

# BEING AN ENGLISH DEBATING COACH: A TEACHER'S ROLES AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

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## ABSTRACT

*English debating has taken its role to improve students' performance in speaking and critical thinking skill, but it is through a long and uneasy process. This paper aims at exploring the lived experience of an English teacher in an Islamic boarding school, who initiated the first English debating club and coached the members to be a considerable debating team in regional and national levels. The data of this narrative inquiry study were collected through several semi-structured interviews. The meaningful experiences and insights from the research data were highlighted thematically and presented as the data findings. This study found several roles of the teacher in initiating the debating club, such as establishing the club, recruiting the members, structuring the regular rehearsal, mapping the students' strengths and weaknesses, and giving feedback and motivation. Under the limited sources of time and information, the teacher guided the students to work effectively and support them mentally. Her roles in coaching the debating club also inspired her professional identity as an English teacher. It implied that establishing running an English debating community requires a sequence of roles. In another way, it also strengthened the English teacher's professional identity. It implies the possibility of extracurricular activities in forming professional identity by accommodating teachers' passion and strengths.*

**Keywords:** *boarding school; coaching; English debating club; professional identity*

One of the most prominent skills in English is speaking skill and many researchers as well as English educators try to find the strategies to enhance students' performance. One of the strategies to improve the students' speaking skill is through English debating. It has been long believed to foster student-centered learning by promoting the growth of collaboration, critical thinking, and communication skills (Cariñanos-Ayala et al., 2021; Majidi et al., 2021). Studies on English debating have been carried out by many previous researchers, many of which

concerning on improving the students' speaking skill and critical thinking through English debating activities (Cariñanos-Ayala et al., 2021; Haryanto et al., 2019; Muthmainnah & Misnar, 2021; Rohadi, 2020). Among the studies on English debating, there was a little concern on the teachers' role in guiding the students in the debating clubs whereas the coaches' background and support from a professional debater are among the determined factors of students' achievement in English debating (Zulfahmi, 2017). In fact, this activity

requires both teachers' and learners' high order abilities of thinking, analyzing, and reasoning (Lan & Lam, 2020). Therefore, to obtain more comprehensive investigation and to bring broader impact, the teachers' roles in guiding English debating activities, both in the curricular and extracurricular contexts still needs to be explored.

To be more focused and get more comprehensive practical information on English debating, this study investigates English debating as an extracurricular activity. English debating is not only taught in daily classroom learning. In many schools and universities, English debating becomes an extracurricular activity. There are also many English debating championships for senior high school and university students, for regional, national, and international levels. It shows us that English debating has been widely recognized and the skill in English debating is valuable for person in person or for institution interest. Therefore, many institutions promoted this activity for their students. Further, English debaters were considered as individuals who were having higher order thinking skills and competent in English (Husnawadi & Syamsudarni, 2016) because there is a significant correlation between cognitive ability and communicative competence. Cognitive ability brings an important impact on critical thinking, analysis, and creativity (Hapsari & Wirawan, 2018). However, more attention was given to the skill itself, but little attention was given to the process of how to develop English debaters with expected skills in which the teacher usually plays an important role.

Several studies on English debating have highlighted the roles of English teachers. Zulfahmi (2017) investigated the factors that influence the students' success in English debates. He pointed out the coaching methods as the determining factors such as cooperative

learning, teacher center, debating practices, and plus minus interesting. He also suggested that teachers should recruit members of English debate students using appropriate tests and an appropriate recruitment process, so they can make progress faster. Here the debating coaches played the role to manage the practices and implement various methods to gain the optimal progress. Lan & Lam (2020) explored EFL teachers' beliefs and practices in teaching topical debates in Mainland China. This study highlighted the need of improving critical and logical thinking which are highly crucial in topical debates. It suggested that the teachers should reflect on their beliefs and practices systematically. It implied the need of continuously improving the teachers' capability in handling topical debate, mainly in implementing logical and critical thinking. Savitz et al., (2021) explored how debate promoted critical and disciplinary literacy and provided space for student empowerment and agency. They highlighted the teachers' roles in debating activities, among others promoting students' agency and empowerment, supporting students through differentiated instruction and scaffolding, and stressing the importance of critical analysis ability in addressing controversial issues. This study has shown the important roles of the English teachers in enhancing the students' debating performance.

As an English teacher guiding an English debating club, it also helps him in realizing his professional identity (PI). PI represents how teachers could define their professional roles and integrate them with personal roles while being a teacher (Zare-ee & Ghasedi, 2014). It is influenced by various conditions and factors such as historical, psychological, sociological, and cultural factors (Gu & Benson, 2015). Studies on teachers' PI have been conducted by several

previous researchers, even though no one had pointed out their roles as a debating team coach and how it could influence their professional identity construction. Han (2021) investigated Korean English language teachers' PI and related metacognitive thinking procedures. This study revealed that the teachers' PIs contained pedagogic meanings that highly regarded teachers' having language knowledge and skills, teaching communication skills for practicality, realizing learner-centered practices, and developing professionalism. Chaaban et al. (2021) explored teacher educators' professional agency, identity renegotiation, and emotional responses amid educational disruption. The study reported several conflicting themes of their professional agency and identity renegotiation, including relational, personal, and contextual spaces. Emotional experiences influenced the dynamic forms of agency and dismissal of renegotiated identities. The study suggested the need of teacher educators' professional agency to support transformative changes and innovations in teacher education. Both studies highlight some aspects of English teachers' professional identity dealing with their own knowledge and skill and pedagogical practices. It also points out the influence of personal and non-personal factors in constructing professional identity.

This current study points out the roles of an English teacher who guides an English debating club in a boarding school. There are several interesting facts in this study. First, not many English teachers are competent to be English debaters and debate adjudicators. Second, boarding schools have relatively strict rules which cover both general school subjects and Islamic teachings, so the students have limited time allotment for English debating. Third, boarding schools limit the source of information, so the students cannot

access information anytime and from anywhere in the boarding school environment. Fourth, English extracurricular usually gets less interest in a boarding school compared to Islamic extracurricular.

Amidst the condition, the teacher who became the participant in this study could manage her students to obtain several achievements in regional and national levels. Those facts underline the research gap of this study from the previous ones and point out the novelty of this study as the newly investigated topic related to an English extracurricular activity one of teacher professional identity construction practices in Islamic boarding school context.

During her journey in guiding the English debating club, she found that she actually learned a lot in improving her own capability and obtaining insights from her students. Utilizing narrative inquiry, this study investigated meaningful insights from an English teacher's lived experience dealing with her roles in guiding an English debating club in the boarding school and how it affected her own PI construction.

## **METHOD**

This study employed narrative inquiry. It focuses on how people use stories to make sense of their experiences and to understand phenomena from the perspectives of who experiences them (Barkhuizen et al., 2014). Narrative inquiry was chosen to elicit meanings from the participant's lived experiences. The participant was one English teacher, who taught at a boarding school in Central Java, Indonesia. She established and managed the first English debating club at the school in 2015. She performed as a credible participant since she was the one who established the club and coached the students. Previously, she was a reputable English debater in national level, as it was proved by

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her experiences in joining several English debating championships, both as a debater and an adjudicator.

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The study was conducted by following several steps. First, the participant was invited for a semi-structured interview on the research topic and she agreed to participate. Two semi-structured interviews using an interview protocol were conducted through voice notes on WhatsApp and each interview lasted around an hour, on 23 January 2022 and 2 June 2022. Multiple follow up conversation was done via WhatsApp chat during the data transcription to confirm the data or look for further detailed information and for triangulation purposes. The data in the form of interview transcriptions were then analyzed using thematic analysis to point out the prominent findings regarding the teachers' roles in guiding the English debating club and how it affects her PI construction.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### The teacher's roles in coaching the English debating club

#### *Establishing the club*

The first was to establish the debating club. This activity might be not familiar in all schools, and, thus it sometimes is uneasy to directly go to debating activities. As what was experienced by the English teacher in an Islamic boarding school. The school as well as the students were not familiar with English debating, though some students performed excellent English-speaking skill and argumentation. Recognizing the need to improve the English-speaking skill of the students and looking at the talents of some students, the teacher firstly initiated an English club which invited those who are interested in improving English skills to join.

*“So, firstly, I started it with more general activity so not only did we learn about debating, but we*

*learned some general English skills like speech or storytelling, so basically the idea is English club. But I put more concern or emphasis on debating skill.” (1<sup>st</sup> interview, 23 January 2022)*

It implied that to bring students into debating activities really needs process. The teacher went through several general English club activities, such as speaking, storytelling, news casting which concerned improving the students' speaking skills. Seeing the students' progress and interest in debating, the teacher then took a step further to bring the students into debating activity.

Another insight from this stage is that the process of establishing the club might be different among institutions, but it is an important thing to determine the vision and mission of the club. Starting from an English club which covers many activities, the teacher has determined the longer plan for developing the students' debating skills. It was established as an extracurricular activity which had a very limited time allotment in a week.

*“There must be ups and downs. But then it comes back to my intention in making this debating club. I have prepared the risk of coaching a debating club in a boarding school context, with limited information and literacy access. The burden might be harder. Because I have chosen it and I have a strong vision. Whenever I feel pessimistic, I will try to remember my vision.” (2<sup>nd</sup> interview, 2 June 2022)*

#### *Recruiting the members*

Recruiting the members was the next step after the club was established. In the recruitment process, the teacher made it as a screening to see the students' diverse potential and not making it a selection

process. From this recruitment stage, she could design the appropriate programs for the English club members. She also noticed the potential students who had better skills in English-speaking or persuading others.

*"I made it like a screening process. But the idea of the screening is not to eliminate the students or to choose.... pick only some, but to have a general understanding of students; diverse abilities. Maybe there are some who most likely have stronger English speaking skill compared to others, and those who might wanna join to improve their skill so they still have problems dealing with English skill itself, the speaking ability itself."*(1<sup>st</sup> interview, 23 January 2022)

Another purpose of not making a selection process was to give opportunity for all members to learn and express their abilities. She found that some students with less speaking ability perform much better during her involvement in the English club. Some other students were very good in persuading others and building arguments but their speaking skills were still undeveloped. For these students, she found it as a meaningful potential since the notion of debating is to deliver ideas in a convincing and persuasive manner (Suhendra, 2020).

### **Structuring the regular training**

Two of the challenges of coaching English debating in an Islamic boarding school were the limited time allotment and less sources of information. Not only did the students learn the national curriculum at school, they also had a certain target of Quran memorization. During their free time they usually focused on memorizing the Quran to meet the daily target. The time allotment for the English debating club was the time for

extracurricular activity. This time allotment might be not enough to bring all stages of English debating. In fact, English debating is not only presenting the arguments. It requires several activities, starting from analyzing the motions, building the arguments, delivering the arguments, making rebuttals, and doing evaluation. For all those stages, the time allotment was all not enough.

In addressing this challenge, the teacher divided the members into several groups in which each division is responsible to provide the current issues on certain field, such as technology, economy, education, lifestyle, etc. the students were supposed to work within a week and the regular rehearsal day is used for sharing and focusing on debating practice.

*"They improve their vocabulary because they are exposed to various reading materials from various topics. In debate we know that we cannot really choose what kind of motion we are going to have so we also have in our debating community we have several research divisions, so we divide the students into some research division with the aim to prepare them to face whatever motion they are going to have later on. So in our debates we have division of education, law, politics, economy, humanity, or technology and so on. And through those research division, the students would have reading section."*(1<sup>st</sup> interview, 23 January 2022)

Among the regular rehearsal activities, building arguments was the most important one. In the initial stages of regular rehearsals, the teacher also introduced the idea of debating, the structure of debating, and the roles of the debaters.

*“I would say that actually I put more focus on the arguments or the ideas the students will deliver in debating because the spirit of debating is actually to argue something and to counter arguments toward something in this case is the issue or the motion being debated on. So, firstly I introduced them to the basic idea of debating, the structure of debating, the roles of each speaker in debating and also the argument itself, how to create an argument, now to build a good argument so I put more emphasis on arguments.” (1<sup>st</sup> interview, 23 January 2022)*

Having various resources helped the students in selecting the data and evidence, making arguments, and rebuttal (Suharsih & Supriatna, 2020). However, due to the limited access to the internet and other sources of information, the students’ main source was from newspapers and any books available in the boarding school.

When the Covid-19 pandemic spread in the world, this debating club still existed and had regular rehearsal online through various platforms. It enabled them to access as much information during their stay at home.

*“We couldn’t have the same rehearsal quality during the pandemic, but I always motivated them to have online rehearsal by using several platforms which are designed for parliamentary debating practice. Back then, sometimes there were troubles due to unstable internet connection.” (2<sup>nd</sup> interview, 2 June 2022)*

It can be seen that the teacher used various techniques and employed several media to

facilitate the regular rehearsal, either offline or online. Some techniques and platforms to elicit arguments and rebuttals were used. The variety of the rehearsal activities was as a response in addressing several factors, such as students’ lack of preparation and their language proficiency level, including technical factors due to unpredicted situations (Lan & Lam, 2020).

### ***Recognizing the students’ strength and weaknesses***

Every person is different in nature, so as in their English skills. For early stage English debaters, their capabilities were varied. The duty of the coach was then to be able to recognize the students’ potential to be upgraded. The teacher saw every member with their unique performance. Through observations, the teacher could see the members’ strengths and weaknesses and give constructive feedback.

*“...usually what I do is to see that every student is actually unique. They have their own characteristics on speaking. Maybe some of them are really good with their pronunciation, or they have such convincing gestures or they are persuasive in nature, so actually whenever they speak, they can persuade others to listen to them so there are some who are like that. But maybe there are some who are really good at analyzing something, in researching something, or tacking the opponent’s ideas in this case is good at rebutting, so would address those strengths to the students, “you are really good at this, you can improve it.” We may give some compliments to their strength and give feedback on what they are still lacking. That’s what I*

do.” (1<sup>st</sup> interview, 23 January 2022)

Recognizing the students’ strengths and weaknesses helps the teacher to identify the best learning strategies for them, since each debater may need different strategies due to their diverse characteristics and different developed skills in English debating (Lestari, 2018; Turaya, 2020).

### ***Giving feedback and motivation***

A reputable debater must go through a lot of effort. Finding the fact that she was coached by a new debater, she really understood the condition that she should go slowly but sure. She tried to recognize the students’ difficulties and propose solutions through the feedback. She set a gradual target, rather expecting too much of her students. The most important point is to encourage them to try and speak about their ideas.

*“Maybe at first, we start at one minute then we go with three minutes and then five minutes, and eventually seven minutes. It needs process. Usually I would give them some constructive feedback on what they need to improve, dealing with their argumentation, their delivery when speaking in the debate. But mostly I would motivate them to not afraid to make mistakes and to try to speak.”* (1<sup>st</sup> interview, 23 January 2022)

She realized that being a good debater involved many aspects which must need time to develop. To give constructive and focused feedback, she pointed out some aspects which the students needed to improve, such as grammatical mistakes, pronunciation, and word choice.

*“And it is really okay for them to make grammatical mistakes in speaking. It’s really okay. It’s also okay if they choose or pick up some*

*wrong dictions or inappropriate vocabulary. I would later on tell them the more appropriate option for their opinion or arguments but the thing is I would like to see how they are able to voice out their ideas. They are able to deliver their opinion first.”* (1<sup>st</sup> interview, 23 January 2022)

Through feedback to the students, the teacher builds up meaningful interaction and engagement with her students, which contribute to the students’ progress (Muliani & Sumarsono, 2021).

*“And through the process of coaching my students in our debating community, I also learned that having motivation or having a strong goal in something would help you to achieve the goal eventually. If you have a strong reason why you are doing this kind of thing for example, why you are joining a debate for example, shaping this kind of goal would help you to improve yourself a lot better and faster than the others. So, giving them motivation or letting them know what actually their purpose is in joining the club is one of the boosters to improve themselves.”* (1<sup>st</sup> interview, 23 January 2022)

Motivation from teachers could promote students’ autonomy and competence (Ahn et al., 2021). From the teacher’s experience, giving motivation to the students to have determination in joining the debating club will help them accelerate their progress. Moreover, motivation from teachers was also reported to increase learners’ emotional engagement and self-actualization, and reduce anxiety (Salimi et al., 2022).

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## How coaching English debating club affects the English teacher's PI construction

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Language teachers' professional identity can be developed through several practices such as doing research and self-reflection (Meihami, 2021). Meihami also reported that EFL teachers' professional identity development was influenced by teachers' motivation and emotion. It means that EFL teachers who were motivated by their profession and had a positive emotion would probably improve the engagement to professional activities which eventually would lead to their PI construction. PI construction is an individual experience, even though it is mediated by contextual factors (Gu & Benson, 2015). This study looks at how coaching English debating clubs could affect the teacher's PI construction. It is firstly expressed in the following statement:

*"Personally, I think guiding or coaching debating communities forced me to be able to show them how to think critically and deliver arguments in debate. That's why I need to also improve my critical thinking and speaking ability. Because when I want to be a model for my students, when I want to give them some feedback or criticism, I would like to be a teacher or the one who could be their example. That's why I need to improve my performance first before coaching them. That's why I also learn and improve my skill a lot so learning with them also make me to learning to improve myself better in speaking and also in critical thinking"* (1st interview, 23 January 2022)

This is the first PI of the teacher that she constructed through coaching English

debating: to be the role model for the students regarding the English performance. This identity has motivated her to improve her own capability, mainly in critical thinking and speaking skill since her performance was seen and observed by the students.

As the role model in the classroom interactions, an English teacher holds a unique position to influence the students' belief about language (Metz, 2021). Metz also further believed that an English teacher was able to influence the students' understanding on the language use through the curricular materials and pedagogical approaches. As the role model, an English teacher also can develop the students' perceptions on the linguistic variations in English language. Hence, constructing this professional identity was essential in making the teachers realize their essential function as the model for the students. Moreover, being a model means being credible. Teachers' credibility was reported to be the determinant of students' engagement, satisfaction, and motivation in the classroom (Froment & de-Besa Gutiérrez, 2022).

The second PI which was constructed from coaching the English debating club was becoming facilitator of the students' English skills development. This is reflected from her roles in recognizing the students' strengths and weaknesses as well as giving feedback and motivation. A teacher's ability in identifying the students' types (for example, high and low achiever) will help them design the appropriate learning experience (Lin et al., 2017). For this purpose of optimizing the students' progress, a teacher also needs creativity and sufficient pedagogical knowledge.

The third of the teacher's PI construction from coaching English debating was as the mood builder during the learning process. Heterogeneous students with diverse



characteristics may experience boredom during the learning process. A professional teacher would always try to get the students engaged and enjoy the learning process. It is reflected from her efforts to bring various learning experiences, games, and challenges. It is also influenced by the strict schedule in the boarding school, high academic and Quran memorization target that made them excuse many times in the debating club.

*“It occurs several times (feeling pessimistic) when I was so excited to coach them, but they often excused themselves. In this condition I tried to understand their situation under academic and Quran requirements. I tried to understand them and talk to them. When we have strong bonding with the students, it’s very easy to motivate them personally.”*(2<sup>nd</sup> interview, 2 June 2022)

For performing this professional identity, a teacher needs to maintain their motivation and positive vibes to help the students enjoy their learning process. Teachers’ motivation also strongly relates to their teaching performance (Thommen et al., 2021), and hence, maintaining their motivation will help them perform better which eventually promotes the students’ progress.

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## CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussion, it can be concluded that the teacher’s role in coaching the English debating club are: (1) establishing the debating club with a clear vision, (2) recruiting the members by focusing on each student’s potential, (3) structuring the regular rehearsals by employing various strategies, (4) mapping the students’ strengths and weaknesses to design the appropriate learning activities, and (5) giving constructive feedback and motivation.

While being the coach of the debating club, the teacher also constructs her professional identity. She realized her identity as the role model for the students, as the facilitator of the students’ English skills progress, and as the mood builder in the learning process.

This study has revealed insights from an English teacher’s lived experience on coaching an English debating club at an Islamic boarding school. Many other teachers’ lived experiences dealing with their PI construction, teacher professional development, and teaching experience could be investigated to find beneficial meanings and insight..

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