

# Student's Ideological Conflicts During Debating Practices in Language Learning: A Reflective Study

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the ideological conflict experienced by students during debating practices in EAP classes. As current paradigm of higher education competency demands the integration of critical thinking skills and information literacy from various perspectives and cultures in the learning process, in-class debate is believed to encourage students not only learn language skills, but also how to communicate eloquently through critical analysis and problem-solving through various perspectives. But in practice, debate motions are not always acceptable to the students. This reflective study involved undergraduate students (N=22) through focus-group discussion to collect the data. One factor that plays a major role in the ideological conflict is the differences in the micro-culture of religion and culture that have been less well-recognized during debate practices. Such conflicts have impacts on student's performance as indicated by passive attitudes, rejection, denial, and abstaining from classroom participation. This research is expected to provide an understanding of the ideological factors and patterns of conflict experienced by students, including the role of understanding micro-culture of the student. In addition, research is made an effort to negotiate an appropriate learning approach to accommodate the micro-culture factors of students and their compatibility with learning objectives.

**Keywords:** Ideological conflict, In-class debate, Micro-culture, Language learning

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This study is the result of students' reflections during and after debating practices in the English classroom, in particular related with the experience of ideological conflicts dealt by the students. This reflective study aims to map the appropriate instructions and the learning objectives contained in the curriculum of the language learning which accommodates debating practices in the classroom with the social conditions of the students as well as possible impact on this phenomenon.

As stated in the National Qualifications Framework of Indonesia (KKNI) in accordance with Presidential Regulation Number 8 of 2012 [1], which becomes the reference for the development of higher education curriculum policies, the trend of needs and demands for competency in critical thinking skills in higher education are urgently needed. It justifies the presence of critical thinking skills as one of the competencies for college graduation stipulated in Law Number 12 of 2012 concerning Higher Education in Indonesia [2]. In addition, other demands related to critical information

literacy skills are also necessary in order to understand social problems and offer relevant solutions through logical analysis from various perspectives and cultures.

In the context of English language learning, there have been several changes in learning approaches in order to meet the demands and public expectation, from translation and grammar-based teaching (Grammar Translation Method) to communicative approaches; the current urgency of integrating cognitive approaches in language learning is as a form of response to 21st century skills need to be live in prosperity. The trend requires an overhaul of English language teaching to become broader, including integrating vital skills like critical thinking, problem solving, and critical information literacy [3].

One of the activities that accommodate these aspects is debate. Through debating practices, students not only improve their language skills, but also communication skills and critical analysis to solve problems. Several studies on learning needs that integrate critical thinking in learning through the practice of debate in English learning in Indonesia are based on several reasons,

including the critical pedagogy paradigm (referring to the idea proposed by Paulo Freire); this paradigm is basically in line with the qualification platform for higher education as proposed by the Government through Law on Higher Education (2012). More specifically, it is described the benefits of debate practice more specifically in relation to foreign language learning that accommodates the paradigm of critical thinking [4]. In short, critical pedagogy is a learner-centered approach to education, which focuses on problem-posing in which students engage in critical dialogue.

Some of the key concepts of critical pedagogy include presenting real issues, dialogue, and praxis. Freire describes these principles as the action and reflection through dialogue that triggers critical analysis by focusing on the authentic problems around. It should also be understood that Freire's critical pedagogy is not the only concept that is integrated into the context of language learning. The conception of critical pedagogy is flexible and aims to use experiences and problems that are directly relevant to students as learning materials, it makes sense to use critical pedagogy in diverse countries [5], including Indonesia. Indonesia needs a more flexible and adaptive approach to learning English that takes into account cultural diversity and aspects of the classroom.

As the cautious consideration to the integration of critical thinking into language learning, we need to refer to the idea proposed Atkinson [6] that should be more critical in applying the concept of critical thinking in foreign language learning (L2); instead of being able to encourage students to improve their communication skills, the application of the concept of critical thinking will actually inhibit student participation which later results in a less than optimal increase in their ability to communicate in foreign languages.

Debating practice is believed to provide benefits for students in the context of learning English, such as actively analyzing, discussing, and applying meaningful content, rather than passively absorbing information [4]. In terms of student involvement, academic debate encourages students to collaborate actively, responsibly, to think critically and average grades, especially for students with lower Scholastic Ability Test scores [7] [8]. In addition, academic debate requires listeners and participants to evaluate competing options [9]; students join the call for activities that develop critical thinking skills by advancing to higher levels of competence according to Bloom Taxonomy [10] [11]. Therefore, teaching strategies such as debates in class are more suitable for the development of students' higher order

thinking skills than traditional teaching strategies such as lectures [12]. In addition to academic goals, academic debate also demands the development of oral communication skills, as well as mastery of content, which are essential for success in most careers [13], and in line with the skills demand of the 21st century.

Several studies on the needs of critical pedagogy through academic debate in the Indonesian context concluded that critical pedagogy can be implemented effectively for several reasons, even though it has varying degrees of success; precisely with this diversity, a critical approach by considering various things is needed in order to obtain appropriate results [14] [15] [16]. From these studies, a general and common teaching strategy should be proposed effectively to be used in critical discussion in English class in the form of academic debate activities through appropriate instructional strategies.

However, in the classroom practice, the topics or debate motions are not always acceptable to students, especially in Indonesia. Some of the possible reasons are the factors of cultural differences or (culture bumps) [17]; the social perceptions in Indonesia where criticality and debate upon sensitive issues are not fully accepted especially which include the role of ideology, including religion; that it is not always a logical analytical approach to propose a solution or view of a problem in accordance with the ideology of society. For example, during the initial study, students understood the logical analysis of the motions, but the analysis is considered as contradictory to their belief values. The analytical context does not run linearly or positively, but is rather complex because it involves values. As a consequence, students experience inner conflicts during debate practice, which affect learning performance in the classroom, generally indicated by passive changes in attitudes, rejection or denial upon the ideas or views on the problems, to abstention and reduced participation. during the learning process. The existence of this contradiction is an important issue in integrating critical thinking through debate in learning English.

In this regard, it is necessary to understand the pattern of ideological conflicts experienced by the students when practicing debates in language classes. This study is intended to observe the conflicting situation within students' identity in debate classroom, including understanding the factors and patterns of ideological conflict experienced by students, including the micro-culture possessed by each student, as well as efforts to negotiate learning approaches to accommodate the

factors of student needs and their suitability with the objectives of the learning.

## **2. METHOD**

### ***2.1. Machine Learning Algorithms***

This is a case study with an ethnographic approach in an English debate class, in which the researchers simultaneously acted as the teachers in the class. In the implementation process, the researcher involved himself in making observations throughout the semester of the class and interviews in the form of reflections at each meeting with the group members. Hendwerker [18] describes the use of an ethnographic approach in accordance with research that focuses on the interaction process related to views of cultural variability between individuals, including viewpoints influenced by culture and ideology. From the process throughout the semester, it was expected that a pattern and meaning of each behavior, language, and interaction in groups can be learned related to individual cultural backgrounds.

### ***2.2. Research Subjects***

This study involved undergraduate students ( $N = 22$ ) who attended the academic debate class at the Department of English Literature. The Speaking for Debate class in the Department of English Language and Literature is one level of the Speaking III class which is based on the paradigm of critical thinking in the form of academic debate and adopts a parliamentary format. This class consists of 2 credits and the implementation of observations is carried out for 14 meetings throughout the semester. Of the students attended the class, 4 students were selected based on the classroom observation and reflections in relation with the ideological conflicts.

The selected students are believed to have limited knowledge about debate practices or activities related to debate. In terms of class demographics, most of the students were Javanese students in a predominantly Muslim community (with only 2 Christian students) with a gender composition consisting of 4 students and 18 female students. The 4 selected students were all 1 male students and 3 female students whom were determined purposively with consideration of access to students. All the selected students were Muslim, coming from the very religious to moderate family background.

### ***2.3. Data Collection***

This research was initiated by preliminary study through classroom observation (field study) as well as classroom reflection by conducting general interviews related to mapping the background information of each student. In addition, general topic determination was also conveyed to students that several issues were sensitive but real in everyday life (authentic materials). Data collection was carried out throughout the semester, especially after each meeting through material reflection. This was to get personal view information on each material (motion) in debate practice in the classroom. From the initial study, the four selected students were involved into deeper interview and reflection.

Data collection was carried out in two ways, namely distribution of questionnaires (initial study) and in-depth interviews with the selected students. In-depth interviews were carried out both in a structured and semi-structured manner in a focus-group discussion in accordance with the development of data during the observation process throughout the semester with the selected students. The focus of the semi-open interview was to understand several aspects, including (1) identification of micro-cultural information for each student, (2) student perceptions of topics to be discussed throughout the semester, and (3) the topic's relationship with real life.

### ***2.4. Data Analysis***

The collected data were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitative data were obtained from the questionnaires during the initial study, especially information about student perceptions of topics or motions to be discussed throughout the semester. The qualitative data were obtained from classroom observations and integrated interviews with the four selected student groups. In addition, the collected information was analyzed thematically based on the 6-step thematic content analysis [19]. It is believed that the 6 stages of thematic analysis have a clear and useful framework for carrying out thematic analysis in teaching activities; this framework is arguably the most influential and practical approach in the social sciences at least.

In the early stages of data analysis, all data obtained through in-depth interviews with the student groups were transcribed and collected; this procedure occurred because the researchers had full access and were

thoroughly involved in data collection, making it easier to familiarize themselves with the data. The next step was to generate the initial code through data reduction followed by looking for a theme for the analysis, which will primarily be derived from the research question rather than the acquired data. To understand the essence of the theme.

### **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This section discussed two main discussions, namely the pattern of the conflicting ideology experienced by the students in relation with their micro-cultural background. In addition, the initial negotiation for the appropriate instructional strategies in the debate classroom based on the students' perspective was discussed as well.

#### ***3.1. Ideological Conflicts and Micro-cultures of the Students***

The ideological conflicts experienced by the students are generally due to contradicting conclusion between the conclusion of the logical analysis and their belief regarding the motion being debated in the classroom. In terms of logical analysis, the conclusions obtained were reasonably acceptable through the argumentations. However, their belief says that this is unacceptable in terms of several aspects, namely religion, ethnicity, family, and academic roles, in this case the relationship between lectures and the purpose of language learning.

When debating the classic topic, namely about the legalization of prostitution in Indonesia, students experienced a change in stance before and after the debate. By argument, the conclusion in the debate shows that the legalization of prostitution in Indonesia is deemed necessary as an alternative form of affirmative action on the existence of underground prostitution, social control, economic income, and health aspects.

"[...] Indeed, based on the arguments presented by my friends (during the debate), the establishment of brothels or a special area for prostitution is justifiable. For a moment, I agreed with that. However, my religion says it clear that supporting the (proposal) means justifying a sinful act. While when arguing this issue, we cannot include a religious perspective; when we have to bring religion, we are considered conservative." (S2)

Another student gave a conflicting situation in which students seem to be forced to use secular way of thinking, while the majority of the society is religious.

"When debating, we seem to be led to a secular way of thinking. How can that be, for example, while government policies also represent the social condition (religious society), is there any religion (in Indonesia) that really allows prostitution?" (S3)

In addition to religious conflict, students experienced conflicting situation upon family values which consider marriage is sacred that the State is obliged to guarantee its values.

"Does it mean the government justify cheating? That the action is considered common instead of a serious problem that people can no longer respect the faithful relationship. Business is business, but faithful is more than just business; it is sacred." (S4)

One inquiry from the students that self-conflict may not be because of their ideology, but rather misunderstanding. For example, someone was uncomfortable discussing the topic of prostitution because it is considered taboo, even though we can discuss prostitution without having to discuss sexual activity (which is understandable as a more intimate / personal topic).

"I didn't feel comfortable when discussing the issue of prostitution. I feel that it is a private business, not appropriate to discussed in public, especially in class. Even in the family sometimes it is rarely discussed." (S1)

In debate practice, the role of the speaker is to provide contextual definition supported with clear parameters. A community with different context and cultural backgrounds tends to misunderstand communication because they can interpret the same thing differently. Some polite discussion in one culture can feel taboo in another. Cultural differences and views in communicating or interacting can make someone feel uncomfortable because they feel different. This situation is known as "culture bumps" [17]. It is also the role of the teacher to provide clear context as well as post-debate reflection in order to avoid such misunderstanding upon the topics being debated.

In addition to providing reflection and contextual definition of the debate, lack of understanding of the goal of the learning may lead into skeptical and denial of the issue in the classroom.

"I don't find any relationships between the topics (replacing religion education with religious tolerance) we discussed in the classroom with the learning objectives (English education). Sometimes I wonder whether our

debate should be always about politics and religion? [...] and also, I don't think debate is part of our (culture) either." (S1)

### ***3.2. Classroom Negotiation for Appropriate Instructions to Accommodate the Micro-culture of the Students***

Bringing authentic topics into language classroom through in-class debate should be critical. Atkinson [6] even gives his critical view on the integration of critical thinking in L2 learning because it might be contradictory; otherwise, careful considerations should be taken by the teacher in order to meet the goals of the L2 learning as well as critical thinking skills.

Throughout the in-depth discussion with the four students who experienced self-conflict during debate class, constructive inquiries were obtained as the bases for teacher's considerations to negotiate the current instructional strategies with the students' expectations and micro-cultural background in order to establish a safe space for students to learn the language as well as critical thinking. There are four principles that need to be considered before bringing real topics into classroom debate, namely topic selection, contextual discussion through academic contract, the idea of culture bumps, and reflective session.

Other cultural differences are more common and result from differences in values and meanings, such as differences between high context and low context cultures. Most cultures in Latin America, the Middle East, and Asia are high context cultures. When they communicate, they use the full context to understand the message. It is not only words that are important, but also how they are pronounced and in what context. They consider mutual understanding. This means that many things can be left unsaid. In low context cultures, such as the United States, messages are made explicit through words. The speaker does not leave important parts of the message unspoken, and what is said is interpreted more literally [19] [20].

The self-conflicts experience by the students were either the topics are contradictory to their beliefs or considered not significant for their academic role as students. A study involving Japanese EFL learners shows significant results that indicate students perceive better language learning and stronger argumentation for the topics based on their preference [21]. It means when students discuss the preferable topics, students may

experience better learning process which lead to better learning outcomes.

In the context of debate practice in language classroom, teacher should provide opportunity for the students to select which topics they want to discuss in the classroom or ban. In determining the topics for the in-class debate, students are expected to include their micro-cultural background. A small survey at the beginning of the semester might become the basis for the teacher for the topics in the classroom.

Second aspect for teacher in negotiating the appropriate instructions in classroom debate is to provide sufficient and comprehensive understanding of the in-class debate in the context of language learning. Such information such as the difference of academic debate with policy debate, the benefits of debates for communicative competence, and also the principles of bringing intercultural understanding into language classroom. Brown (2007) proposes some steps of adaptation process of welcoming new culture as part of language learning, from excitement, culture shock, recovery (adjustment and emergent comfort in the new culture), and adaption (bridging cultural barriers and accepting the new culture) [23]. Even though this idea is more likely related to adapting in new culture in a foreign country, similar process may be applicable for introducing new culture as well in the classroom.

Third principle to negotiate instructions for debate practice in language classroom is that teacher's role to bridge the barriers between different (micro)cultures in order to avoid misunderstanding and ideological conflict among students or culture bumps. Teachers are encouraged to provide the students opportunities to explore and recognize the cultural differences, including different perspectives toward social issues being debated in the classroom [24]. That means raising their awareness not only of the target culture but of their own as well, which is to accept different stance in responding the social issues.

The last principle to provide appropriate instruction in bringing debate practice in language classroom is through post-debate reflection. In post-debate reflective practice, students should be encouraged to become self-regulatory, self-mediated, and self-aware, while the teacher serves as the facilitator of the learning process. This process is considered as constructive for the students to learn and get to new meanings from the debates they have experienced. It is added that the reflective teaching should be open-minded, sincere and responsible [25] which can be a powerful impetus for the

students and teachers to be more constructive and experience meaningful learning.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Despite the importance of the integration of critical thinking skills into language learning and also the benefits of in-class debate to language competence, such practice may not be in line with the students' expectation and micro-cultural background. Careful considerations should be performed by teachers to bring debate into language classroom in order to avoid deconstructive attitudes from the students in the form of self-ideological conflicts namely religious, family, and learning objectives, which inhibit language learning. Some principles should be implemented to negotiate the instructions such as careful bottom-up topic selection, comprehensive elaboration of the context of academic debate in language learning, the importance of intercultural understanding, and post-debate reflective activities. Further study is needed to measure the implementation of the four principles in order to avoid culture bumps in debating practices in language classroom.

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