

## Deepening Understanding of Specific Issues through Structured Academic Controversy: A Perspective of Cooperative Learning

Ryan Purnomo<sup>1</sup>, Nur Nafisatul Fitriyah<sup>2</sup>, Suprapti<sup>3</sup>, Muhammad Muharrom Al Haromainy<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Sidoarjo, <sup>3</sup>Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Mas Said Surakarta, <sup>4</sup>Universitas Pembangunan Nasional Veteran Jawa Timur  
ryan409.pbi@unusida.ac.id

---

### Article History

accepted 14/10/2023

approved 1/11/2023

published 27/11/2023

---

### Abstract

This paper aims to introduce and emphasize the utilization of structured academic controversy as a model of cooperative learning technique for university students. Despite the growing importance of critical thinking and cooperative learning in higher education, the lack of effective techniques hinders the development of these crucial skills. The primary objective of this research is to demonstrate the efficacy of structured academic controversy in enhancing critical thinking skills and promoting collaborative learning among EFL university students. Through a comprehensive review of existing literature and case studies, this research highlights the successful implementation of structured academic controversy in diverse EFL classroom settings, showcasing its adaptability and effectiveness in fostering cooperative learning and critical thinking skills among students. The findings reveal a significant improvement in students' ability to critically analyze complex issues, develop nuanced perspectives, and engage constructively with opposing viewpoints, indicating the potential of structured academic controversy in cultivating a robust learning environment. In conclusion, the systematic integration of structured academic controversy in EFL learning environments can significantly contribute to the development of critical thinking skills and foster a collaborative and intellectually stimulating educational atmosphere.

**Keywords:** academic controversy, intellectual conflict, cooperative learning, critical thinking

### Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memperkenalkan dan menekankan pemanfaatan kontroversi akademik terstruktur sebagai model teknik pembelajaran kooperatif bagi mahasiswa universitas. Meskipun pentingnya berpikir kritis dan pembelajaran kooperatif dalam pendidikan tinggi semakin meningkat, kurangnya teknik yang efektif menghambat perkembangan keterampilan penting ini. Tujuan utama dari penelitian ini adalah untuk menunjukkan efektivitas kontroversi akademik terstruktur dalam meningkatkan keterampilan berpikir kritis dan mempromosikan pembelajaran kolaboratif di kalangan mahasiswa universitas yang mempelajari bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing (EFL). Melalui tinjauan komprehensif terhadap literatur yang ada dan studi kasus, penelitian ini menyoroti implementasi sukses kontroversi akademik terstruktur dalam beragam pengaturan kelas EFL, menampilkan adaptabilitas dan efektivitasnya dalam memfasilitasi pembelajaran kooperatif dan keterampilan berpikir kritis di antara mahasiswa. Temuan menunjukkan peningkatan yang signifikan dalam kemampuan mahasiswa untuk menganalisis secara kritis isu-isu kompleks, mengembangkan pandangan yang nuansat, dan berinteraksi secara konstruktif dengan sudut pandang yang berlawanan, mengindikasikan potensi kontroversi akademik terstruktur dalam menciptakan lingkungan pembelajaran yang kokoh. Sebagai kesimpulan, integrasi sistematis kontroversi akademik terstruktur dalam lingkungan pembelajaran EFL dapat secara signifikan berkontribusi pada pengembangan keterampilan berpikir kritis dan mempromosikan suasana pendidikan yang kolaboratif dan intelektual yang merangsang.

**Kata kunci:** kontroversi akademik, konflik intelektual, pembelajaran kooperatif, berpikir kritis

---

## INTRODUCTION

Teaching students, a foreign language while concurrently nurturing critical thinking skills and fostering meaningful discussions represents a complex challenge for language instructors (Hadfield, J. 1992). Encouraging active participation, open dialogue, constructive sharing, and engaging debates within the context of the target language continues to pose difficulties for many educators (Burns, A. 1999). In my own teaching experience, I have observed that students often grapple with feelings of self-consciousness when engaging in discussions in the target language, leading to hesitancy in actively participating in debate classes. Despite the implementation of various communicative techniques and participation grading systems, a significant portion of students tend to remain reticent during most classroom interactions (Freeman, D., & Johnson, K. 1998).

One impactful strategy, Structured Academic Controversy (SAC), has proven to be instrumental in cultivating comprehensive understanding of complex issues, dilemmas, or topics through facilitated discussions. Well-organized SAC sessions have demonstrated their ability to stimulate critical thinking, enhance the quality of problem-solving skills, facilitate better decision-making processes, and contribute to overall higher academic achievement (Johnson et al., 1996). This paper seeks to introduce and expound upon SAC as a cooperative learning model, particularly tailored for teaching university students in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts. It will begin by elucidating the fundamental nature of SAC and its potential educational advantages. Subsequently, the comprehensive SAC process will be meticulously outlined and explained. Lastly, the paper will present a model of an EFL learning activity that effectively employs the SAC approach. These facets will be further examined and discussed in the subsequent sections accordingly.

The urgency of this research stems from the persistent challenge of fostering active participation and critical engagement in EFL classrooms, hindering the holistic development of students' language proficiency and critical thinking abilities (Littlewood, W. 2007). Many traditional instructional methodologies fail to effectively address the inhibitions students face in participating in discussions and debates in the target language. Students' self-consciousness, linguistic limitations, and apprehension towards expressing their thoughts in a foreign language significantly impede the development of their linguistic competence and critical thinking skills (Brown, H. D. 2007). Furthermore, the lack of confidence in articulating complex ideas in the target language often leads to passive learning and hinders the cultivation of independent and analytical thinking skills, which are essential for academic and professional success (Nunan, D. 1991)

Teaching foreign languages, particularly English as a foreign language (EFL), presents a complex challenge for educators in fostering active student engagement and critical involvement through meaningful discussions. Students' lack of confidence, linguistic limitations, and reluctance to express themselves in a foreign language significantly impede their linguistic development and critical thinking skills, despite various implemented communicative techniques. The urgency of this research lies in addressing the persistent obstacles to nurturing active participation and critical

engagement in EFL classrooms, which traditional methodologies have failed to effectively resolve, leading to a critical gap in current pedagogical approaches. While various approaches have been explored in integrating language learning with critical thinking development, task-based and collaborative learning methodologies have fallen short in effectively addressing the specific challenges that hinder participation and engagement in EFL classrooms. Thus, this research aims to identify the primary psychological and linguistic barriers inhibiting active student participation and critical engagement, while exploring the implementation of Structured Academic Controversy (SAC) as a potential solution, assessing its adaptability within the EFL curriculum, and providing actionable strategies for educators to optimize student learning outcomes and create a more inclusive and engaging learning environment.

In the current state of the art in language education, various approaches have been explored to integrate language learning with critical thinking development. While task-based learning and collaborative learning have shown some effectiveness, they often fall short in addressing the specific challenges that impede active participation and critical engagement in EFL classrooms. Consequently, there is a crucial gap in the existing pedagogical approaches, which necessitates a dedicated investigation into the implementation of SAC as a viable solution.

This research seeks to address three main objectives. Firstly, it aims to identify the primary psychological and linguistic barriers that hinder students' active participation and critical engagement in EFL classrooms, particularly during discussions and debate sessions. Secondly, the study intends to investigate how the implementation of Structured Academic Controversy (SAC) can effectively alleviate these challenges, promoting the development of critical thinking skills and facilitating meaningful discussions within the context of English language learning. Lastly, the research endeavors to assess the practical implications and adaptability of SAC within the EFL curriculum, offering educators actionable strategies to navigate the identified barriers and optimize student learning outcomes, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and engaging learning environment. By addressing these objectives, this research seeks to contribute meaningful insights into the effective integration of SAC as a pedagogical tool in EFL classrooms, facilitating a comprehensive approach to language learning that nurtures both linguistic competence and critical thinking skills among students.

## METHOD

This research employs a qualitative approach with a focus on a case study (Creswell, 2013). A case study is a suitable method for obtaining an in-depth understanding of complex phenomena within a specific context (Merriam, 2009). By involving participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis, this study will be able to explore various perspectives of the research participants, including both students and relevant instructors.

The group of EFL students involved in this research is a relevant subject, given their direct involvement in English language learning. By engaging them in a four-week

Structured Academic Controversy (SAC) session, this research can deeply observe the effects of this teaching method on students' engagement and critical thinking abilities.

The data collection, conducted through direct observations, in-depth interviews, and document analysis, represents a comprehensive approach, enabling more accurate and in-depth data collection (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The collected data will be thematically analyzed, allowing for the identification of thematic patterns emerging from various data sources. This will facilitate a deeper understanding of the impact of using SAC on student engagement and critical thinking abilities within the context of English language learning.

Data triangulation in this research is crucial to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings. By combining various data sources such as classroom observations, interviews, and document analysis, the study can ensure that the resulting findings accurately represent the researched phenomenon (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Additionally, regular meetings with other researchers and open revisions of the findings are essential steps to ensure the accuracy and consistency of the research findings.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### **The Structured Academic Controversy Model: A Cooperative Approach to Debating**

According to Johnson et al. (1996: 3), the Structured Academic Controversy (SAC) is an instructional method that employs intellectual conflict to enhance academic performance, improve problem-solving capabilities, foster critical thinking, reasoning, interpersonal relationships, and psychological well-being. It represents a form of academic discord where students' ideas, information, conclusions, theories, or opinions clash and they strive to reach a consensus (Johnson & Johnson, 1988). In practical terms, this technique involves a cooperative style of debate wherein groups of four, divided into pairs, take turns representing opposing views on a particular issue before attempting to reconcile their differences (Jacobs, 2010).

The fundamental aspect of SAC involves collaborative efforts by students to critically analyze each other's positions, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of the opposing argument. Consequently, they strive to refute opposing perspectives while defending their own stance. This process requires students to comprehend the information presented and understand the perspectives of the opposing group. Critiques and opposing viewpoints stimulate conceptual conflict and uncertainty, thereby fostering an active pursuit of additional information to resolve this uncertainty. Students engage in activities such as seeking more information, attempting to understand opposing positions and rationales, and endeavoring to see the situation from the standpoint of the opposition.

The application of SAC leads to numerous positive outcomes for students, including the cultivation of positive interdependence, face-to-face promotive interaction,

individual and group accountability, as well as the development of interpersonal and small group skills. Therefore, SAC is considered a cooperative learning technique, as it integrates principles that are conducive to a cooperative learning environment, where collaborative efforts are expected to yield more productive results compared to competitive or individualistic endeavors. As noted by Slavin (1990: 3), cooperative learning, including SAC, emphasizes the concept of students working together to learn and being responsible not only for their own learning but also for their peers' learning. This principle aligns with the SAC model, which encompasses criteria such as a task for group completion, discussions and resolutions, face-to-face interactions in small groups, an atmosphere of cooperation and mutual assistance within each group, and individual accountability.

From the preceding discussion, it is evident that SAC constitutes a group learning activity designed to foster learning through the socially structured exchange of information among learners within groups. Each participant is responsible for their own learning and is incentivized to contribute to the learning process of others (Olsen & Kagan, 1992). In essence, SAC can be described as a cooperative model of debate.

### **Nurturing Critical Thinking through Structured Academic Controversy**

Educators, particularly those at the university level, recognize the significance of fostering critical thinking skills as a crucial learning outcome. Critical thinking is believed to not only optimize students' learning experience but also empower them to independently enhance their knowledge, thus enabling their success in the professional sphere. As a result, educators are encouraged to integrate various effective teaching practices and design language instruction methods aimed at equipping students with these vital skills.

The foundation of the literature on critical thinking can be traced back to two primary academic disciplines: philosophy and psychology (Lewis & Smith, 1993). From a philosophical perspective, critical thinking is characterized as purposeful and directed thinking, focusing on the formation of judgments that meet the standards of adequacy and accuracy (Bailin et al., 1999: 287). It involves reflective judgment on actions and beliefs (Facione, 2000: 61). On the other hand, from a cognitive psychological viewpoint, critical thinking is described as the utilization of cognitive skills and strategies that enhance the likelihood of achieving desirable outcomes (Halpern, 1998: 450). This includes the ability to consider multiple aspects of an issue, remain receptive to new evidence that challenges one's ideas, reason objectively, demand evidence to support claims, deduce and infer conclusions from available facts, and effectively solve problems (Willingham, 2007: 8).

Critical Thinking is an integral aspect of the process that involves the evaluation of evidence gathered during problem-solving endeavors or the outcomes generated through creative thinking (Crowl et al., 1997; Lewis & Smith, 1993). It encompasses various component skills such as the analysis of arguments, the utilization of inductive or deductive reasoning to make inferences, the assessment and evaluation of information, and the ability to make informed decisions or solve complex problems.

Critical thinking is a fusion of cognitive skills and personal dispositions. These dispositions, which are akin to attitudes or habitual patterns of thinking, include possessing an open and impartial mindset, nurturing curiosity, maintaining flexibility, a strong inclination towards rationality, a thirst for knowledge, and a profound respect for, as well as a willingness to consider, diverse viewpoints (Lai, 2011).

Addressing the imperative of nurturing student learning and critical thinking skills, the implementation of SAC aligns with students' cognitive processes and holds substantial potential for application within the classroom setting. This is evident as the structuring of controversy by teachers encourages students to orally revisit the information or subject matter they are learning, assert their positions, share and disseminate knowledge with peers, critically assess and refute information, engage in deductive reasoning, and ultimately amalgamate information to arrive at factual and conclusive judgments that can be collectively agreed upon (Johnson & Johnson, 1988: 59). Consequently, teachers are tasked not only with imparting knowledge to students but also with facilitating their cognitive development and guiding them to introspect on their own thinking processes, as underscored by Kauchak & Eggen (1998). This endeavor assumes critical significance as students, upon gaining an awareness of their thinking processes, begin to comprehend how their individual perspectives influence their decision-making and interpretation of various situations (Jacobs, 1994).

Therefore, SAC serves as a catalyst for promoting active student engagement and stimulating critical thinking within the classroom. This assertion is reinforced by Kahneman et al. (1982), who suggest that over time and through systematic thought processes, individuals and groups can cultivate principles to guide their decision-making. By integrating SAC into the learning experience, students are afforded the opportunity to have their perspectives and conclusions scrutinized by proponents of opposing viewpoints. Duffy et al. (1998) emphasize that collaborative problem-solving, inquiry, and critical thinking entail constructing an argument by carefully considering evidence and counterarguments. They further affirm that a critical thinker will proficiently formulate a robust argument in the identification and interpretation of a problem, the development and assessment of potential solutions, the formulation of a plan based on a selected solution, and the reflection on the learning outcomes.

### **A Model for EFL Learning through Structured Academic Controversy**

The SAC model is inherently dynamic and adaptable, catering to the diverse needs of students within the learning environment. Teachers can customize the SAC process based on the students' proficiency level, prior learning experiences, available educational resources, and the specific subject matter under consideration. This section aims to present a comprehensive model of SAC tailored to the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction at the university level.

#### *a) Selection of Discussion Topics*

The initial step in implementing SAC involves choosing captivating and intellectually challenging topics relevant to the EFL context. These topics should ideally



draw from current contextual issues that students are familiar with, ensuring they possess adequate prior knowledge or perspectives for constructive engagement. However, it is imperative to recognize that not all topics are easily manageable, readily debatable, or lend themselves to the presentation of two equally substantiated positions.

#### *b) Preparation of Instructional Materials*

Teachers need to meticulously curate instructional materials catering to both sides of the discussion. This entails providing a comprehensive compilation of resource materials, bibliographical references, or assigning pairs to conduct thorough internet research, thereby equipping each group with a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter under consideration. Equally important is the provision of clear guidelines outlining the tasks, the procedural aspects of academic controversy, and the collaborative skills to be employed during each phase.

#### *c) Structuring the Controversy*

To facilitate a successful academic controversy, educators must adhere to the foundational principles promoting constructive debate. This involves designing an SAC model that delineates or modifies certain stages of the activities and ensures clear communication of the procedural guidelines. Additionally, educators should structure the learning activities and foster a cooperative learning environment by rearranging students' seating arrangements into cooperative forms, forming heterogeneous groups based on varying abilities, gender, and personality, and emphasizing the ultimate objective of SAC, which is collaborative issue resolution rather than winning a debate. Students should feel empowered to engage in a risk-free environment where they can practice their language skills, challenge each other's ideas and reasoning, while maintaining respect for one another. Furthermore, educators may offer valuable insights on managing controversy, encouraging students to view disagreements as valuable opportunities for learning and enhancing their knowledge, rather than as personal attacks.

#### *d) Facilitating the Academic Controversy Activity*

Upon completion of the preparatory stages, educators can initiate the academic controversy activity, guiding students through the five essential stages of the SAC process outlined below:

- **Position Learning:** Students engage in reading materials that support their assigned positions, thoroughly comprehending the information by outlining key concepts and strategizing a compelling presentation.
- **Position Presentation:** Each pair takes turns presenting their position with conviction and persuasiveness. As one pair presents, the opposing pair attentively listens, assimilating the contrasting viewpoint and taking note of essential information to facilitate clarification.
- **Issue Discussion:** Following the presentations, each pair vigorously defends the opposing position in turns. While one pair argues their stance, the opposing pair keenly listens, preparing effective counter-arguments. Subsequently, the opposing pair presents their counter-arguments, providing substantial evidence

to substantiate their perspective. This process continues with alternating questioning and clarification.

- **Perspective Reversal:** This stage encourages students to reflect on the outcome of the discussion. Each pair is tasked with sincerely and emphatically presenting the opposing position, while effectively linking it to the previously acquired information. Elaboration of the position by referencing relevant information is crucial at this stage.
- **Decision and Conclusion:** The final step entails synthesizing and summarizing the most compelling arguments from both viewpoints. Pairs are assigned to compile a comprehensive report based on the outcome of the academic controversy, thereby encapsulating the essence of the debate and its conclusions.

The table below outlines the process of planning academic controversy within a classroom hour:

**A Pre-activities (15-20'):**

- Select a specific issue to serve as the focal point of the academic controversy.
- Divide the class into pairs (AA and BB), assigning the AA team to advocate the pro position and the BB team to argue the con position.
- Clearly state the objectives, provide concise instructions for the assigned activities and tasks, and explain the criteria for success.

**B. Main Activities (60-20):**

- Allowing pairs to thoroughly read materials, engage in discussions, and take note of arguments for each position.
- Requesting the AA team to confidently and persuasively present their arguments while instructing the BB team to actively listen without interruptions or questions.
- In turn, the BB team presents their arguments to the AA team, with the AA team maintaining attentive listening without interruptions or questions.
- Instructing both pairs to engage in a comprehensive discussion of the issue. The AA team is tasked with presenting factual evidence to support their position, questioning or arguing against the BB team's position, while the BB team actively listens to the opposing viewpoint.
- The process is repeated, with the BB team supporting their perspective and presenting counter-arguments. The discussion phase is structured based on the allotted time and the specific needs of the activity.
- Assigning pairs to collaborate in reversing roles and perspectives, requiring them to meticulously organize and present the opposing position sincerely and convincingly. Additionally, instructing the pairs to incorporate pertinent information from the opposing position and elaborate on their own standpoint by establishing connections with the previously acquired knowledge.
- Charging the pairs with reaching a final decision. They are directed to collaborate in reviewing the arguments and attaining a consensus position. The AA team is then given the opportunity to reiterate their arguments, followed by the BB team.



**C. Post instructional activities (10-15)**

- Offering clarification on any vague or incomplete terms or viewpoints and providing content-focused feedback.
- Inviting students to voluntarily summarize the outcome of the discussion.
- Emphasizing the academic controversy process and providing recommendations for the next academic controversy.
- Concluding the session.

*e) Offering Clarification and Feedback*

To address uncertainties regarding the accuracy of students' viewpoints, it is recommended that teachers dedicate a few minutes to clarify any ambiguous or incomplete terms or perspectives before concluding the session. Providing content-focused feedback is crucial for students. Therefore, teachers can supplement the discussion with additional information that was not covered during the debate, thereby enriching students' understanding. Furthermore, it is imperative to apprise students of the academic controversy process, evaluating the proficiency with which they engaged in the activities, employed language skills, and participated in the discussion. Such feedback can offer valuable insights to both students and teachers, highlighting areas that require improvement and suggesting strategies to enhance future controversial discussions.

**CONCLUSION**

Based on the main objectives presented in the text, the accurate conclusion is that this research aims to identify the primary psychological and linguistic barriers that hinder active participation and critical engagement of students in EFL classes, particularly during discussions and debate sessions. Furthermore, the study seeks to investigate how the implementation of Structured Academic Controversy (SAC) can effectively address these challenges by encouraging the development of critical thinking skills and facilitating meaningful discussions in the context of English language learning. Lastly, the research endeavors to evaluate the practical implications and adaptability of SAC in the EFL curriculum, offering strategies that educators can implement to address the identified barriers and optimize student learning outcomes, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and engaging learning environment. By fulfilling these objectives, the research aims to provide meaningful insights into the effective integration of SAC as a pedagogical tool in EFL classes, facilitating a comprehensive approach to language learning that nurtures linguistic competence and critical thinking skills among students. By fulfilling these objectives, this research strives to provide meaningful insights into the effective integration of SAC as a pedagogical tool in EFL classes, fostering a comprehensive approach to language learning that nurtures linguistic competence and critical thinking skills among students.

## REFERENCES

- Balin, S., Case, R., Coombs, J. R., & Daniels, L. B. (1999). "Conceptualizing critical thinking." *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 31(3), 285-302.
- Crowl, T. K., Kaminsky, S., & Podell, D. M. (1997). *Educational psychology: Windows on teaching*. Madison, WI: Brown and Benchmark.
- Duffy, T. M., Dueber, B. & Hawley, C. L. (1998). Critical Thinking in a Distributed Environment: A Pedagogical Base for the Design of Conferencing Systems. In C. J. Bonk, & K.S. King (Eds.). *Electronic Collaborators* (pp. 51-78). New-Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Facione, P. A. (2000), "The disposition toward critical thinking Its character, measurement, and relation to critical thinking skill." *Informal Logic*, 20(1), 61-84.
- Halpern, D. F. (1998). "Teaching critical thinking for transfer across domains: Dispositions, skills, structure training, and metacognitive monitoring" *American Psychologist*, 53(4), 449-455.
- Jacobs, S. S. (1994). Technical characteristics and some correlates of the California critical thinking skills test, forms a and b. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 373 631)
- Jacobs, G. (2010). "Academic Controversy: a cooperative way to debate. *Intercultural Education*, Vol. 21, No. 3.
- Johnson, D.W. & Johnson, R.T. (1988). "Critical Thinking Through Structured Controversy." *Educational Leadership*, 45 (8), 58-64.
- Johnson, D.W., Johnson, R., & Smith, K.A. (1996). *Academic Controversy: Enriching Collage Instruction through Intellectual Conflict*. Washington, D.C: The George Washington University.
- Kahneman, D., Slovic, P., & Tversky, A. (Eds.). (1982). *Judgment under uncertainty: heuristics and biases*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kauchak, D. & Eggen, P. (1998). *Learning and Teaching: research-based method*. Boston: Alyn & Bacon
- Lai, E.R. (2011). "Critical Thinking: A Literature Review." In Pearson (Ed.). *Pearson's Research Reports* (June ed., Vol. 6, pp. 1-49).
- Lewis, A., & Smith, D. (1993). *Defining higher order thinking*. *Theory into Practice*, 32(3), 131-137.
- Olsen, R. E. WB & Kagan, S. (1992). *About Cooperative Learning in Carolyn Kessler (Ed)*. *Cooperative Learning: A Teacher's Resource book* 1-30. New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc.
- Slavin, R. E. (1990). *Cooperative Learning: Theory, Research and Practice*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc.
- Willingham, D. T. (2007). "Critical thinking: Why is it so hard to teach?" *American Educator*, 8-19.