**Cognitive Dissonance and the Subjective Mind in Foreign Language Learning: The use of *Structured Academic Controversy* in the German language classroom**

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**Overview**

The purpose of this chapter is to consider the potential value of adding a technique known as Structured Academic Controversy (SAC) to the repertoire of pedagogical approaches commonly applied in language teaching and learning. It begins with an introduction to the concept of SAC and then considers its potential role in the language classroom. Against this backdrop, a case-study is presented in which the impact of SAC as a pedagogical tool is assessed. The findings of the study are considered as are directions for future research.

**Introduction: SAC, Engagement and Cognitive Dissonance**

SAC also known as ‘Structured Controversial Dialogue’ (Zainuddin and Moore 2003) or ‘Co-operative Controversy’ (D’Eon and Proctor 2001) is a pedagogical technique designed to scaffold informed, constructive debate by learners on controversial issues or issues about which reasonable people are likely to disagree. To date, SAC has been most closely associated with the teaching of political education in schools (Hahn 2009) and with classrooms in which the primary objective has been to develop critical thinking skills (D’Eon and Proctor 2001).

In its simplest form, SAC involves giving or directing students towards materials which argue polarised positions on a controversial issue. As a result, it can function both as part of a course based solely on face-to-face interaction or as part of a blended learning approach which integrates face-to-face with online learning (see for example Garrison and Kanuka 2004), in that teams of learners can be required to source, share and reflect online on relevant material in advance. It can also be usefully associated with the notion of a ‘flipped classroom’ (Berrett 2012; Teaching Methods 2011) in which class contact hours can be devoted to interactive engagement while the absorbtion of content takes place outside of the classroom usually in advance in the learners’ own time. When using the SAC approach, learners are divided into groups of four and two of the group members present their position on the controversial topic to the other two. The objective is not to ‘win’ or defeat the other side but instead to uncover the various arguments around the issue in question as the roles are then reversed with each pair representing an alternative position. In an attempt to move students from an advocacy position to a position that synthesises all of the perspectives, all four students are then required to attempt to reach an informed consensus on the subject using evidence-based, constructive argument (Hahn 2009; Zainuddin and Moore 2003). A variation on the approach, introduced by D’Eon and Proctor (2001), involves matching the pairs with a different team the second time around as part of what they describe as a “double switch” (2001: 251) as the participants are switching both group and advocacy position and as a result are exposed to richer input in the form of an additional set of arguments.

Due to the nature of SAC, it is viewed in the literature both as a constructivist teaching strategy and a cooperative learning strategy (Avery and Simmons 2008) as follows: SAC belongs to the constructivist paradigm in the sense that it aims to put learners in a position whereby they can construct their own knowledge via both interaction with their peers and the development or possibly transformation of their cognitive understandings or schemata regarding a particular issue (Biggs and Tang 2011; Jones and Man Sze Lau 2010; Jones and Peachy 2005). It also requires co-operative learning and team-work by those involved in order to function effectively.

One of the explanations for the degree of engagement observed during the use of SAC is related to the notion of cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance as a concept originated in the field of social psychology (Festinger 1957) and has applications today in many domains including the field of educational psychology. It is a psychological phenomenon which occurs whenever there is a need to accommodate new ideas into existing understandings or schemata (Egan, Santos and Bloom 2007). This is an uncomfortable, or unsettling, process as it impacts on the ‘subjective mind’ (Witte and Harden 2013) and as a result an individual engaged in it strives to alter some of their ideas in order to avoid inconsistency in their belief systems. Such a process results in a deep level of engagement, or as it is sometimes described ‘transformative’ learning (Cairncross 2001; Biggs and Tang 2011). This is viewed as the polar opposite of the process of ‘surface learning’ which concerns primarily reproduction of declarative, factual knowledge.

Many proponents of SAC (for example Hahn 2009; Johnson, Johnson and Smith 2000) argue, in addition, that it promotes intellectual inquiry in a number of ways. These include building coherent arguments based on fact, formulating persuasive, coherent arguments, critically analysing and challenging the position of other students and in particular seeing issues from a variety of perspectives as well as finally seeking reasoned consensual judgements. The primary role of the teacher during this process is to facilitate the process and in doing so to encourage divergent thinking among students. The teacher’s role as a faciliator may also involve asking students sometimes to elaborate on a point in order to deepen their thinking.

In terms of the classroom environment, it is recognised (Hahn 2009; Zainuddin and Moore 2003) that there are a number of key elements which must be enforced for SAC to work successfully. These include the creation of an open and trusting classroom climate in which students feel free to express their views and a willingness among all of those involved to listen to, genuinely consider and make an effort to understand alternative perspectives and opposing points of view. Participants must also be willing to modify their position based on supporting evidence in order to find an optimum solution to a problem. Specific issues concerning the use of SAC in the language classroom are reviewed in the following section.

**SAC, Engagement, Language Learner Motivation and Language Learning**

This potential of SAC to engage the learner, referred to in the previous section, means that it is potentially also an effective tool in the language learning classroom. Studies from several different areas associated with the teaching and learning of languages support the view that increased engagement with language learning can, for example, increase both learner motivation and vocabulary acquisition.

With regard to the former, for example, studies from the related fields of language learning and teaching, learner motivation and foreign language acquisition (see for example Dörnyei 2001) suggest that where the learner is more actively engaged with the material, motivation levels are higher and the language learning process is enhanced (see also Lo and Hyland 2007). Similarly, research on Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) offers additional support for this theory. According to this approach, a language other than the students’ mother tongue is used as the medium of instruction for a ‘content subject’ such as geography or history. Studies (Dalton-Puffer 2007; European Commission 2013) indicate that where authentic, meaningful engagement is occurring with material in the target language, gains in language competence are likely

In terms of the latter, research on the learning of vocabulary in a second language indicates that ‘the overriding principle for maximizing vocabulary learning is to increase the amount of engagement learners have with lexical items’ (Schmitt 2008: 239; see also Chang and Read 2006; Newton 2013). Schmitt (2008: 354) comments, for example, that ‘The variety of factors which affect vocabulary learning means that there will never be one ‘best’ teaching methodology, but the meta-principle of maximizing sustained engagement with the lexical items which need to be learned appears to underlie all effective vocabulary learning’. Craik and Lockhart’s (1972) work on their depth/levels of processing hypothesis provides a basis for this theory as it states that the more attention given by a learner to an item and the greater the degree and frequency of the manipulation of the item by the learner, the greater the likelihood that it will be remembered. Hulstijn and Laufer (2001) go a step further in their study, concluding that, in all cases, more effective vocabulary acquisition occurred where the activities involved a greater degree of engagement on the part of the learner. Such engagement was ensured for example, by requiring meaning to be negotiated as opposed to not being negotiated and where terms were required to be used in original sentences as opposed to being placed in non-original sentences. Schmitt (2008: 339) additionally lists a range of other factors associated with higher levels of engagement which recur throughout the literature as facilitating vocabulary learning. This include a need to learn/use the lexical item for a task or a personal goal, the amount of time spent engaging with the lexical item and the amount of interaction with the item.

Furthermore, as outlined in the previous section, successful engagement with SAC requires the student among other things to view issues from a multiplicity of perspectives and to develop arguments in support of the different views. Using SAC in the language classroom, it is argued here, adds an additional layer to this process in that the arguments are developed in the target language and thus the interplay of language and thought in this context becomes considerably more complex. While there has been very little research conducted specifically on the impact and use of SAC in the language classroom, Zainuddin and Moore (2003) report positively on their attempts to use SAC among English language learners in a CLIL context for the purposes of improving both their critical thinking skills and their English language proficiency. Against this backdrop, and in keeping with the trend towards research-based language teaching (Ellis 2013; Stapleton 2013) this paper presents a preliminary study designed to assess the effectiveness of SAC as a technique in the German language classroom.

**SAC in a German-Language Classroom: A Case-Study**

The purpose of this study is to shed some initial light on the question of whether SAC can function as a useful technique in the language classroom. A second-year group of 18 undergraduate students was selected for participation in the study. The students were studying German as a core subject on a four-year BA in Global Business (twelve), a BA in Applied Language and Intercultural Studies (three), a BA in Languages for International Communication (two) and a BA in International Business (one) at Dublin City University. They were enrolled for this purpose on an intermediate German language module which was designed and delivered by the researcher and had as its core objective the development of the students language proficiency and intercultural competency in preparation for their compulsory third year of study abroad.

The study used a quasi-experimental design (Trochim 2006). As such, it involved a pre- and post-test for a treatment and comparison group. The participants’ language competence was measured before and after engagement with SAC, or engagement with an alternative pedagogical technique in the case of the comparison group, using a C-test. C-tests are complex language tests designed to measure a language learner’s overall language competence (Katona and Dörnyei 2004). They consist of several short texts which are written in the target language and from which the second half of every second word has been deleted beginning with the second word of the second sentence and with the last sentence left intact. The language learner is then required to reconstruct the text. The C-test was designed specifically for this study on the topic of cyberbullying and can be found in Appendix 1. A C-test was selected as the measurement instrument for several reasons. Firstly, as the creation of C-tests involves ‘damaging’ every second word, it is possible to obtain a more representative sample of the different language elements in a text than, for example, by using a cloze test, where normally only every fifth or sixth word is removed (Katona and Dörnyei 2004). For the purpose of this study, this meant that tentative conclusions could be drawn regarding a range of different language elements including nouns (and their plural forms), verbs and adjectival endings in particular. Secondly, several studies (for example Katona and Dörnyei 2004) have compared C tests with other measures of language proficiency such as cloze tests, oral interviews, vocabulary tests, grammar tests, reading and listening comprehensions as well as standardised multiple choice tests, and have concluded that the C-test correlates well with these language-proficiency tests.

As mentioned previously, all 18 of the participants in this study were enrolled on the year two, second semester, German language module, German Language 4. This module has three contact hours per week. The study took place over two of these contact hours as follows: In the first contact hour the 15 students who were present completed the C-test. They were then provided with material to read in their own time in advance of the second contact hour. The material was all in the target language, German, and was on the subject of cyberbullying among young people framed by material concerning the use of social media, in general, and the social networking site, Facebook, in particular. This topic was selected as it was a particularly controversial and current at the time owing to its recent association with two high profile suicide cases in Ireland. The following day, during the second class contact hour, the students were assigned in no particular order to two groups of eight and seven students. The group of seven functioned as a comparison group and was asked to answer in writing four comprehension questions provided by the researcher and based on the material previously provided. The second group of eight students engaged in SAC around the issue. They were divided into two groups of four and given the following statement for the purpose of debate ‘Young people under the age of 16 should be banned from using Facebook’. Each pair had 15 minutes to prepare their arguments either for or against the statement. They then swapped positions and groups and again prepared and presented their arguments for the opposing side with the lecturer acting as a facilitator directing the students where necessary and assisting with vocabulary. Finally, in their new groups, those engaged in SAC were directed to attempt to reach a consensus position which they did (deciding in both groups that partial restrictions should be put in place for minors attempting to access Facebook). This process took place through the target language. Finally, their C-tests were returned to all of the participants in the treatment and comparison groups and they were asked to make any additions or alterations/corrections or improvements they felt to be appropriate in a different colour, a copy having been made of the original C-test responses to ensure the accuracy of the assessment of change between the pre- and post- C-tests.

Of the 15 students who participated in the second hour, four had not been present the previous day, one member of the treatment group and two of the control group. In addition, one member of the control group elected not to hand up his C-test. Therefore, for the purpose of the data analyses, the results for the seven members of the treatment group who had been present during both contact hours and the four members of the control group who had been present during both hours and submitted their C-tests were included. The data was analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, SPSS.

The results are presented below in three tables. Table 1 presents the individual scores in the C-tests for all of the 15 participants. Table 2 presents these scores as means for each group and, finally, Table 3 breaks the scores for the C-tests down into grammatical type (noun, verb or adjective ending).

**Table 1. Individual results for the C-tests for the treatment and comparison groups**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Treatment**  **Participants** | **C-test pre-score** | **C-test post-score** | **Comparison**  **Participants** | **C-test pre-score** | **C-test post-score** |
| 1 | 43 | 54.5 | 1 | 30 | 42.5 |
| 2 | 31.5 | 41 | 2 | 25 | 32 |
| 3 | 25 | 35 | 3 | 23 | 34 |
| 4 | 27 | 33.5 | 4 | 24 | 31.5 |
| 5 | 24 | 40.5 |  |  |  |
| 6 | 21 | 36.5 |  |  |  |
| 7 | 15 | 26.5 |  |  |  |

Individual scores in the C-test (Table 1) range from a minimum of 15 to a maximum of 43 for the treatment group and from 23 to 30 for the comparison group in advance of engagement with the material in the second classroom contact hour. Although the numbers are too small to draw definitive conclusions, there is clearly a wider range in the treatment group with a tendency to cluster around a mode for the comparison group. Following engagement, the score ranged from 26.5 to 54.5 from the treatment group and from 31.5 to 42.5 for the comparison group. As we can see from Table 1, all of the students in both the treatment and control groups displayed an increase in language competence as measured by the C-test in question following their engagement with the material either through SAC or by answering the questions posed as part of written reading comprehension exercise.

**Table 2. Mean pre and post C-test scores for treatment and comparison group**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Mean pre-test score | Mean post-test score | N |
| Treatment  Group | 26.64 | 38.21 | 7 |
| Comparison  Group | 25.50 | 35.00 | 4 |

Table 2 contains the mean C-test scores before and after engaging with either SAC or the reading comprehension exercise for the treatment and comparison groups respectively. There is an increase in the mean score for both groups. The increase for the treatment group is slightly larger than that of the comparison group at 11.57 for the treatment group compared with 9.5 for the comparison group.

**Table 3. Average increase in C-test score for the treatment and comparison groups broken down by nouns, verbs and adjectival endings**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Increase in C-test score for nouns**  (17 items)2 | **Increase in C-test score for verbs**  (15 items) | **Increase in C-test score for adjectival endings**  (7 items) |
| Treatment Group | 21% | 26% | 10% |
| Comparison Group | 15% | 22% | 11% |

2Identical, repeated items were not included in the analysis.

Breaking the C-test elements down and looking at three categories in particular, i.e. nouns, verbs and adjectival endings, we can see that there is an improvement in all three categories for the treatment and the comparison groups.

For the treatment group, the observed increase is greatest for the verbs followed by the nouns and, finally, the adjectives. For the comparison group, the improvement is also largest for the verbs, followed by the nouns and finally the adjective endings. In the case of the adjectival endings the increase is slightly greater for the comparison group than it is for the treatment group.

**Discussion, Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Research**

The results of this study indicate that SAC is a potentially useful technique in the language classroom. The group which used this technique displayed an increase in language competence in the subject domain as measured by the pre and post C-tests. Furthermore, the average increase in language competence was greater overall among these students than among those in the comparison group. However, given the small sample size and exploratory nature of this study, it is impossible to draw definitive conclusions. As such, the intention is not to suggest here that SAC should replace reading comprehensions or any other potentially useful pedagogical approaches and techniques. As noted above, the group engaged with reading comprehension also displayed evidence of an increase in language competence. Instead, the argument is that SAC may usefully be included as a complementary technique in the arsenal of teaching approaches at the disposal of the language teacher. For the language teacher operating in a ‘post-method’ environment (Stapleton 2013: 157) in which rather than following any one theoretical approach, they select their methodologies in an eclectic manner with the primary consideration being the nature of the group of learners before them, it is essential that they have a range of tried and tested teaching methodologies at their disposal. For example, the fact that there was a wider range of scores on the pre-engagement C-tests for the treatment group may also indicate that diversity in terms of levels and academic or linguistic ability does not preclude the use of SAC implying perhaps that it may be an appropriate method to use with mixed ability groupings. Again, given the numbers involved, however, such conclusions must remain tentative at this point.

These results would also appear to indicate that SAC had a greater, more positive impact on the acquisition of vocabulary, in this case nouns and verbs, than it did on the development of grammatical competence represented here by the acquisition of adjectival endings. A possible explanation for this is that while vocabulary can be acquired passively or implicitly while the focus is on engagement with content through the target language, this may not be the same for particular aspects of grammar such as adjectival endings in German. Therefore, it is possible that a grammar exercise explicitly focussing on this feature could usefully complement the SAC activity. Similar arguments regarding the need for supplementary focus on language forms in a meaning-based learning context have been made by a number of researchers in this field including Ellis (1997) and Schmitt (2008: 336, 340).

In terms of future research, this study would ideally be repeated with a larger number of participants using a double hour rather than two contact hours spread over two days in order to avoid attrition of participants. A larger sample would permit the use of more sophisticated statistical analyses of the results. It would also be valuable to include alternative assessments of changes in language competence in addition to or in place of the C-tests in order to obtain deeper insights into the type of learning occurring and to administer these and/or the C-tests at intervals such as for example one and two weeks after engaging with SAC, in order to determine the extent to which material acquired using different approaches is remembered by the learners. A longitudinal design incorporating repeated use of SAC throughout the module might also yield richer data and insights into the developmental process and allow a deeper understanding of changes occurring in the mind of the learner. Other topics and materials perhaps of a more intercultural nature could be introduced, in order to incorporate this element of foreign language learning to a greater extent, as could additional target languages. The materials themselves could also potentially be sourced by the student teams. It would also be useful to exploit further and monitor the possibilities offered by blended learning and flipped classrooms in developing this approach. Elicitation of feedback from the participants themselves explicitly regarding the use of SAC would also be a useful addition to the research design in order to determine, for example, the learners’ views concerning ways in which the use of SAC could be optimised.

Of note, in addition, is the fact that the participants in this study commented in their anonymous evaluations on the module in general that, for example, “…the debate was helpful as it gave us a chance to form sentences, work with others and try and hold a conversation/debate through German alone” or that “…the debating in class was a good way to build up fluency with the language”.

Finally, although the focus in this chapter was on the potential of engagement with SAC to facilitate the development of language proficiency, the heightened engagement observed by the researcher of the learners in the treatment group with the content of the material is an end in itself (Stefani 2009) and a further positive outcome of the process. Such engagement manifested itself in the form of lively argument and debate both within smaller groups and in the plenary sessions. This may reflect the origins of SAC in the political education classroom discussed previously where the requirement to develop a multiplicity of perspectives on an issue is designed to create a situation in which cognitive dissonance is experienced and heightened engagement with the material occurs as a result of the learner being pushed to incorporate new ideas into existing understandings of an issue or concept. Further research on this phenomenon in the field of language learning is likely to prove particularly fruitful and would represent a continuation of the historical alignment of developments in foreign language teaching methodology with developments in the field of psychology (Ashby 2012: 2). It is possible for example that the use of SAC could help to develop in language learners an ability to view the world and particular issues not just from different perspectives but from the perspective of different cultures, thus enhancing their ability to deal with ‘cultural dissonance’, or conflicting culturally-bound beliefs, values and norms (Cambell-Wilcox 2007: 265) and thus function more effectively within Kramsch’s (1993) ‘third space’ (see also Witte, Harden and de Oliviera Harden 2009: 6). It is likely that such research would contribute to our understanding of the ‘added value’ of language learning beyond the acquisition of linguistic proficiency and cultural knowledge, in other words, to the more subjective dimensions of foreign language learning.

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**Appendix 1: C-test**

**Soziale Medien und *Cyberbullying*:**

Soziale Med\_\_\_\_\_\_ bergen Gefa\_\_\_\_\_\_, wie z\_\_\_\_\_\_ Beispiel:

* Online-\_\_\_\_\_\_
* Ablenkung v\_\_\_\_\_\_ den Hausau\_\_\_\_\_\_, wenn Jugend\_\_\_\_\_\_ diese a\_\_\_\_\_\_ Computer mac\_\_\_\_\_\_ und gleich\_\_\_\_\_\_ im Sozi\_\_\_\_\_\_ Netzwerk einge\_\_\_\_\_\_ sind.
* Unerwünschte Kont\_\_\_\_\_\_: Pädosexuelle kön\_\_\_\_\_\_ über Soz\_\_\_\_\_\_ Netzwerke Kon\_\_\_\_\_\_ mit potenz\_\_\_\_\_\_ Opfern aufn\_\_\_\_\_\_.
* Von and\_\_\_\_\_\_ «Usern» bele\_\_\_\_\_\_ oder belä\_\_\_\_\_\_ werden ([Cyberbullying](http://www.jugendundmedien.ch/de/chancen-und-gefahren/gefahren-im-ueberblick/cyberbullying.html)).

## Cyberbullying – “Andere im Internet fertig machen”:

Mit d\_\_\_\_\_\_ Nutzung v\_\_\_\_\_\_ digitalen Med\_\_\_\_\_\_ hat au\_\_\_\_\_\_ die Verbr\_\_\_\_\_\_ von bosh\_\_\_\_\_\_ und diffam\_\_\_\_\_\_ Texten, Bil\_\_\_\_\_\_ oder Fi\_\_\_\_\_\_ über d\_\_\_\_\_\_ Handy od\_\_\_\_\_\_ Internet zugen\_\_\_\_\_\_: Cyberbullying - au\_\_\_\_\_\_ Cybermobbing gen\_\_\_\_\_\_ - ist ei\_\_\_\_\_\_ Gewal\_\_\_\_\_\_, bei d\_\_\_\_\_\_ andere Mens\_\_\_\_\_\_ belästigt wer\_\_\_\_\_\_. In d\_\_\_\_\_\_ Regel wi\_\_\_\_\_\_ sie wiede\_\_\_\_\_\_ oder üb\_\_\_\_\_\_ längere Ze\_\_\_\_\_\_ meist v\_\_\_\_\_\_ Personen a\_\_\_\_\_\_ dem eig\_\_\_\_\_\_ Bekanntenkreis ausg\_\_\_\_\_\_. Mögliche Folgen für die Opfer sind Wut, Verzweiflung, Hilflosigkeit oder Schlafstörungen.

**Wie kann man [Cyberbullying vermeiden?](http://www.jugendundmedien.ch/)**

* Sic\_\_\_\_\_\_ Passwörter f\_\_\_\_\_\_ Computer, E-m\_\_\_\_\_\_, Soziale Netz\_\_\_\_\_\_ etc. benutzen u\_\_\_\_\_\_ nicht weite\_\_\_\_\_\_.
* Private u\_\_\_\_\_\_ persönliche Da\_\_\_\_\_\_ nicht weite\_\_\_\_\_\_.
* Darauf ach\_\_\_\_\_\_, mit w\_\_\_\_\_\_ und w\_\_\_\_\_\_ man wel\_\_\_\_\_\_ Informationen austa\_\_\_\_\_\_ oder veröffe\_\_\_\_\_\_, damit ke\_\_\_\_\_\_ peinlichen Inh\_\_\_\_\_\_ und Bil\_\_\_\_\_\_ an Pers\_\_\_\_\_\_ gelangen, d\_\_\_\_\_\_ diese missbr\_\_\_\_\_\_ könnten.