

Enhancing Critical Thinking with Structured Controversial Dialogues

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This article discusses a structured controversial dialogue technique for fostering critical thinking among English language learners.

Introduction

One of the main tasks that mainstream teachers face is to teach English language learners complex content while they are developing English proficiency. Teachers have to figure out how to make instruction comprehensible to students who are still grappling with their new language and relying on limited linguistic resources to understand instruction. This means that complex academic information must be broken down using simplified, social language and a variety of scaffolding strategies before cognitively demanding information can be accessible to them (Zainuddin, H., Yahya, N, Morales-Jones, C. & Ariza, E. , 2002). If the language becomes "manageable", students can focus on more difficult abstract concepts and higher levels of reasoning, or critical thinking. Critical thinking, once the thorny issue of how it is defined is resolved, is generally recognized as an important skill for students to acquire in the acquisition of academic language (Connolly, 2000; Davidson, 1998; Davidson & Dunham, 1997).

What Is Critical Thinking?

There are a number of definitions of critical thinking, ranging from ones which envisage critical thinking as a broad construct (Davidson & Dunham, 1997) which centers primarily on reasonable and reflective thinking which is focused on what to believe or do, while others view it more narrowly, specific to a certain content area (McPeck, 1981). In this paper, a broader definition of critical thinking operationalized for primary and secondary students will be taken from the Goal 3 Standards of Florida's System of School Improvement and Accountability. The standard that promotes critical thinking in Florida's public schools is as follows:

"Florida students use creative skills to generate new ideas, make the best decisions, recognize and solve problems through reasoning, interpret symbolic data, and develop efficient techniques for lifelong learning."
(Sunshine State Goal 3 Standards, 2003)

Although this standard appears to be only applicable to one state within the United States, it is clearly applicable to all students, both mainstream and English language learners, around the world. All students need to be able to generate novel ideas and approaches, make decisions which impact them as students and citizens of their respective countries, and interpret information that is in different visual formats. Perhaps most importantly, the standard makes it clear that critical thinking is something which needs to be cultivated over time and throughout one's life.

Structured Controversial Dialogues for Enhancing Critical Thinking

Among the many techniques that ESL teachers can use to foster critical thinking in their students is the structured controversial dialogue. The structured controversial dialogue is an adaptation of the constructive controversy. It utilizes a cooperative learning strategy where students work in small groups, argue one side of an issue and then another side of the same issue in hope of moving students from their advocacy position to a position that synthesizes all perspectives. It promotes intellectual inquiry that includes

building coherent intellectual arguments, giving persuasive presentations, critically analyzing and challenging other's positions, rebutting other's challenges, seeing issues from a variety of perspectives, and seeking reasoned judgments (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 2000). Instead of constructing a short position presentation or argument using more formal academic language features, structured controversial dialogues allow students to frame complex thoughts in a simplified language that resembles social conversational language. Because of an English language learner's greater familiarity with spoken language features, the dialogue provides a natural scaffolding for students to understand and interpret complex content and reasoning.

For structured academic controversies to work successfully, students must be reminded of certain key elements (Johnson & Johnson, 1995):

- open-mindedness and willingness to listen to the opposing positions;
- disagreement with another person's position does not reflect a personal attack on the person;
- effort to try and understand different positions or perspectives to the controversy;
- willingness to change your mind when there is evidence to support this; and
- getting the best solution to the problem after all the evidence has been analyzed.

Advantages of Using Structured Controversial Dialogues

Structured controversy can enhance the development of many skills that are central to academic learning. These skills include:

- searching for information and new experiences to resolve a dilemma or an uncertainty;
- organizing information;
- preparing an advocacy position and rationalizing the position;
- seeing issues from a different perspective and learning to debate the merits of each position; and
- synthesizing issues and conceptualizing a new position or reaching consensus based on careful analysis and evaluation of all positions of the issue.

By using structured controversy, students' curiosity for searching for solutions to the problem will be sparked, engaging them in active learning that will help develop their understanding and appreciation of diverse points of views. It also requires students to use complex reasoning and critical thinking skills. As a result, students are exposed to a greater range of ideas that will help them to generate creative solutions and new conclusions to their controversial problem.

Procedures for Using Structured Controversial Dialogues

1. Students form groups of four and divide into two pairs.
2. Each pair is assigned an advocacy position. (Students may be given supporting documentation or references to conduct their research.)
3. Student pairs from different groups with the same positions can compare ideas after becoming familiar with the positions. Student pairs highlight the main arguments for their position.
4. Student pairs return to their original group and present their position to the other student pair. Pairs then reverse perspectives and present the best case for the opposing position. Encourage students to see the issue from both perspectives.
5. Groups now prepare a short dialog discussing the two positions and provide supporting evidence. They may choose several characters to present different points of views. Each group must present a dilemma for the other groups to solve by posing a question that advocates two positions. Each dialog must be given a short title that captures the controversial problem.
6. Groups exchange their dialogs and prepare a response to the dilemma. Students should drop their advocacy role and prepare a consensus report addressing the question posed.

Sample Structured Controversies

Structured controversies can be created for students throughout the K-12 system that are linked to specific content or knowledge that is familiar to the students. However, we also recommend using content that is covered in various academic subjects. By drawing upon content from academic subject areas, students will be allowed multiple paths for learning and relearning difficult concepts, vocabulary, structures, and reasoning skills. The following two examples are sample structured controversial dialogues suitable for primary, secondary, and university students. The first example is appropriate for primary learners. In this example, a boy named Hiro

has witnessed the act of bullying on the part of another boy whose approval Hiro hopes to obtain. The issue revolves around complex, abstract concepts of morality, crime and punishment, what constitutes an eyewitness, and socialization processes of new and often powerless children in a school setting. All of these concepts are those which might appear in the content area of social studies. The students can be provided with grade-level appropriate storybooks, which have bully characters in them for research materials.

Example 1 (Primary Level) "Telling on a Bully"

Many primary children will face or witness the actions of a bully sometime during their schooling. Some children may tell their teachers or administrators to make the bullies stop what they are doing. Other children, particularly language minority children, may feel reluctant to tell on a bully for fear of retribution, which may lead to a disruption of their acculturation process in and out of school. Let's listen in on a conversation between two elementary school children on this issue:

Hiro: I have a problem and I don't know what to do.

Erica: What happened?

Hiro: I saw Dylan kicking Antonio and taking Antonio's lunch out of his bag. He threw the lunch on the ground!

Erica: Dylan is really a bad boy. He likes to bother a lot of people. So what's the problem? Aren't you going to tell Mrs. Sanchez what Dylan did?

Hiro: I don't like Dylan, but a lot of people think he is "all that". He gets to be the captain to pick teams for soccer and baseball after school. I have waited since I moved from Japan last year to be picked to be on a team. Nowadays he is picking me because I'm a good player. I think a lot more people want to play with me because Dylan starting picking me for his team.

Erica: Just because Dylan picks you doesn't mean people like you. Anyways, isn't Antonio your friend, too?

Hiro: Yes, Antonio is my friend.....since last year.

Erica: If Antonio is your friend, why don't you tell on Dylan? Dylan's a big bully anyway.

Hiro: I'm afraid Dylan won't pick me anymore if he finds out it was me who told on him. Can you tell the teacher for me?

Erica: Hiro, I wasn't there, you know. You were the one who saw everything

Think about Hiro's problem with Dylan. Think also about what Hiro and Erica said. What do you think Hiro should do about Dylan? Why do you think so?

The second example, which is suitable for secondary or university students, addresses a topic very much on the minds of Internet-savvy teenagers and young adults -- free downloading of copyrighted programs from the Internet. Like the elementary example, it also takes on complex issues such as ethics, economics, and theft of intellectual property and potential impact of theft on the workforce and corporations. The students can be provided with materials on software piracy from news sources on the Internet.

Example 2 (Secondary and/or University Level) "Digital Pirates"

Many people have been downloading video games for free off of the Internet instead of paying for them from stores for a number of years. Many believe this is not a crime and wealthy companies that create the video games are rich enough to take a loss here and there. Let's listen in on a conversation between two teenagers on this issue:

Vanessa: I just downloaded the latest version of "The Simtastics". I can even pick out what gym shoes they wear!

Yukiko: How much did you pay for it?

Vanessa: Pay? Are you kidding? I downloaded it for free off the Internet. Why pay money when you can get it for free?

Yukiko: Don't you think that the programmers who wrote the program should get paid for their work?

Vanessa: Yeah, right. The company that makes it is worth 100 billion dollars. They won't miss 39 dollars from me....

Yukiko: Maybe not, but what if 1 million other people do the same thing? Now we're talking about 39 million dollars!

Vanessa: Anyway, programmers don't get some of the sales money for every video game that the company sells. They get a yearly salary. So, I'm only taking money away from greedy software companies!

Yukiko: I know software companies are rich, but don't they deserve the money they make, too? After all, software companies have to pay the salaries of all their computer programmers. Not every video game sells as well as "The Simtastics", you know. Software companies sometimes lose a lot of money when they create and market a video game. Remember that stupid video game last year called "More Homework, Please!" that nobody bought?

Vanessa: Yeah I remember, but who cares about a billion-dollar company losing a few dollars here and there because some of us want to download some programs for free. Don't they realize that we aren't all rich like they are? We can't all afford to pay \$39 for a video game!

Yukiko: You say they are already rich from selling programs. What about new games? What if every video game player was like you and downloaded their programs for free instead of paying for it? Why would they want to hire program designers to make new games for us anymore?

Vanessa: Not everybody downloads programs, you know. Some players will still buy their programs. Some download a few games just to see if they really like them before buying them.

Yukiko: Isn't your mom a web designer, Vanessa? What if people ripped off your mom's web designs and gave them away for free? Don't you want your mom to get paid so she can support your family? What if the loss in sales of her designs caused her company to collapse? Do you think your family can make it without your Mom's salary?

Vanessa: Well ...

Think about what both Yukiko and Vanessa said. Do you agree with Yukiko or Vanessa? Is there a perspective on this issue that was not presented by either person? Is there a compromise solution to this controversy that would please both sides?

Conclusion

This article has outlined the structured controversial dialogue technique for fostering critical thinking among English language learners. This technique can be used at all school and university levels for any content area because dialogue and debate occur in virtually every content area. Topics with which English language learners are familiar make ideal vehicles for contextualizing abstract content concepts that might otherwise be difficult for students to process. In addition, all four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) are used in the technique, so there are no artificial distinctions made between them in helping students acquire their additional language. In terms of literacy acquisition, the technique encourages students to not only learn to read and write, but also to read and write to learn new concepts, or better understand phenomena to which they have already been exposed. Finally, students are allowed to practice their critical thinking skills using a technique that encourages them to generate new ideas, problem-solve through reasoning, and make the best decisions possible in a given situation.

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