

## ANALYZING SANTRI NEEDS FOR ENGLISH DEBATE AS A STRATEGY TO SUPPORT GLOBAL COMMUNICATION READINESS

Novi Dwi Yuliani<sup>1</sup>, Lailatun Najmiah<sup>2</sup>, Muhammad Rifqy Rujani<sup>3</sup>, Nurul Hidayah Ramadani<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1,2,4</sup>English Study Program, Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Kalimantan Selatan, Banjarmasin, Indonesia

<sup>3</sup>English Study Program, UIN Antasari Banjarmasin, Banjarmasin, Indonesia  
[novideye24@gmail.com](mailto:novideye24@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

*This study investigates the specific needs of beginner-level students engaged in English debate activities within the Language Area program at an Islamic boarding school in South Kalimantan, Indonesia. Recognizing the increasing role of debate as a pedagogical strategy in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, the research aims to explore linguistic, emotional, and cultural needs that are often overlooked in generic debate materials. A qualitative descriptive design was employed, using open-ended questionnaires distributed to 60 English Club members and semi-structured interviews were done to one debate coach, and one student as a delegation. Thematic analysis revealed that students not only seek to improve their speaking skills, but also desire confidence, logical argumentation, and culturally relevant content. Participants emphasized the importance of structured guidance, beginner-friendly materials, and emotional support to overcome anxiety and build motivation. The findings confirm the value of debate in fostering speaking fluency, critical thinking, and collaboration, particularly when activities are adapted to the pesantren context. The study highlights a strong demand for a tailored debate handbook that aligns with students' religious, social, and educational environments. This research contributes to the growing field of learner-centered EFL materials design and offers practical implications for integrating culturally sensitive debate instruction in Islamic boarding schools.*

**Keywords:** English Debate, Islamic Boarding School, Language Area Program, Needs Analysis

### INTRODUCTION

English debate is a powerful pedagogical tool in EFL settings, effectively boosting speaking fluency, confidence, and critical thinking by requiring real-time communication and argumentation (Aliakbari & Sadeghdaghighi, 2020). This builds essential communicative competence valuable for both academic and real-life interactions.

In Indonesia, Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), which are traditionally religious, are increasingly adopting English programs, often using the Language Area model—an English immersion strategy—to meet global demands (Sari, 2021;

Hidayat, 2020). Debate is implemented as a core speaking activity within this context to enhance fluency (Rahmawati & Setiawan, 2021).

### The Challenge of Beginner Contexts

Implementing debate for beginners in *pesantren* faces several critical challenges:

1. Linguistic and Emotional Barriers: Many students have minimal English exposure, making spontaneous public speaking intimidating due to limited vocabulary and confidence. Anxiety and Willingness to Communicate (WTC) are significant factors (Sun and Zhang, 2022).
2. Mismatched Resources: Existing debate materials are designed for advanced learners and formal academic settings, which do not suit the needs of beginner *pesantren* students.
3. The Materials Gap: Effective materials must be tailored to the learners' specific needs, social context, and cultural values (Nation and Macalister, 2021). Generic handbooks are ineffective in this unique environment, making structured, culturally appropriate activities essential (Yuliani, Noor, and Rujani, 2024).

### Designing the Solution through Needs Analysis

To address this gap, a comprehensive needs analysis is proposed to inform a tailored debate handbook design. Modern needs analysis is dynamic and continuous (Wang, 2023; Alavi & Rezaei, 2023), moving beyond linguistic gaps to consider holistic needs like emotional readiness and social context (Gilakjani et al., 2020). It also aims to integrate 21st-Century Skills such as critical thinking and collaboration (Chostelidou, 2020; Long, 2021).

1. The success of the implementation hinges on sound pedagogy and cultural sensitivity:
2. Pedagogical Alignment: Debate aligns with Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Instruction, promoting higher-order cognitive skills like analyzing and evaluating (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2023; Ellis, 2021; Cahyani, 2022). Empirical evidence supports its positive impact on fluency and confidence (Setiawan and Suryanto, 2021; Phongphio and Rattanavich, 2020).

3. Scaffolding and Adaptation: For beginners, the format must be guided or semi-structured, using tools like vocabulary support and sentence starters to reduce pressure (Arslan, 2020; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2023; Maulidina & Hamid, 2022).
4. Cultural Sensitivity (*Adab*): Debate must be framed as a respectful exchange of ideas, guided by Islamic values like *adab* (respect and politeness), rather than confrontation (Rahman, 2020; Yusuf, 2022; Aziz & Kurniawati, 2021).

The Language Area model, based on immersion (Lyster, 2019), supports debate by encouraging natural, daily English use, fostering student autonomy (Bui & Nguyen, 2023; Tian & Taguchi, 2021; Zhou & Wang, 2020; Wijaya & Astuti, 2021).

Existing research mostly focuses on advanced learners in urban settings (Lee, 2020; Rahimi & Sajjadi, 2021; Nuryana et al., 2022). There is a significant lack of materials designed for beginners in culturally specific, immersion environments like *pesantren* (Ismail, 2021).

This study aims to fill these gaps by conducting a comprehensive needs analysis to understand the linguistic, emotional, and cultural needs of *pesantren* students. The resulting data will directly inform the design of a beginner-friendly, culturally responsive debate handbook, thereby supporting language mastery and confidence in this unique setting (Yuliani et al., 2024).

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to deeply explore students' needs related to English debate within the *Language Area* program of an Islamic boarding school (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A qualitative approach was chosen to gain in-depth, contextual insight into real-life educational practices, serving as the early stage needs analysis for a larger debate handbook development project, thereby establishing a foundation for designing relevant materials as advocated by Long (2015).

The research was conducted at Pondok Pesantren Darul Hijrah in South Kalimantan, which mandates an English and Arabic immersion system (*Language*

*Area*). The population included all enrolled students, but the sample was purposively chosen, consisting of 60 students (ranging from beginner to intermediate proficiency) who regularly participate in the English Club where debate is actively practiced (Patton, 2015).

The study used two main instruments to support data triangulation (Dörnyei, 2007): first, two semi-structured interviews were conducted with a debate coach (*ustadzah*) and a student competition winner to gather important insights from key stakeholders (Richards, 2003). Second, a qualitative questionnaire containing open-ended questions was administered to all 60 English Club members, allowing them to freely express their experiences, difficulties, goals, and expectations (West, 2020). Data were collected via recorded interviews and printed questionnaires, and subsequently analyzed using thematic analysis, based on the six-step model by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method was selected for its flexibility in identifying patterns without a fixed theoretical lens (Nowell et al., 2017). To ensure trustworthiness, the researchers implemented data triangulation, peer debriefing, and memo writing, adhering to the standards of qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## RESULTS

### Data Form questionnaire

The questionnaire results show that most of the students strongly agreed with the first focus on the questionnaire which is about the need for debate materials and activities. This shows us that the students have a strong interest in improving their English skills, especially through debate activities. The data is shown in the table below:

Table 1. Need for Debate Materials and Activities										
Question	Strongly disagree		Dissagree		Neutral		Agree		Strongly agree	
I want to improve my English-speaking skills.	0	0%	10	0%	11	18%	15	25%	34	57%
I feel the need to practice expressing opinions in a	0	0%	1	2%	12	20%	23	38%	24	40%

structured way in English.										
I am interested in participating in English debate activities at the <i>pesantren</i> .	1	2%	0	0%	14	23%	22	37%	23	38%
Debate materials should be aligned with topics that are relevant to the daily life of <i>santri</i> .	0	0%	2	3%	20	33%	14	23%	24	40%
I need technical guidance on how to conduct an English debate.	1	2%	1	2%	14	23%	22	37%	23	38%
I feel the need to practice how to respond to opponents' arguments in a debate.	0	0%	1	2%	7	12%	24	40%	28	47%

The questionnaire results reveal high motivation and specific support needs among students regarding English debate participation within the *pesantren*'s Language Area program.

First, a majority of students (57% show positive responses) are willing to improve their English speaking skills, seeking greater confidence and fluency in real-life English use. This high motivation reflects their recognition of the daily demands imposed by the EFL immersion environment.

Second, there is a strong awareness of the need for structured argumentation, with 38% agreed and 40% strongly agreed that they need practice in expressing opinions clearly and in an organized, logical way. This indicates a desire to move beyond basic conversation toward purposeful, debate-level communication.

Third, the students show significant interest in joining English debate activities (37% agreed and 38% strongly agreed). This is a positive sign of their willingness to take on challenging tasks that integrate thinking, speaking, listening, and quick responses.

Regarding material context, a majority (40% strongly agreed) emphasized that debate topics should be related to the daily life of *santri* (students) and the

*pesantren* environment. This suggests that contextual relevance (cultural, religious, and experiential) is crucial for motivation and connection.

Furthermore, students require clear guidance or instructions on how to execute English debate, with 37% agreed and 38% showing positive responses. Although interested, they lack full confidence and need simple, clear steps regarding rules, strategies, and format, highlighting the need for a supportive handbook.

Finally, a substantial portion (up to 47% agreed) feel the need to practice responding to opponents' arguments. This shows they understand the critical skill of careful listening and constructing smart, respectful rebuttals, but require dedicated practice to master it.

In summary, the results indicate students are highly motivated and interested in debate, viewing it not just as a language exercise but also as a vehicle for soft-skill development (intellectual, emotional, and social growth). They urgently need support in: 1) improving fluency, 2) organizing thoughts, 3) understanding debate format, and 4) responding effectively, all within the context of culturally relevant material. These insights are crucial for designing a handbook that fits their specific linguistic and contextual needs.

Table 2. Soft-skills Development

Question	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Neutral		Agree		Strongly agree	
I want to improve my critical thinking skills.	0	0%	1	2%	11	18%	12	20%	36	60%
I want to be able to understand and discuss global issues.	0	0%	2	3%	18	30%	18	30%	22	37%
I want to feel confident when speaking in public.	0	0%	0	0%	7	12%	14	23%	39	65%
I want to learn how to build arguments	0	0%	0	0%	10	17%	22	37%	27	45%

logically and coherently.										
I want to be able to collaborate and communicate well in a debate team.	0	0%	1	2%	13	22%	20	33%	25	42%
Debate helps me think quickly and accurately.	0	0%	1	2%	17	28%	15	25%	27	45%

The second focus of the questionnaire highlighted that students view English debate not merely as a language exercise, but as a critical tool for soft skill development and achieving broader intellectual, emotional, and social goals.

Firstly, a high majority of students (60%) showed a very positive response towards improving their critical thinking skills. This indicates their awareness that debate requires deep analysis, effective questioning, and the ability to construct clear, smart arguments.

Secondly, students also expressed a desire to understand and discuss global issues in English. This reflects an interest in expanding their knowledge beyond the immediate environment to engage meaningfully with topics like climate change or politics, thereby simultaneously enhancing their vocabulary and fluency.

Thirdly, 65% of students prioritized feeling confident when speaking in public. This response confirms that debate is seen as a supportive mechanism to overcome a common challenge in the Language Area setting, providing structured opportunities to build public speaking comfort.

Furthermore, 45% of students wished to learn how to build logical and organized arguments. This shows a focus on improving the clarity and structure of their ideas, a skill valuable across academic and written performance, not just in debate.

Strong agreement was also shown regarding the importance of teamwork and communication in a debate team (42% strongly agreed). Students recognize debate as a cooperative activity requiring planning, feedback, and collaboration, underscoring their desire to develop essential teamwork skills for future workplaces.

Finally, students strongly agreed that debate helps them think fast and respond accurately. This confirms they appreciate the benefit of debate in developing mental agility, quick thinking, and staying composed under pressure—important life skills.

In summary, students see debate as a valuable activity that builds confidence, teamwork, critical thinking, and global awareness. These goals demonstrate the need for a debate handbook that supports personal and academic development, not just the formal structure of debate. These strong responses provide meaningful guidance for the subsequent development of supportive materials.

Table 3. Expectation toward the Debate Handbook										
Question	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Neutral		Agree		Strongly agree	
I hope there is a debate guide that is easy to understand for beginners.	0	0%	0	0%	10	17%	12	20%	38	63%
I want the handbook to include example motions/topics that are relevant to the daily life of <i>santri</i> .	0	0%	1	2%	20	33%	20	33%	18	30%
I want practical debate exercises	1	2%	1	2%	13	22%	24	40%	22	37%
I want clear guidance on how to construct arguments in English.	0	0%	0	0%	13	22%	18	30%	29	48%
I want this handbook to help me be more prepared for global communication.	0	0%	0	0%	6	10%	19	32%	35	58%



The third section of the questionnaire provided very clear answers about what the students actually want and need in a debate handbook, offering solid direction for its development.

To start, a significant majority of students (63%) strongly requested a debate guide that is easy to grasp, particularly for beginners. This means they need something straightforward and accessible—not filled with academic jargon—that uses simple language and clear structure so they can follow and apply the content without confusion.

Next, their answers regarding the desire for debate motions relevant to santri life were varied. This flexibility suggests the handbook should include a good mix: incorporating topics related to daily *pesantren* experiences, Islamic values, and real-life moral dilemmas alongside global issues and worldwide topics. This ensures the content is both personally engaging and globally relevant.

Interestingly, when asked if they wanted practical debate exercises, most students chose "agree" rather than "strongly agree." This might hint that while practice is important, they could feel a bit hesitant or unprepared to jump straight into full debates. Therefore, the handbook needs to introduce practice gently, starting with small, guided, step-by-step exercises before tackling the full activity. Furthermore, students strongly agreed that they need clear instructions on how to build arguments in English. This confirms their need for practical help with both language and logic. The handbook must provide hands-on tools like practical models, useful sentence starters, vocabulary support, and explicit examples for effective argument formation and delivery.

Finally, the majority strongly agreed that they hope the handbook will help them prepare for global communication. This shows an ambitious outlook, viewing debate as a crucial stepping stone to the wider world. The material must support this goal by integrating cross-cultural awareness and internationally-relevant topics.

In essence, the students want a handbook that is simple, relatable, practical, and empowering. These responses underline the necessity of creating a student-centered resource that is firmly grounded in their unique environment while

simultaneously supporting their language growth and preparing them for meaningful communication on a global scale.

### **Interview Findings**

In-depth interviews with a student representative and the debate coach revealed consistent insights across seven themes regarding the English debate program, emphasizing its crucial role and the urgent need for a beginner-friendly handbook.

1. **Essential Component of the English Zone:** Both participants confirmed that English debate is treated as a core component of the *pasantren*'s English Zone program, not a mere extracurricular activity. It uses the Australasian format and is viewed by the coach as a comprehensive pedagogical tool that integrates all four language skills (writing, reading, speaking, and listening) along with critical thinking.
2. **Challenges in Participation:** Barriers to consistent attendance include logistical issues like afternoon practice times overlapping with personal responsibilities (Student), and initial student resistance or "laziness" which requires continuous motivational strategies from the coach.
3. **Common Learning Difficulties:** Students face performance anxiety (stage fright, losing focus) and significant informational limitations. The coach highlighted the difficulty in teaching students to build debate cases due to limited access to learning resources, especially for global issues common in competitions.
4. **Training Methods and Support:** The program utilizes a basic instructional framework, including a coach who acts as an adjudicator and structured models like AREL (Assertion, Reason, Evidence, Link), supplemented by video-based learning. However, both noted the critical lack of written learning materials specifically tailored for new English debate participants.
5. **Urgent Need for a Beginner-Friendly Handbook:** Both interviewees strongly agreed on the urgent need for a needs-based, written handbook designed specifically for beginners. The student noted it should cover everything from basic English usage to clear structure (manner, method, matter), while the coach stressed its value for planning and delivery. The

student also suggested the "matter" should include relatable topics like sports, movies, or games.

6. Broader Hopes for Debate's Impact: Debate is seen as a transformative learning process. The student reported benefits in public speaking, confidence, and thinking calmly to find solutions, while the coach believes it helps build globally aware students who can adapt and respond thoughtfully to different viewpoints.
7. Practical Suggestions for Improvement: The most critical practical suggestion from both was the need for access to the computer lab for research on debate materials. Additionally, the student proposed organizing public debate performances (fun-debates) and sparring events with other *pesantren* to boost interest, exposure, and knowledge exchange.

## DISCUSSION

The needs analysis confirms the strong enthusiasm of *pesantren* students in the English immersion program for debate, viewing it as a meaningful platform for both linguistic and personal development. Students clearly expressed a desire to improve speaking fluency, argument organization, and public confidence.

The findings strongly support an expanded view of needs analysis (Gilakjani et al., 2020; Wang, 2023), confirming that effective materials must be learner-centered (Nation & Macalister, 2021; Long, 2021). Students require materials that are easy to understand, culturally relevant, and practical. The desire for structured, authentic practice aligns debate perfectly with Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and task-based frameworks (Ellis, 2021; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2023).

### Key Themes in the Discussion

1. Cultural Relevance: The need for debate topics to connect to daily *santri* life and Islamic values (*adab*) was paramount. This supports the argument that language practice in *pesantren* must prioritize ethical communication (Rahman, 2020; Yusuf, 2022). Culturally sensitive content is essential to maximize engagement and reduce intimidation.
2. Speaking Fluency and Scaffolding: Students consistently sought to improve fluency and public speaking confidence, aligning with empirical evidence on debate's positive impact (Setiawan & Suryanto, 2021; Phongphio &

Rattanavich, 2020). Importantly, requests for practical tools (sample motions, vocabulary, logical structures) underscore the need for clear, guided scaffolding to help beginners transition to spontaneous expression (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2023).

3. Emotional Readiness: Students highlighted affective needs like confidence and feeling prepared. This aligns with findings that anxiety and willingness to communicate (WTC) are critical factors (Sun & Zhang, 2022). The high motivation shown suggests that involving learners in material development fosters ownership and increases engagement (Alavi & Rezaei, 2023).

The study's limitations include its focus on a single institution, which limits generalizability, and the exclusion of administrative/parental viewpoints. Future research should pursue longitudinal data to track evolving needs, investigate the effectiveness of specific handbook features (e.g., scaffolding tools), and expand the participant base to other *pesantren* to strengthen the applicability of the materials.

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