | Abouchedid K. | The pedagogy of inquiry and deliberation in higher education in the Arab region (Abouchedid, 2017) | | | | | 1 | 1 |
| 2 | Mumtaz S.; Latif R. | Learning through debate during problem-based learning: An active learning strategy (Mumtaz & Latif, 2017) | | 1 | | 1 | | |

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 3 | Spaska A.M.; Savishchenko V.M.; Komar O.A.; Hritchenko T.Ya.; Maidanyk O.V. | Enhancing analytical thinking in tertiary students using debates (Spaska et al., 2021) | 1 | | | | 1 | |
| 4 | Latif R.; Mumtaz S.; Mumtaz R.; Hussain A. | A comparison of debate and role play in enhancing critical thinking and communication skills of medical students during problem based learning (Latif et al., 2018) | | | | | | |
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| 7 | Naser-Najjab N. | Palestinian youth and the Arab Spring. Learning to think critically: A case study (Naser- Najjab, 2012) | | 1 | | | 1 | |
| 8 | Al-Hawamdeh, BOS | Incorporation of critical thinking for developing reading skills in EFL classroom teaching (Salameh Al Hawamdeh, 2023) | | | 1 | 1 | | |

4. DISCUSSION

Debate is considered a valuable educational tool, with origins back to ancient Greece. It serves as a pedagogical strategy that enhances students' analytical and communication skills. It also provides a platform for intellectual discourse and allows students to engage with content. Recent research supports this view, highlighting the transformative potential of debates in educational institutes (Bellon, 2000) . Also (Argyropoulou, 2021) notes that structured debates can improve students' critical thinking and communication skills. Debates do this by making use of intellectual engagement.

In this generation, the ability to think critically is considered more important. Educational practices that polish this thinking skill are highly valued in institutions. Debate participation requires students to analyze information and arguments. And then also to formulate reasoned judgments. These skills are considered important for developing critical thinking. Research conducted (Brown *et al.*, 2015) reveals that debating process improves thinking skills among students. Participation in debates also enhances student's ability to articulate ideas and respond effectively to opposing points of view. These

skills are critical for academic and professional success (Zare & Othman, 2013)

Other research indicates that debates can positively affect academic performance. For instance. A study involving middle and high school students from low-income neighborhoods in Boston found that debate participation led to significant gains in English language arts (ELA) competencies (Warner & Brushke, 2001). Furthermore, debate programs have been linked to higher rates of high school graduation. The impact was notably significant among students who were previously low achieving. This suggests that debate can be an effective tool for reducing educational inequality.(Schueler & Larned, 2023)

Debates are particularly effective in fostering critical thinking skills by requiring students to engage deeply with compelling topics, evaluate diverse arguments, and develop well-reasoned conclusions (Zare & Othman, 2013). As (Brown *et al.*, 2015) suggested, participation in debate programs encourages cognitive development by prompting students to question assumptions and explore complex issues from multiple perspectives.

Debates contribute significantly to hard and soft skill development by enhancing students' abilities to structure arguments, use evidence effectively, and

communicate persuasively. They also promote teamwork and self-confidence, preparing students for professional challenges. The learner-centered nature of debates contrasts with traditional lecture-based approaches, encouraging active learning and self-driven study (Brown *et al.*, 2015) ; (Doody & Condon, 2012) Recent studies have shown that debates can significantly improve collaborative learning skills and increase student involvement in the learning process (Schueler & Larned, 2023)

However, developing and practicing debate as a teaching method is associated with several challenges. These challenges include assessing students' performance and ensuring effective preparation. Implementing debate as a teaching method presents another challenge of assessing student performance and ensuring effective preparation. These challenges are especially highlighted in the Arab world. Faculty and academics must look into these obstacles in order to get the benefits of debate in educational settings (Salim, 2015)

The adaptation of debate practices in diverse cultural settings presents potential challenges. These challenges are traditional approaches of argument and confrontation. However, it is crucial to recognize that the benefits associated with debate such as engaging in group discussions, developing logical reasoning skills, and defending viewpoints, are not confined to only Western contexts (Mercier, 2016). If debate formats can be fit with local cultural norms and values, educators can use these educational benefits. In the end they can enhance students' critical thinking, communication skills, and their preparation for global citizenship.

Previous research demonstrates that debate can be altered to fit various cultural norms and in this process, debate can also maintain its effectiveness (AlRubaie *et al.*, 2024). With the support and intervention of faculty and higher education institutions, the debate has the potential to adapt to alternative cultural norms. And in this way it can engage and developing academic and intellectual skills across diverse settings.

Constructivist Learning Theory explains that learners construct knowledge through interactions with their environment and among themselves. The works (Zhao, 2024) and (Vygotsky, 1980) highlight the importance of social and cultural contexts and also on the collaborative activities in the learning process. Structured debates provide a better environment where students can negotiate meanings, challenge assumptions, and build knowledge together. Debates provide a learning

environment where students actively engage with content. This framework supports the idea that debates help students build knowledge through critical engagement with diverse perspectives. Thus, students get to learn different perspectives and get an opportunity to learn also from each other during a structured debating process.

Transformative learning theory, developed by Mezirow (1978), explains learning as a process of fundamental transformation in how students perceive and interpret their environment (Cronin, 2016) . The central point to this theory is critical reflection, enabling students to examine their feelings, beliefs, and assumptions (Mezirow, 1998). Two key practices contribute to transformative learning: dilemmas that challenge existing beliefs and prompt critical reflection, another is a discourse that allows learners to validate assumptions and gain diverse perspectives.(Mezirow, 1997) These two elements improve the transformative process by encouraging the expression of thoughts and challenging viewpoints, leading to a better understanding of complex issues. In this context, debate serves as a practice that contributes to transformative learning, which in turn enhances critical thinking and perspective transformation.

According to one study (Kolb, 1984) learning is a process in which experience is transformed into knowledge. Students participate in structured debates by having concrete experiences and thinking back on those experiences. In this process, they develop conceptualizations which are basically arguments, and actively experiment (revising arguments or strategies in subsequent debates).(Kolb, 1984)

Moreover, there are certain studies done to look for the association of debates and students' performance. Some of these studies have shown promising results as well. In one study, it is demonstrated that students after engaged in debating activity also showed higher levels of motivation and enhanced interest in course content. (McCormick *et al.*, 2015). Hence after such research, it can be advised to incorporate debating as a part of the curriculum for better student engagement, leading to a vibrant classroom environment.

Active learning techniques such as debates, improve the retention rates compared to traditional lecture formats. Some studies have found that students involved in debates recall information better than those who passively receive information through lectures.(Wyse *et al.*, 2016). Debating can be implemented as a form of learning technique for the active participation of students and leading to better

performance.

There is no doubt that debates can be an effective tool for study and learning among students at the higher education level in the MENA region. Various studies also support this idea, some of them highlighting its importance in constructing various skills, such as critical thinking, and decision making and still some studies support it as an effective way of learning tool. But there are some challenges as well in the incorporation of debates at the Higher education level.

The role of the instructor is pivotal in ensuring successful debate structures. Educators need to be adept at moderating discussions, maintaining a respectful tone, and ensuring equitable participation among all students. (University of Queensland & Gillies, 2016) Skilled facilitation can mitigate potential conflicts and encourage an open exchange of ideas.

Debate environments must accommodate diverse learning styles and backgrounds. It's important to create a supportive atmosphere where all students feel comfortable sharing their thoughts, thereby maximizing learning benefits and fostering an inclusive community. This feature of inclusivity is very important for constructing a positive and healthy environments for practicing debating.

Structured debates also require time for students to conduct research and formulate their arguments. Moreover, it also required them to rehearse their presentations. This time commitment can be a challenge, especially in tightly packed academic schedules.

Debating and argumentation are influenced by personal, social, educational, and cultural factors. These practices are incorporated within academic settings. (Hogan et al., 2016) The available research on debating in higher education has primarily focused on North American and Western European contexts, instead of other social and cultural perspectives (Argyropoulou, 2021). Students from non-Western backgrounds frequently struggle when exposed to critical thinking and debate in Western-based higher education (Durkin, 2007). In the Arab World, research has tended to focus on the development of new universities or the adoption of Western teaching methodologies, rather than the culturally relevant integration of tools such as debate, leaving this field underexplored. (Badran et al., 2020).

5. IMPLICATIONS

This systematic review highlights the importance of structured debates as a pedagogical tool and how

they can be incorporated into institutions at the level of higher education for enhancing the skills of students.

Debating can be used as a part of the curriculum at schools and universities and courses can be designed centered on it. It will enhance students' learning, allowing them to actively argue with one another in a controlled environment for a better understanding of a topic from different points of view.

This study further elaborates on the challenges in implementing debating activities in Arab countries, highlighting the major challenges that can be overcome by proper planning and resources. In this way, better integration of debating skills in the educational institutes at the higher education level can be made easy.

6. LIMITATIONS

This review has only 8 studies because not enough studies have been done on the development of debating practices and how they can influence the higher education institutes and students in the Arab and MENA region countries. Moreover, there were not many studies exploring the Arab social and cultural perspective of debate as a pedagogical tool.

7. CONCLUSION

Structured debates have proven to be an effective pedagogical tool in Arab countries' higher education, in the context of enhancing critical thinking, communication, problem-solving, and analytical skills. Critical thinking, cited in nearly all studies, is the most significant benefit, while communication skills, including public speaking and active listening, are also widely supported. Debates moreover, also contribute towards collaborative learning and research skills, promoting active student engagement.

However, several challenges impede their implementation. These include students' unfamiliarity with debate methods, faculty difficulties in facilitating and organizing debates, and challenges in measuring skill development. Cultural norms, including limited acceptance of confrontational dialogue, further constrain the effectiveness of debates. Integrating debate activities into existing curricula also requires time and structural adjustments.

To overcome these barriers, institutions should focus on faculty training, a culturally oriented debating process, and better tools to measure skill outcomes. With these strategies, structured debates can play a key role in improving student learning and

equipping them with essential skills for academic, professional, and societal success.

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