Phenomenological Insights Into Debate Based TBLT for Improving EFL Students' HOTS

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ABSTRACT

In rapidly evolving 21st-century EFL education, fostering higher-order thinking skills has become a critical priority, yet many classrooms continue to rely on traditional, teacher-centered practices that offer limited cognitive challenge and minimal opportunities for analytical engagement. Addressing this pedagogical gap, the present study investigates how Task-Based Language Teaching empowered through debate activities can serve as an integrative pathway for enhancing learners' HOTS within an EFL setting. Using a qualitative phenomenological design, data were generated through in depth semi structured interviews that elicited the lecturer's narratives about task design, classroom enactment, and perceived learning outcomes. The interview transcript was analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six phase thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns in strategies, challenges, and perceived impacts. The findings reveal that carefully scaffolded debate cycles, explicit modeling of argument structures, and sustained language support help students move from surface level participation toward more analytic reasoning, improved fluency, and greater confidence. At the same time, the lecturer reports constraints related to time, uneven language proficiency, and the need for institutional support. Overall, the study demonstrates that debate based TBLT can function as a powerful pedagogical space for integrating language development with higher order thinking. The results contribute phenomenological insights into lecturer agency in shaping cognitively challenging EFL tasks and offer implications for curriculum design, teacher professional development, and policy initiatives that seek to align EFL teaching with global demands for critical, reflective, and socially responsive graduates.

1. Introduction

The rapid transformation of the twenty first century and the expanding digital ecosystem have reshaped the competencies required of learners, making critical, creative, and reflective thinking indispensable for academic and real-world success. Higher order thinking skills (HOTS) are a key benchmark of quality learning, especially in systems that prepare students for complex information environments and global communication. Educators play a pivotal role in designing learning conditions that foster advanced cognitive engagement (Lu et al., 2021), a responsibility that has become more urgent with the rise of sophisticated technologies and the overwhelming flow of digital information (Saraswati et al., 2023).

In English language learning, there is an expectation to develop not only communicative proficiency but also the intellectual agility to interpret, evaluate, and generate knowledge in meaningful ways

(Purnama & Nurdianingsih, 2019). Studies show that integrating HOTS supports EFL learners through targeted pedagogy and enabling conditions, including teachers' understanding of HOTS (Saraswati et al., 2023), flipped classroom designs (Samadi et al., 2024), and learning environments that promote critical thinking (Du & Zhang, 2022). These approaches are reinforced by evidence on the positive effects of HOTS instruction on speaking skills and motivation (Purnama & Nurdianingsih, 2019), as well as the strong links between motivation, engagement, and critical thinking in EFL contexts (Yang et al., 2025).

In the context of English as a Foreign Language instruction, higher order thinking skills enable learners to interpret and analyze texts, construct arguments, evaluate information sources, and articulate complex ideas with clarity and precision. These cognitive abilities directly influence learners' performance and overall language development (Le et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2024). Nevertheless, EFL

classrooms often struggle to integrate cognitively demanding tasks due to long standing reliance on grammar focused pedagogy and memorization oriented routines. Such practices constrain analytical thinking, creativity, and reflective reasoning, leading to passive learning and superficial language use (Shykun, 2023; Bui & Truong, 2015). As a result, fostering deeper intellectual engagement has become a central concern for EFL educators in diverse contexts (Shykun, 2023; Huang & Li, 2024). Content and language integrated learning (CLIL) addresses these limitations by combining language development with meaningful content, which enhances language acquisition, content understanding, motivation, and classroom engagement (Shykun, 2023; Bui & Truong, 2015). CLIL and related approaches further promote higher order thinking through cognitively demanding tasks across disciplines (Bui & Truong, 2015), while broader frameworks support deep learning and academic literacy in higher education (Huang & Li, 2024). Emerging instructional models, such as inquiry based learning and flipped EFL writing with technology enhanced formative assessment, also encourage active participation and language growth, with evidence of increased engagement and improved learning outcomes (Huang et al., 2024).

A growing body of research has highlighted the limitations of conventional teacher centered language instruction, which tends to prioritize accuracy and examination based outcomes at the expense of meaningful communication and cognitive development. Scholars argue that pedagogical modifications are necessary to respond to contemporary learning demands (Kozanitis & Nenciovici, 2023). Another impediment frequently identified in previous studies is that students in EFL settings often face difficulties expressing abstract or critical ideas due to restricted vocabulary or lack of confidence, even though vocabulary forms the backbone of successful communication (Shi, 2025; Namaziandost et al., 2020). Research on critical reading, communicative competence, and argumentation further emphasizes that higher order thinking skills are deeply intertwined with language performance (Le et al., 2024; Chen et al., 2022).

Despite these scholarly efforts, significant challenges remain in designing cognitively rich classroom tasks that develop both language proficiency and higher order thinking skills (HOTS). Aligning learning objectives and assessments with HOTS demands curricular revision and targeted teacher preparation so that HOTS oriented instruction and writing across the curriculum can be implemented effectively (Chavda et al., 2023). In ESL settings, many teachers feel unprepared to address language and writing simultaneously, which complicates task design (Bhowmik, 2023; Bhowmik & Kim, 2021). Themed materials that genuinely support HOTS at the elementary level also remain limited, underscoring the

need for resources that integrate content, language, and HOTS oriented activities (Permana & Utomo, 2021). Although educational technology can aid reading and language development, its impact depends on student centered, constructivist use rather than transmission based models, and it cannot by itself overcome core design problems (Ni et al., 2022).

Scholars have increasingly turned to Task Based Language Teaching as a promising solution because it positions learners at the center of communicative meaning making while engaging them in purposeful tasks that stimulate cognitive depth (Ellis et al., 2019; Lu et al., 2025). Research indicates that TBLT enhances communicative competence (Gutiérrez, 2024), fosters autonomy (Aldosari & Alsager, 2023), and improves learning motivation (Chua & Lin, 2020). At the same time, debate has been recognized as a powerful argumentative task that supports critical inquiry, logical reasoning, and structured argumentation in EFL contexts (el Majidi, Janssen, et al., 2024; el Majidi, de Graaff, et al., 2021). Although studies on debate and TBLT have individually demonstrated encouraging outcomes, the integration of these two approaches remains underexplored, especially concerning teachers' lived experiences in facilitating debate tasks designed to build higher order thinking skills. Few studies have examined how lecturers navigate the practical, cognitive, and affective dimensions of implementing debates within a TBLT framework, leaving a theoretical and pedagogical gap in the literature.

Positioned within this gap, the present study offers a focused investigation into the lived experiences of an EFL lecturer who integrates debate tasks within a TBLT framework to foster higher order thinking. The niche of this study lies in its phenomenological approach, which seeks to uncover the essence of the lecturer's reflections, insights, and challenges when facilitating HOTS oriented debate activities. Unlike previous research that primarily examines student outcomes or compares instructional interventions, this study foregrounds the educator's voice to illuminate how pedagogical decisions are shaped by real world constraints, classroom dynamics, and evolving understandings of TBLT and debate integration. This approach offers a novel contribution by connecting theory, practice, and personal experience in ways that expand current perspectives on critical thinking oriented language teaching.

The significance of this study is rooted in its potential to deepen understanding of how TBLT empowered debates can be strategically integrated to support both cognitive and linguistic development in higher education. The study aims to identify the lecturer's strategies in designing and implementing debate tasks, to explore perceived challenges and opportunities, and to investigate how such activities influence students' cognitive engagement, language performance, and critical thinking. These aims align

with current efforts to advance innovative and learner centered pedagogies that respond to global demands for communicative competence and advanced thinking skills.

Overall, the insights provided through this study contribute to ongoing efforts to strengthen English language teaching by promoting deeper cognitive engagement, reflective reasoning, and communicative effectiveness. Understanding how lecturers perceive and navigate TBLT empowered debates offers valuable guidance for educators, curriculum designers, and institutions seeking to implement innovative practices that enhance both language learning and higher order thinking. The implications of this study emphasize the need for supportive environments, intentional task design, and reflective teaching practices that can advance holistic, future ready learning in EFL contexts.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design and Philosophical Orientation

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to examine the lived pedagogical experience of an EFL lecturer implementing Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) through debate to foster Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS). Phenomenology is concerned with how individuals interpret and assign meaning to lived experiences and is therefore particularly appropriate for investigating pedagogical enactment as it unfolds in authentic classroom practice (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This design enabled the researcher to move beyond procedural descriptions of instruction and to access the deeper pedagogical reasoning, beliefs, and reflective meaning making that shaped classroom decisions. In so doing, it illuminated not only what the teacher did, but also why particular choices were made and how these choices aligned with broader goals for language development and higher order thinking.

Consistent with contemporary applications of phenomenology in educational research, this study sought to distill the essence of how TBLT-empowered debates are designed, negotiated, and perceived in relation to HOTS development (Tavakol & Sandars, 2025). The approach prioritizes depth, subjectivity, and experiential richness rather than hypothesis testing or variable manipulation.

2.2 Participant and Sampling Strategy

The participant was one university-level EFL lecturer who teaches debate as a core subject and systematically applies Task-Based Language Teaching principles in classroom instruction. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to ensure that the participant possessed experiential relevance to

the phenomenon under investigation. The inclusion criteria were:

1) A minimum of two years of experience teaching EFL debate courses.

2) Demonstrated and sustained integration of TBLT principles in instructional practice.

The selection of a single participant is methodologically aligned with phenomenological inquiry, which emphasizes intensive depth of lived experience over large-sample generalization. This allowed for detailed exploration of personal pedagogical transformations, instructional negotiations, and reflexive meaning construction within the institutional context of higher education.

2.3 Data Collection Procedures

Data were generated through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which are widely recognized as an optimal method for capturing lived experience, reflective narration, and evolving meaning construction in qualitative inquiry (Magaldi & Berler, 2020). This format maintained sufficient structural guidance while allowing flexibility for probing emergent insights.

An interview protocol consisting of five open-ended guiding questions was developed and organized around three central analytical domains:

1) The lecturer's experience in designing and implementing TBLT-based debate tasks;

2) Perceptions of students' cognitive engagement and HOTS development;

3) Reflections on challenges, institutional conditions, and pedagogical opportunities.

All interview questions were intentionally framed to elicit thick description, narrative depth, and reflexive pedagogical interpretation rather than short factual responses. The interview was conducted in a quiet and secure environment, either face-to-face or via a trusted online platform, and lasted approximately 45–60 minutes.

With informed consent, the session was audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim to preserve linguistic, affective, and cognitive nuances essential for phenomenological analysis. Member checking was conducted through follow-up communication to confirm the accuracy of interpretations and to enhance interpretive credibility.

2.4 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following the six-phase analytical framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2023). This approach was selected for its analytical rigor, transparency, and theoretical flexibility in developing meaning-based patterns from qualitative data.

The analytical process proceeded through the following stages:

1) Data familiarization: Repeated immersive reading of transcripts to identify preliminary meaning units.

2) Initial coding: Systematic generation of inductive codes highlighting pedagogical actions, cognitive processes, institutional dynamics, and student responses.

3) Theme construction: Organization of related codes into potential thematic clusters.

4) Theme refinement: Critical evaluation of thematic coherence against the entire dataset.

5) Theme definition and labeling: Conceptual delineation of each theme's analytical boundaries.

6) Analytical narrative construction: Integration of thematic findings with theoretical interpretation and empirical illustration.

This multi-layered analysis enabled identification of patterns related to instructional scaffolding, cognitive engagement, student transformation, pedagogical constraints, and institutional structuring surrounding TBLT-based debates.

2.5 Trustworthiness and Analytical Rigor

To ensure credibility, confirmability, and interpretive depth, the study employed theoretical triangulation. Although the data were derived from a single primary instrument (semi-structured interview), interpretation was conducted through multiple conceptual frameworks, specifically:

- Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)

- Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS)

This triangulated analytical framing reduced theoretical bias and strengthened interpretive robustness. Additionally, member checking served as a key validation mechanism to confirm the trustworthiness of thematic interpretations. The researcher engaged in sustained reflexivity throughout the analysis to maintain transparency between data, interpretation, and theoretical positioning.

3. Result

The data analysis reveals a coherent pattern in how debate based TBLT is designed, enacted, and experienced in the classroom. Four clusters of findings stand out. First, the lecturer orchestrates a carefully scaffolded sequence of strategies that gradually moves students from guided modeling to independent, inquiry driven debate. Second, the implementation of these tasks is strongly shaped by structural and pedagogical challenges that can either constrain or dilute higher order thinking processes. Third, a set of environmental and institutional opportunities emerges as a powerful enabler for sustaining debate based practices. Finally, the lecturer perceives deep and multidimensional impacts on students' linguistic performance, critical reasoning, and socio emotional growth, suggesting that debate based TBLT functions as a holistic learning ecology rather than a single technique.

3.1 Strategies for Designing and Implementing TBLT-Based Debates

This sub-section examines how the lecturer conceptualises and operationalises debate activities within a Task-Based Language Teaching framework to stimulate higher-order thinking. The qualitative evidence demonstrates that debate is not enacted as an improvisational speaking exercise but as a deliberately staged intellectual process, guided by carefully sequenced pedagogical decisions. The strategies identified reflect a conscious effort to transform students into reflective arguers who engage in structured reasoning, critical evaluation, and informed decision-making. Table 1 presents the coded interview data that underpin these strategies, highlighting the empirical foundation of the analysis.

Table 1. Strategies in Designing and Implementing TBLT-Based Debate Activities

No.	Interview Excerpt with Coding	Strategies
1	"I usually provide scaffolding first, such as an example of an argument structure, so I first explain to the students what the argument structure is like, what a strong argument is like, then key vocabulary … or looking at models on debate." (L1-S1)	Scaffolding and modeling
2	"....brainstorming in small groups, before they debate." (L1-S2)	Collaborative brainstorming
3	"I also give them enough time to prepare ideas by reading sources." (L1-S3)	Preparation time
4	"And usually, I will encourage them to look for various online sources because here technology is also involved." (L1-S4)	Resource use and technology integration

The coded data in Table 1 reveal four pedagogical strategies that significantly shape the design and implementation of TBLT-based debates. The most prominent finding is the lecturer's reliance on scaffolding and modeling as the cognitive anchor of the debate process. By explicitly demonstrating argument structures and clarifying what constitutes a strong argument, the lecturer constructs a structured cognitive framework that directs students towards analytical depth. This strategy functions as an intellectual blueprint, enabling learners to move beyond intuitive or fragmented responses into coherent and logically organised reasoning patterns. It reflects a deliberate attempt to externalise thinking processes so they can be internalised and reproduced with greater autonomy.

Collaborative brainstorming, as indicated by the coded evidence, represents the second major strategy and operates as a collective incubator for ideas. Through small-group interaction, students are given the opportunity to negotiate meaning, test emerging arguments, and refine perspectives before entering the formal debate arena. This phase is not merely preparatory, but epistemologically significant, as it demonstrates that critical thinking is constructed through interaction and dialogic engagement. The strategy reduces psychological pressure and reinforces the notion that intellectual growth is a shared enterprise rather than an individual performance.

The provision of sufficient preparation time further deepens the quality of student engagement. By allowing learners to explore sources and organise their arguments in advance, the lecturer transforms debate from impulsive expression into reflective and evidence-based discourse. This temporal space enhances cognitive discipline, fostering deliberate reasoning and structured argument construction that elevates the analytical rigor of student contributions.

The integration of resources and technology extends the learning environment beyond the physical classroom. Encouraging students to draw on online sources positions them as autonomous knowledge seekers and reinforces their role as critical evaluators of information. This strategy enriches the epistemic dimension of debate, enabling students to support claims with credible evidence and engage with diverse perspectives rooted in wider information ecosystems.

Collectively, these strategies illustrate that the lecturer's pedagogical design is not reactive but meticulously orchestrated. The progression from scaffolding to collaboration, from preparation to technological engagement, reflects a coherent cognitive architecture that intentionally nurtures higher-order thinking. In this configuration, debate emerges as a transformative learning space where reasoning, linguistic competence, and learner agency intersect. This original interpretation suggests that the success of TBLT-based debates lies not in their performative dimension alone but in their capacity to systematically cultivate intellectual discipline, reflective judgment, and autonomous critical engagement among EFL learners.

3.2 Challenges in Facilitating TBLT-Based Debates for HOTS Development

This sub-section addresses the structural and pedagogical constraints that shape the practical implementation of TBLT-based debates and, consequently, the extent to which higher-order thinking skills can be fully cultivated. The lecturer's reflections reveal that while debate is recognised as a powerful cognitive tool, its effectiveness is frequently moderated by contextual limitations within the classroom and institutional environment. These challenges expose a persistent tension between the pedagogical ideal of cognitively rich debate and the operational realities of time, student diversity, linguistic readiness, and assessment complexity. The following table presents the coded interview data that serve as qualitative evidence for the challenges identified.

Table 2. Challenges in Facilitating TBLT-Based Debates for HOTS Development

No.	Interview Excerpt with Coding	Challenges
1	"So, the biggest challenge I face in implementing task-based language teaching is related to time constraints… the lecture schedule is often quite tight, so it only takes 3 credits of about 2.5 hours, and that's once a week." (L1-C1)	Time constraints
2	"… and the students' own readiness… Furthermore, students' abilities vary greatly. Some are confident in arguing in English, but others struggle to develop ideas and have limited vocabulary." (L1-C2)	Student readiness
3	"Speaking abilities also vary greatly; some are already fluent, while others still struggle with speaking or speaking English itself, so it will be a big challenge to build their confidence in participating in the learning process in this debate." (L1-C3)	Language proficiency
4	"Assessment is also a challenge in itself, because I have to assess both the process and the results of their arguments." (L1-C4)	Assessment challenges

The data in Table 2 reveal four dominant challenges that significantly influence the pedagogical effectiveness of debate-based TBLT in fostering higher-order thinking. The most pressing challenge is time constraint, which emerges as a structural barrier that limits the depth and continuity of cognitive engagement. Restricted lesson duration forces the lecturer to compress preparation, performance, and reflection phases, thereby reducing opportunities for sustained analytical reasoning. As a result, debates risk becoming surface-level exchanges rather than extended spaces for iterative argument refinement and critical deliberation.

Student readiness constitutes the second critical challenge, highlighting disparities in cognitive and emotional preparedness. Some students enter debates with confidence and conceptual clarity, while others demonstrate hesitation, limited ideation, or anxiety. This uneven readiness not only affects individual participation but also disrupts the balance of collaborative reasoning, leading to dependency on dominant voices and diminishing the inclusivity of intellectual exchange. This finding suggests that cognitive engagement is not solely a function of task design but is deeply intertwined with learners' psychological disposition and prior exposure to argumentation culture.

The third challenge, language proficiency, intensifies this disparity. The variation in students' speaking abilities creates asymmetrical participation patterns where fluent speakers tend to dominate the argumentative space, while less proficient learners remain peripheral. This condition restricts the potential for equal cognitive development and prevents the full realisation of debate as a democratic platform for critical exploration. It also reveals a paradox where the very activity intended to empower critical reasoning can inadvertently marginalise those who require it most.

Assessment challenges form a complex pedagogical dilemma. The lecturer must evaluate both cognitive processes and final argumentative products, requiring nuanced judgement across reasoning, language, interaction, and critical depth. This dual focus increases workload, heightens subjectivity, and makes fair, transparent evaluation difficult, signaling the need for clearer and more workable assessment frameworks.

Together, these challenges reveal key vulnerabilities in implementing TBLT based debates. Cognitive ambition alone is insufficient without structural support, differentiated pedagogy, and systematic evaluation. The effectiveness of debate in fostering higher order thinking depends not only on instructional design but also on the lecturer's ability to navigate institutional constraints and learner diversity, calling for adaptive pedagogical redesign that narrows the gap between cognitive intent and classroom reality.

3.3 Opportunities and Enabling Conditions

This sub-section highlights the contextual and pedagogical factors that enhance the successful implementation of TBLT-based debates and strengthen their capacity to foster higher-order thinking. While the previous sub-section revealed significant constraints, the lecturer's reflections also uncover a set of enabling conditions that transform debate from a challenging practice into a highly effective cognitive and communicative learning experience. These opportunities demonstrate that the effectiveness of debate-based TBLT is not solely dependent on instructional design but is profoundly influenced by classroom climate, infrastructural support, institutional commitment, and student awareness. The following table presents the coded qualitative evidence that illustrates these enabling conditions.

Table 3. Opportunities and Enabling Conditions in Facilitating TBLT-Based Debates for HOTS Development

No.	Interview Excerpt with Coding	Opportunities
1	"The implementation of debate-based task-based language teaching is more successful when the class has an active atmosphere, so students feel confident to speak, communicate, and respect each other." (L1-O1)	Active and supportive atmosphere
2	"… and of course, supportive facilities. For example, flexible space for group arrangements, access to learning resources, in this case, I think it's sufficient because every student already has a smartphone that supports internet access, and also several online sources that they can use to find data to strengthen their arguments." (L1-O2)	Supportive facilities and compatible technology
3	"Then, sufficient discussion time is also important." (L1-O3)	Sufficient discussion time
4	"… then support from the institution… also very helpful." (L1-O4)	Institutional support
5	"… students' understanding of the purpose of debate is also very helpful." (L1-O5)	Student understanding

The data in Table 3 reveal a constellation of conditions that significantly amplify the pedagogical power of TBLT-based debates. The most influential opportunity is the presence of an active and supportive classroom atmosphere, which emerges as the emotional and psychological backbone of effective debate. When students feel safe, respected, and encouraged, they are more willing to engage in intellectual risk-taking, articulate evolving ideas, and challenge opposing arguments. This environment cultivates psychological openness, transforming debate from a performance arena into a space of genuine inquiry and mutual respect. In this context, critical thinking flourishes because students perceive error not as failure but as part of intellectual growth.

Supportive facilities and compatible technology represent the second enabling condition. Flexible classroom layouts allow dynamic group formations, while access to smartphones and online resources empowers students to substantiate arguments with real-time data. This infrastructural support expands the epistemic boundaries of the classroom, allowing knowledge construction to extend beyond textbook limitations. Students become active navigators of information, strengthening their evaluative judgment and reinforcing the authenticity of their argumentative positions.

Sufficient discussion time emerges as a crucial temporal enabler. Extended time allocation allows students to move beyond superficial exchanges and engage more deeply with content, counterarguments, and reflective reasoning. This temporal flexibility enables the iterative construction of ideas, encouraging thoughtful processing rather than rushed responses. As a result, debate becomes a process of progressive refinement, where analytical precision is gradually strengthened.

Institutional support plays a strategic role in legitimising debate as a serious academic practice. When the institution provides administrative flexibility, material resources, and curricular recognition, lecturers feel empowered to sustain and innovate debate-based pedagogy. This structural backing transforms debate from an optional classroom experiment into an embedded component of meaningful instruction.

Finally, students' understanding of the purpose of debate functions as a motivational catalyst. When learners recognise debate as a tool for developing critical reasoning rather than merely fulfilling a task requirement, their engagement becomes more intentional and self-directed. This awareness fosters goal-oriented participation and reinforces the intrinsic value of intellectual dialogue.

Collectively, these enabling conditions reveal that effective implementation of TBLT-based debates is the result of synergistic alignment between psychological readiness, physical infrastructure, institutional policy, and learner mindset. The original interpretation presented here suggests that debate achieves its fullest transformative potential not simply through task design but through the cultivation of a learning ecosystem that supports intellectual courage, collaborative inquiry, and reflective participation. These opportunities illuminate a pathway through which debates evolve into powerful pedagogical spaces where higher-order thinking is actively nurtured, sustained, and meaningfully embodied.

3.4 Perceived Impacts on Students' Learning and Thinking

This sub-section examines the lecturer's perceptions of how TBLT-based debate activities shape students' learning and cognitive development. The qualitative evidence reveals that the impact of debates extends far beyond linguistic improvement and enters the domains of critical reasoning, affective transformation, and social maturity. The lecturer consistently describes debate as a catalyst that reshapes students' intellectual posture, communicative confidence, and interpersonal awareness. These perceived impacts indicate that debate functions not merely as a speaking activity but as a transformative pedagogical experience that reconstructs how students think, interact, and position themselves as learners. The following table presents the coded interview data that underpin these observed outcomes.

Table 4. Perceived Impacts of TBLT-Based Debates on Students' Learning and Thinking

No.	Interview Excerpt with Coding	Improvement
1	"I discovered several unexpected benefits from implementing debate in learning to encourage English speaking. In addition to improving students' critical thinking skills, debate activities also significantly boosted their confidence and courage in speaking English in public or in front of an audience." (L1-I1)	Increased confidence and public speaking
2	"Students became more active and bold in expressing their opinions; even those who previously tended to be fluent in English were encouraged to be active and bold in expressing their arguments, of course, in English." (L1-I2)	Learning engagement

No.	Interview Excerpt with Coding	Improvement
3	"So, many skills were developed in this debate. They were also encouraged and stimulated to speak in public, think critically, and present their arguments." (L1-I3)	Enhanced critical thinking and argumentation
4	"Furthermore, the process of responding to each other's arguments encouraged them to think more openly and appreciate differing points of view." (L1-I4)	Open-mindedness and respect
5	"Social benefits such as teamwork, empathy, and mutual respect also emerged naturally during the preparation and implementation of the debate." (L1-I5)	Social and interpersonal growth
6	"These were additional outcomes I hadn't anticipated, but they greatly supported the development of students' English speaking and character." (L1-I6)	Holistic skill development

The data presented in Table 4 reveal a multidimensional pattern of impact that reshapes students' learning experiences at cognitive, affective, and interpersonal levels. The most immediately visible transformation is the significant increase in confidence and public speaking ability. Students who initially demonstrated hesitation gradually developed the courage to articulate ideas before an audience, indicating that debate provided a psychologically empowering space where fear was progressively replaced by self-assurance. This change reflects a shift in learner identity, from passive participant to confident communicator, suggesting that debate reconstructs students' self-perception within the academic environment.

Learning engagement emerges as another key finding. The lecturer observed that students became more active, expressive, and invested in classroom interaction. This heightened participation suggests that debate stimulates intrinsic motivation by positioning students as contributors rather than mere recipients of knowledge. The dialogic nature of debate creates a learning atmosphere where students experience ownership of ideas, transforming engagement from compliance into intellectual commitment.

Enhanced critical thinking and argumentation represent the most profound cognitive outcome. Students are perceived to develop greater capacity for analysis, evaluation, and structured reasoning. The act of constructing and defending arguments requires them to organise thoughts systematically, anticipate counterpoints, and justify claims logically. This process signifies a transition from surface-level communication to disciplined intellectual engagement, reinforcing the role of debate as a vehicle for higher-order cognitive development.

The emergence of open-mindedness and respect highlights an important affective dimension. By engaging with opposing viewpoints, students learn to process disagreement constructively, cultivating tolerance and reflective judgement. This outcome demonstrates that debate nurtures not only cognitive sharpness but also ethical sensitivity, shaping learners who are capable of engaging critically without undermining interpersonal harmony.

Social and interpersonal growth underscores the collaborative nature of debate preparation. Teamwork, empathy, and mutual responsibility evolve through sustained interaction, indicating that debate fosters relational competence alongside intellectual skill. Students learn to negotiate roles, support peers, and coordinate collective goals, strengthening their social awareness.

Collectively, these outcomes contribute to holistic skill development, where linguistic proficiency, critical reasoning, confidence, and character formation evolve simultaneously. The original interpretation offered here suggests that TBLT-based debate functions as an integrative learning catalyst that transcends traditional disciplinary boundaries. It reconstructs students not only as more competent language users but as reflective thinkers and socially responsive individuals. This transformation positions debate as a pedagogical space where cognitive rigor, emotional maturation, and ethical awareness converge, confirming its powerful role in shaping intellectually resilient and critically engaged EFL learners.

4. Discussion

This study set out to illuminate how an EFL lecturer designs, negotiates, and experiences debate within a TBLT framework to foster higher order thinking skills. Through a phenomenological design and reflexive thematic analysis, the findings move beyond procedural description and reveal the pedagogical reasoning, tensions, and transformative potential that underpin TBLT empowered debates in a higher education context (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2023; Tavakol & Sandars, 2025). Overall, the study highlights three key results. First,

debate is framed as a carefully scaffolded intellectual journey that explicitly targets HOTS rather than a simple speaking exercise. Second, the lecturer's practice is continuously shaped by a dynamic interplay between constraints and enabling conditions at learner, classroom, and institutional levels. Third, debate emerges as a catalyst for holistic development that integrates linguistic, cognitive, and socio emotional outcomes. Building on these key findings, the following sub sections discuss how the results confirm, refine, and extend current theorisation, while also foregrounding the gaps, novelty, and implications of the study.

4.1 Reframing strategies for TBLT-based debates in light of HOTS-oriented pedagogy

The first cluster of findings shows that the lecturer reimagines debate as a staged intellectual pathway in which students move from explicit modelling of argument structure, through collaborative brainstorming and extended preparation, towards more autonomous, inquiry driven debate. This multi layered architecture of scaffolding and support is deliberately aligned with HOTS development and affirms the view that higher order thinking in EFL settings is most likely to flourish when learners engage in tasks that demand analysis, evaluation, and synthesis rather than mere recall (Lu et al., 2021; Le et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2024; Sajidin, 2025). By making argument structure visible, negotiable, and repeatedly rehearsed, the lecturer turns reasoning itself into an object of instruction, thereby elevating HOTS from an incidental by product of language practice to an explicit learning target.

From a TBLT perspective, these strategies reaffirm the value of meaning focused, learner centred, and purpose driven tasks (Ellis et al., 2019; Lu et al., 2025). The deliberate progression from modelling to guided practice and then to independent debate echoes core TBLT principles that tasks should culminate in clear communicative outcomes while simultaneously engaging complex reasoning (Gutiérrez, 2024; Chua & Lin, 2020). Small group brainstorming, in particular, functions as a shared cognitive workspace where students test claims, negotiate meanings, and co construct positions before speaking in a more public arena, which resonates with meta analytic evidence that active learning pedagogies outperform traditional lecturing for deep understanding in the humanities and social sciences (Kozanitis & Nenciovici, 2023).

The insistence on extended preparation time and source based argumentation also reframes debate as a vehicle for critical literacy. Students are required to move beyond intuitive opinion and to ground their positions in textual and digital evidence, thus strengthening reading strategies, source evaluation, and rhetorical flexibility (Le et al., 2024; Chen et al.,

2022). The integration of digital tools and online resources reflects wider findings that technology enriched environments can enhance HOTS and creativity when integration is intentional and reflective (Lu et al., 2021; Bereczki & Kárpáti, 2021). In this study, learners are positioned as autonomous investigators who must locate, filter, and mobilise information, a process that simultaneously expands vocabulary (Shi, 2025; Namaziandost et al., 2020) and cultivates the resilience and self regulation associated with task supported language learning (Aldosari & Alsager, 2023).

Taken together, these findings substantiate international evidence that TBLT can elevate communicative competence, motivation, and learner autonomy (Chua & Lin, 2020; Gutiérrez, 2024; Lu et al., 2025), while adding a more fine grained account of how argument centred tasks can be engineered to serve HOTS specific goals. They also extend previous work on debate in L2 education by shifting analytical attention from student outcomes alone to the lecturer's design moves and situated decisions as key variables shaping the cognitive texture of debate (el Majidi, de Graaff, et al., 2024; el Majidi, Janssen, et al., 2021; Malloy et al., 2020). A notable gap that emerges here is the lack of empirical descriptions of how such design repertoires develop over time across different lecturers and institutions, which suggests an important avenue for future comparative and longitudinal research.

4.2 Negotiating challenges and leveraging opportunities in HOTS-oriented debate pedagogy

The second cluster of findings reveals that the implementation of TBLT based debates is governed by a delicate negotiation between structural constraints and contextual affordances. Time limitation stands out as a major structural challenge. In line with Ellis (2019), the lecturer's experience confirms that cognitively demanding tasks require sufficient planning, performance, and post task reflection time; when sessions are compressed into tight weekly slots, the phases that are most crucial for higher order thinking risk being rushed or truncated. This tension highlights a structural gap between ambitious curricular aims for HOTS and the practical realities of timetable and workload organisation.

Learner related variables further complicate this landscape. Varied readiness, uneven language proficiency, and differing levels of confidence generate asymmetrical participation patterns in which more proficient and confident students often dominate while less prepared peers remain at the margins. This pattern strengthens the claim that task based instruction can only fully realise its transformative potential when it is complemented by differentiated support for students with weaker linguistic and affective resources (Wordofa et al., 2025; Liu et al.,

2024). In the context of debate, such disparities risk undermining the democratising promise of argument based pedagogy, where all learners are supposed to have opportunities to voice their perspectives and contest ideas (Malloy et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2022). This study therefore surfaces an important gap between the inclusive ideals of debate and the unequal conditions under which many students enter the classroom.

Assessment emerges as another persistent tension. The lecturer's difficulty in capturing both process and product speaks directly to unresolved questions in the literature about how to operationalise critical thinking and information processing in performance based tasks (Reynders et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2024). While analytic rubrics can help articulate expectations for reasoning, interaction, and language use, they also risk fragmenting the holistic nature of debate performance and increasing evaluative workload. The study thus reinforces the need for more practicable and context sensitive assessment models that balance reliability with flexibility.

At the same time, the findings illuminate several enabling conditions that help compensate for these obstacles. Psychological safety and an active, respectful classroom climate emerge as fundamental to sustaining HOTS oriented debate. This aligns with work showing that students are more likely to confront difficulties and persist with demanding tasks when they feel safe to take intellectual risks and to make mistakes (Thomsen et al., 2025; Koul & Nayar, 2021). In the present study, safety is not treated as an optional add on but as a core condition for turning debate into a space of inquiry rather than anxiety.

Institutional and infrastructural support also play a decisive role. Flexible classroom layouts, ready access to smartphones, and availability of online resources allow students to engage in authentic inquiry and real time information building, echoing findings that educational technologies can enhance engagement and collaboration when embedded in thoughtful design (Godsk & Møller, 2025; Burke et al., 2024). When curricular frameworks and administrative policies recognise debate and TBLT as legitimate, high value practices, lecturers feel more empowered to resist examination driven routines and to sustain active learning approaches (Kozanitis & Nenciovici, 2023; Lu et al., 2021).

Finally, the results stress the importance of students' awareness of the purpose of debate. When learners understand that debates are intended to develop critical reasoning, evidence based thinking, and collaborative inquiry, their participation becomes more strategic, reflective, and self directed (Aarar & Valverde, 2025; Wordofa et al., 2025). This highlights a practical implication: metacommunication about pedagogical aims should be built into the task cycle so

that students can align their identities and efforts with the deeper intellectual goals of debate.

4.3 Repositioning debate as a catalyst for holistic development

The third cluster of findings foregrounds the perceived impact of TBLT empowered debates on students' linguistic, cognitive, and socio affective development. The lecturer's account that debates simultaneously foster fluency, confidence, and more disciplined reasoning converges with a growing body of research showing that argument based tasks in L2 classrooms promote both language growth and higher order thinking (el Majidi, Janssen, et al., 2024; el Majidi, de Graaff, et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2022). The reported gains in public speaking confidence and willingness to articulate complex ideas echo evidence that debate oriented instruction can strengthen evidence based writing and critical thinking in secondary and tertiary settings (Aarar & Valverde, 2025; Yan et al., 2025; Le et al., 2024). In this study, debate functions as a rehearsal arena where students repeatedly organise arguments, anticipate rebuttals, and reformulate positions, thereby supporting advanced discourse competencies and narrowing the gap between linguistic knowledge and real time communicative performance.

The lecturer also observes a qualitative shift in classroom culture towards greater engagement and reduced passivity. This transformation resonates with research on virtual and blended discussion environments, which shows that structured interaction can deepen cognitive engagement and encourage more sustained exploration of ideas (Burke et al., 2025). Here, face to face debates appear to play a similar role: the iterative exchange of arguments draws learners into deeper processing, prompting them to revisit assumptions and integrate new perspectives, a pattern consistent with syntheses of HOTS oriented practices in EFL higher education (Sajidin, 2025). In this sense, debate oriented TBLT bridges the cognitive demands of higher education with the communicative needs of language learning, creating meaningful, context sensitive learning experiences that are both authentic and intellectually challenging (Chen, 2023).

Beyond language and cognition, the study highlights socio affective and interpersonal gains. The lecturer notes that teamwork, empathy, and mutual respect emerge organically during preparation and performance. This aligns with the view that debate is not solely about winning arguments but about co constructing understanding through dialogic interaction (Malloy et al., 2020) and with holistic education perspectives that emphasise self awareness, emotional stability, and relational competence alongside academic achievement (Koul & Nayar, 2021). By requiring students to listen to opposing viewpoints, respond respectfully, and adjust their

positions, debates cultivate open mindedness and tolerance, which are central dispositions for twenty first century citizenship (Lu et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2024).

Taken together, these findings suggest that TBLT empowered debates operate as a holistic pedagogical ecology where language mastery, critical reasoning, socio emotional growth, and digital literacy intersect (Godsk & Møller, 2025; Burke et al., 2025). A key contribution of this study is to show, through a phenomenological lens, that such integration is not an automatic outcome of using debate or TBLT, but the result of sustained reflective practice and context sensitive decision making by the lecturer (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Magaldi & Berler, 2020; Tavakol & Sandars, 2025). A remaining gap, however, is the limited insight into how students themselves interpret these holistic impacts and how they transfer these gains to other academic or professional domains, which invites further learner centred and longitudinal investigations.

4.4 Theoretical and practical implications

Viewed as a whole, the findings offer interconnected theoretical, practical, and methodological contributions. Theoretically, the study shows how one lecturer's design, implementation, and evaluation practices realise the promises of TBLT and debate for HOTS development (Ellis et al., 2019; Lu et al., 2025; Sajidin, 2025), confirming that HOTS are more likely to emerge when tasks are supported by scaffolding, collaboration, extended preparation, and evidence based reasoning within affectively supportive environments. At the same time, it echoes concerns that structural constraints, learner diversity, and assessment complexity can limit the critical thinking potential of innovative pedagogies if left unaddressed (Ellis, 2019; Reynders et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2024).

Practically, the study suggests that institutions seeking to mainstream debate based TBLT need coordinated action in pedagogical design, learning environments, and assessment, including equipping lecturers to model argumentation and guide collaborative preparation (Chen, 2023; Chua & Lin, 2020), designing classrooms that foster psychological safety and access to digital resources (Lu et al., 2021), and developing rubrics that clarify expectations for language use and critical thinking while allowing qualitative judgement and formative feedback (Reynders et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2024). Methodologically, it illustrates the value of phenomenological and thematic approaches for unpacking classroom innovation and treating TBLT and debate as evolving practices shaped by institutional conditions, learner profiles, and teacher agency (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2023).

Beyond the immediate context, the exploration of debate oriented TBLT highlights its adaptability across diverse EFL settings and its potential to cultivate graduates who combine linguistic proficiency with critical, reflective, and socially responsive dispositions. Empirical work indicates that TBLT can increase engagement by situating language learning in real world, context rich tasks (Islami & Senom, 2024; Kawa & Nidham, 2023) and that embedding critical thinking standards in TBLT strengthens learners' oral proficiency and logical reasoning (Yaprak & Kaya, 2020), consistent with broader evidence that critical thinking interventions enhance achievement and cognitive flexibility (Ünaldı & Yüce, 2020). The novelty of this study lies in linking that wider body of work with an in depth phenomenological account of a lecturer who integrates TBLT, debate, and HOTS within a specific institutional ecology, thereby bridging macro level claims about innovative pedagogy with micro level practices and dilemmas. Future research could undertake comparative, longitudinal, and mixed method studies in universities, schools, and online or multilingual settings to examine how debate based and debate embedded TBLT are shaped by differing cultures, policies, learner needs, and resources (Burke et al., 2025; Aarar & Valverde, 2025).

5. Conclusions

This study concludes that TBLT based debates, when deliberately designed and reflectively implemented, can serve as a powerful pedagogical platform for nurturing higher order thinking skills, communicative competence, and socio emotional growth among EFL university students. The key findings show that careful scaffolding of argument structures, collaborative preparation, and technology supported research transforms debate from a simple speaking exercise into a structured intellectual journey that invites learners to analyse, evaluate, and synthesise ideas in a second language. At the same time, the study reveals real constraints related to limited classroom time, unequal language proficiency, varied readiness, and complex assessment demands, while also identifying crucial enabling conditions such as psychological safety, supportive classroom climate, flexible infrastructure, and institutional backing that allow debate oriented TBLT to flourish.

The novelty of this research lies in its phenomenological focus on a lecturer's lived experience in integrating TBLT, debate pedagogy, and HOTS in a specific EFL higher education context, offering a finely grained and practice oriented account of how theoretical principles are negotiated in everyday teaching. These insights have important implications for curriculum design, teacher education, and policy making, suggesting that universities need to invest in professional development, assessment literacy, and resource provision if they wish to

mainstream debate based TBLT as a vehicle for critical and holistic learning. Future studies are encouraged to build on this work by incorporating student voices, quantitative measures of critical thinking and speaking proficiency, and comparative or mixed method designs across multiple institutions, including secondary schools, vocational colleges, online or hybrid learning environments, and multilingual classrooms, in order to test, refine, and extend the potential of debate embedded TBLT for diverse learners and educational systems.

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