



What Does English Learners' Writing Reveal? A Case Study of Structured Academic Controversy in a High School Social Studies Classroom

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10.46303/ressat.2026.7

Article Info

Received: January 29, 2026

Accepted: May 12, 2026

Published:

How to cite

Brown C. L., Waters, S., & Russell, W. B.
(2026). What Does English Learners'
Writing Reveal? A Case Study of
Structured Academic Controversy in a
High School Social Studies Classroom.
*Research in Social Sciences and
Technology*, 11(2), 11-31.
<https://doi.org/10.46303/ressat.2026.7>

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how a Structured Academic Controversy (SAC) approach can support English learners (ELs) with below-grade-level English proficiency in meeting rigorous national social studies standards. In a case study, three high school ELs in a U.S. History class wrote protest letters to President Franklin D. Roosevelt about the World War II Japanese American internment (Executive Order 9066). Prior to writing, students analyzed primary sources using guiding questions to consider multiple perspectives. Analysis of the letters revealed evidence of four National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) thematic standards (Themes 1, 2, 5, and 10), while focus group interviews showed student awareness of two of the same themes (Themes 2 and 5) and one additional theme (Theme 6). These findings suggest that SAC enabled ELs to access rigorous content while addressing NCSS standards. A key benefit of SAC was the development of critical thinking and communication skills essential for democratic participation. The SAC process also afforded ELs meaningful opportunities to produce authentic writing that demonstrated engagement with high-level social studies concepts and civic reasoning.

KEYWORDS

Social Studies Education; English learners; structured academic controversy; disciplinary literacy; civic reasoning; scaffolding.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching social studies to younger generations is essential for the health of a democracy. A thriving democratic society requires young people to learn not only their civic rights but also their civic responsibilities. They must be able to think critically and make informed decisions both individually, for their own well-being, and collectively, for the common good. The National Commission on Social Studies in the Schools (NCSS, 1989) articulated five central goals for social studies education: (1) cultivating civic responsibility and citizen participation, (2) fostering a global perspective through understanding one's life experiences as part of the larger human experience across time and place, (3) developing "critical understanding" of the history, geography, and pluralistic institutions of the United States, (4) nurturing a multicultural perspective on the world's peoples through recognition of their differences and commonalities, and (5) advancing students' capacities for critical reflection on the human condition. These ambitious goals present particular challenges for ELs, who must gain "critical understanding" of unfamiliar aspects of U.S. history while navigating below-grade-level academic language proficiency and diverse cultural backgrounds. Between 2011 and 2021, the percentage of ELs in U.S. public schools grew from 9.4% (about 4.6 million students) to 10.6% (roughly 5.3 million students). Growth has been especially pronounced in the Southeast: for example, South Carolina's EL population grew by 236% from 2004 to 2014, and other states like Mississippi and Arkansas saw increases over 100%. Tennessee's EL population grew by about 200% between 1998 and 2008, and by an additional 46% from 2016 to 2022 (Mader et al., 2024). Demographic projections indicate that the EL population will continue to expand in the coming decade, further shaping the landscape of U.S. public education. This reality makes it urgent for educators to identify effective strategies to include and challenge ELs in content-area learning, particularly in civics and history classes where language barriers can compound learning difficulties.

In this context, the present study explores how a specific discussion-based pedagogical approach – Structured Academic Controversy – can help bridge the gap between ELs' language needs and the demands of high school social studies curricula. SAC is a cooperative learning strategy that structures student debate and deliberation on a contentious issue. By requiring students to consider multiple viewpoints and support their claims with evidence, SAC holds promise for developing both content understanding and academic language skills. The purpose of this study was to investigate how implementing a SAC-focused unit would support EL students in meaningfully achieving multiple NCSS thematic standards beyond surface-level factual recall. We focused on a two-week unit concerning the policy of Japanese American incarceration during World War II, specifically examining the sociocultural implications of Executive Order 9066 in a marginalized community. The research showcases: (1) how to contextualize social studies topics for ELs using strategies that address their academic language needs, (2) how incorporating primary sources with SAC can promote deeper conceptual learning, and (3) how to design summative tasks that empower ELs to apply civic reasoning and demonstrate understanding through authentic, action-oriented writing. The central research question

guiding this study was: How does the incorporation of Structured Academic Controversy support ELs in meaningfully accessing social studies content and achieving multiple NCSS thematic standards beyond surface-level learning?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social studies is widely recognized as one of the most difficult subjects for ELs, posing significant challenges for secondary teachers. Beck and McKeown's seminal study (1991) examined why social studies texts are notoriously difficult for younger learners to comprehend. If informational texts in social studies are challenging even for native English speakers, those difficulties are amplified for ELs. Reading comprehension of complex texts depends largely on background knowledge, syntactic knowledge, and vocabulary knowledge. Beck and McKeown (1991) identified unfamiliar content knowledge as a primary reason for comprehension difficulty, with gaps in background knowledge being especially detrimental. This issue is pronounced for ELs: content-area texts often assume prior knowledge of U.S. history, civics, and culture that many ELs do not possess (e.g. national holidays, landmark historical events). Thus, much of the material can be entirely new to them. Scaffolding instruction is not merely recommended but essential to help ELs access the content.

One fundamental challenge is a lack of background knowledge. ELs who recently arrived or who have had different educational experiences may be unfamiliar with key historical contexts and cultural references embedded in the social studies curriculum. Teachers must therefore "prime" ELs by either activating relevant prior knowledge or explicitly building the necessary background information before introducing new content. For example, to teach the concept of regional sectionalism in U.S. history, a teacher might draw an analogy to sports team rivalries, asking students how they feel about competing teams – an analogy that makes an abstract historical division more relatable. In other cases, when an analogous personal experience is not available (such as explaining the principle of separation of church and state), the teacher needs to fill in background knowledge directly. By clearly explaining that, for instance, in the United States a religious leader cannot simultaneously be head of government and that the Constitution forbids establishing an official religion, ELs can better grasp why the idea of church–state separation was significant. Once these knowledge gaps are filled, ELs are properly "primed" to engage with such abstract civic concepts. Research has emphasized the importance of front-loading background knowledge for ELs in content areas to improve comprehension. By drawing on ELs' existing cultural and personal experiences – known as their "funds of knowledge" – and by providing accessible explanations for new concepts, teachers can create entry points for ELs to learn unfamiliar social studies content (Dong, 2025).

A second major challenge lies in the linguistic complexity of social studies texts. Social studies textbooks and primary source documents often contain a high density of academic (Tier 2) words (e.g., evaluate, determine, justify, trace) as well as content-specific (Tier 3) vocabulary (e.g., emancipate, internment, colonize). ELs seldom encounter many of these words in

everyday conversation, limiting their opportunities for practice and reinforcement. Moreover, the discourse style of historical and informational texts frequently involves long, multi-clause sentences that pack multiple ideas and facts together. These dense constructions, especially those with embedded clauses can obscure the central meaning and impose a heavy cognitive load on learners. Complex sentence structures in which lengthy descriptive details are inserted between the subject and verb can cause ELs to lose track of the sentence's core meaning. In addition, history texts commonly employ the passive voice to describe events, causes, and effects. The passive voice often leaves the actor implicit; when combined with unfamiliar content, this can further impair comprehension for ELs. Recent studies indicate that students' syntactic processing ability is a distinct factor contributing to reading comprehension, independent of their vocabulary knowledge. Second-language readers, in particular, tend to rely more on semantic cues (overall meaning) than on grammatical structure when parsing complex sentences—a strategy that can break down when applied to dense academic texts. Accordingly, teachers need to scaffold ELs' reading of social studies texts by explicitly deconstructing complex sentences into simpler components. For example, teachers should help ELs identifying who did what, when, where, and how and by teaching ELs to notice connectives and syntactic cues that signal relationships between ideas.

A third challenge for ELs in social studies is the sheer volume of low-frequency, domain-specific vocabulary and abstract concepts. Many historical terms and civic concepts (e.g., manifest destiny, civil liberty, reparations) rarely surface in everyday conversation, so ELs have limited exposure to them outside the classroom. Additionally, such terms often carry meanings that are culturally or figuratively loaded. For instance, the statement "Westward expansion helped America manifest its destiny" is imbued with both historical significance and figurative meaning. An EL might struggle not only with the historical reference but also with interpreting the phrase "manifest destiny." When language is abstract and context is lacking, comprehension can be severely hindered. Effective strategies to address this include drawing on cross-linguistic connections and students' home languages, a practice consistent with translanguaging pedagogy. Cognates can serve as linguistic bridges – for example, the English word destiny parallels destino in Spanish, and manifest has a connection to manifestar (to express or reveal). Highlighting these cognates can make the concept more accessible to Spanish-speaking ELs. Teachers can further demystify the phrase by explaining that manifest in this context means "to show or reveal," so that manifest destiny can be paraphrased as "to show America's fate." Using students' heritage languages and prior knowledge in this way leverages their full linguistic repertoire and validates their cultural background, which has been shown to increase engagement and understanding in social studies lessons. After simplifying the language, teachers can then re-contextualize the term within the historical narrative (e.g., discussing how the idea of manifest destiny justified westward expansion), helping ELs attach concrete understanding to abstract ideas. Targeted vocabulary instruction, especially when sustained and contextualized, is necessary to improve ELs' content learning in social studies.

Structured Academic Controversy

Structured Academic Controversy is an instructional method originally developed by Johnson and Johnson (1979, 1995) as part of their constructive controversy theory. Unlike a traditional debate in which students are assigned opposing positions to defend at all costs, SAC guides students through a collaborative examination of multiple sides of an issue. The goal is not to “win” the argument but to seek a more nuanced understanding of a complex historical or social question. In a SAC, students typically work in small teams to research and present a position, listen to an opposing position, engage in deliberative discussion, and then reverse perspectives or work together to reach a consensus or informed outcome. This process is grounded in the idea that intellectual conflict, when properly structured, can stimulate critical thinking and deeper learning. As the Johnsons note, “intellectual conflict is not only highly desirable but also an essential instructional tool that energizes student learning.” Research has demonstrated that SAC leads to greater content understanding and improved perspective-taking among secondary students. By considering counterarguments and wrestling with evidence on multiple sides of an issue, students learn history as a contested narrative rather than a fixed set of facts. Such an approach treats history and civics as dynamic fields that involve debate and interpretation, rather than as static content to memorize. Students engaged in SAC learn to weigh diverse perspectives and support claims with evidence, mirroring the work of historians and civic decision-makers. SAC has also been shown to promote communication skills and a willingness to engage in civil discourse across differences. In essence, SAC shifts the classroom mindset from argument against an opponent to dialogue with a peer, fostering an atmosphere of inquiry and respect.

SAC is well aligned with the broader goals of social studies education, including the preparation of youth for active democratic citizenship. John Dewey (1938) famously posited that education and democracy are inextricably linked, with education serving as the backbone of democratic life. Approaches like SAC operationalize this link by teaching students how to engage with factual evidence, evaluate conflicting viewpoints, and practice civic reasoning in a respectful, reasoned manner. This is particularly valuable for students from marginalized backgrounds, as it validates their voices and equips them with the intellectual tools for meaningful participation in a democratic society. Discussing controversial public issues in class, when done in a structured way, helps all students learn to navigate disagreements and consider the values and experiences of others (Hess, 2009). As Hess (2009) notes, structured deliberation around controversial issues cultivates civic reasoning by compelling students to consider multiple viewpoints, formulate and critique competing claims, and apply evidence to support conclusions. For ELs, participating in such deliberations not only reinforces content knowledge but also develops key disciplinary language functions such as explaining, justifying, refuting, and synthesizing information (Zwiers, 2014). These are precisely the kinds of academic language skills ELs need for success in writing and discussion across the curriculum. Thus, SAC can be seen as a form of disciplinary literacy instruction: it apprentices students into the ways of reading,

writing, thinking, and communicating that are valued in the social studies. By integrating content learning with language development and civic learning, SAC offers a holistic approach that addresses the multifaceted challenges ELs face in social studies classrooms. This is especially important given the challenges described earlier (gaps in background knowledge, linguistic complexity, and abstract vocabulary). When instruction incorporates SAC along with appropriate scaffolds, ELs can engage with rigorous content while simultaneously honing skills in evidence-based reasoning, critical thinking, and academic discourse. In summary, the literature suggests that SAC, supported by culturally and linguistically responsive teaching practices, holds considerable promise for improving ELs' access to social studies content and for fostering the civic competencies essential for full participation in a democratic society.

METHODS

Research Design and Context

This study employed a qualitative case study design, focusing on a single classroom to allow for an in-depth examination of instructional practices and student outcomes. The research took place in a 10th grade U.S. History class at a public high school in a southeastern state. In recent years, this school's community experienced a rapid increase in EL enrollment, spurring social studies teachers to seek more effective ways to support culturally and linguistically diverse learners. In the focal class, three students were designated as English learners with intermediate levels of English proficiency. These three ELs (all given pseudonyms) became the primary participants of the case study. The class also included native English-speaking students, and all students in the class participated in the instructional unit described, though our analysis centers on the ELs' experiences and work.

The unit of study, co-planned by the teacher and researchers, was a two-week inquiry into the U.S. government's policy of Japanese American internment during World War II. The compelling question framing the unit was: "Was the internment of Japanese Americans necessary for the protection of the U.S. during WWII?". This question was intentionally contentious, inviting students to consider arguments on both sides. It could be reframed as a debate between two interpretations: one, that internment was a military necessity for national security; and two, that internment was driven by racism rather than genuine protection needs. By modeling this kind of dialectical framing, the teacher encouraged students to recognize multiple perspectives while formulating their own positions on the issue. Throughout the unit, students engaged with a variety of historical sources, including textbook excerpts, photographs, films, and letters to build their understanding of the events and the arguments surrounding them.

Instructional Procedures and Data Collection

At the start of the unit, the teacher employed whole-class discussions and visual resources to immerse students in the historical context and to begin filling gaps in background knowledge. Adopting a problem-posing stance, the teacher introduced the historical case of Japanese

American incarceration as an inquiry into justice, discrimination, and civic responsibility. Two short films served as opening primary sources: “Ugly History: Japanese American Incarceration Camps” and an archival newsreel from the U.S. Office of War Information entitled, “Japanese Relocation”. These multimedia sources provided firsthand testimonies and an overview of key facts, such as the issuance of Executive Order 9066 after Pearl Harbor, the establishment of “assembly centers” and camps by the U.S. Army and War Relocation Authority, the hardships endured by incarcerated, and the later redress movements. By beginning with visual and narrative accounts, the teacher aimed to make the content more accessible to ELs and to ground the discussion in human stories rather than abstract text.

Building on students’ engagement with the videos, the class then explored their own experiences and preconceptions through a supporting question: “Who are Americans (during WWII and/or now)? How has that definition changed over time?” This open-ended prompt invited students to share and reflect on ideas of identity and belonging. It was particularly meaningful for the ELs, who had personal insights into what it means to be seen as an “outsider” or newcomer in America. In a low-stakes journal entry and subsequent class conversation, students described their views of American identity and related them to experiences of inclusion or exclusion. This activity activated ELs’ funds of knowledge and set the stage for them to empathize with the dilemmas faced by Japanese Americans in the 1940s. The teacher deliberately drew connections between historical discrimination and students’ own lives, for example, discussing instances of stereotyping or prejudice the ELs had witnessed to create an “empathetic bridge” between past and present. These strategies reflect culturally and linguistically responsive teaching, ensuring that ELs see their experiences and identities valued in the inquiry process.

Next, the class moved into a sequence of source analysis activities following an inquiry model inspired by the Stanford History Education Group (SHEG). Students examined carefully selected primary sources (e.g., excerpts from government orders, personal letters, newspaper headlines, photographs from the camps) and responded to guiding questions such as: What happened to the Japanese Americans, and why?; Do you think Japanese Americans were interned for reasons of racism or for national protection?. These guiding questions prompted students to form initial hypotheses and then refine their thinking with each additional source. Students worked in pairs or small groups, and the teacher provided scaffolds to support the ELs, including graphic organizers for noting evidence, sentence frames to help them articulate answers, and glossaries for difficult terms. The emphasis throughout was on citing evidence from the sources to support any claims. As new documents were introduced, students revisited their hypotheses, thus practicing the historical thinking skill of corroboration and the iterative nature of inquiry.

The heart of the unit’s pedagogy was the Structured Academic Controversy itself, which took place after students had built up background knowledge through the above activities. The SAC was structured around the compelling question of Japanese American internment. Students

were divided into small teams, and initially each team was assigned a position: one side would defend the view that internment was necessary for national security, and the other side would argue that internment was unjustified and driven by racial prejudice. The three EL focal students were distributed such that each had supportive peers in their SAC teams (including at least one proficient English speaker per team to facilitate communication, though the ELs were encouraged to take active roles). To scaffold the ELs during SAC, the teacher provided language support in the form of debate sentence starters (e.g., “One reason I believe... is that...”; “A counterargument might be...”), and encouraged students to use evidence from the sources they had analyzed. Before the SAC discussions began, the teacher reviewed norms for respectful discourse and reminded students that their goal was to understand both sides of the issue deeply, rather than simply to “win” an argument.

During the SAC, students from each side presented their arguments while the opposing side listened and took notes. Then the sides switched, with each team articulating the opposite position. This required students to genuinely grapple with the arguments they might initially disagree with, enhancing their ability to see the issue from multiple perspectives. Finally, teams dropped their assigned roles and engaged in an open dialogue aimed at reaching a consensus or a more nuanced conclusion. In our case, many students concluded that while there were real security fears during WWII, the wholesale internment policy was unjust and rooted in prejudice, a synthesis reflecting elements of both sides. Throughout these SAC deliberations, the teacher observed and occasionally intervened to prompt deeper thinking, especially prodding students to substantiate their claims with evidence. The EL students participated actively; though their grammar was sometimes imperfect, they contributed relevant points (often referencing the primary sources) and responded to their classmates’ ideas. Notably, one EL student who was usually quiet in class, “Felicia,” was particularly engaged, speaking at length about how Americans at the time might have felt afraid but that many actions taken were clearly racist – a point we elaborate on in the findings.

As an additional scaffold and reflection tool, the teacher used a Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Inquiry Checklist (Yoder & Johnson, 2017) throughout the unit. This checklist included items to ensure instruction remained responsive to ELs’ needs (for example, checking whether students could answer the compelling question in a linguistically appropriate way, and whether multiple cultural perspectives were incorporated). This self-assessment helped the teacher make on-the-fly adjustments to support EL comprehension and participation. For instance, the checklist reminded the teacher to verify that ELs understood key vocabulary in the compelling question (“internment,” “necessary,” “protection”) and to provide synonyms or translations as needed. It also encouraged tying the content back to students’ lives, which bolstered the meaningfulness of the lessons for the ELs.

The unit culminated in a summative performance assessment, designed with action-oriented principles to connect learning to civic engagement. Students were given a choice for the final task: they would write either (a) a speech as President Roosevelt defending the decision

to intern Japanese Americans, or (b) a protest letter to President Roosevelt opposing the internment policy. All three EL participants opted to write a protest letter. To set them up for success, the teacher provided a writing template in which the opening and closing paragraphs of the letter were partially written as models. This scaffold offered a clear structure (for instance, a polite salutation, an introduction stating the student's stance, and a concluding call for action) so that the ELs could focus on composing the main arguments in their own words. Additional supports for writing included sentence stems (e.g., "One reason this policy was wrong is..."), a word bank of useful terms (rights, citizens, Constitution, security, etc.), and the allowance of drafting in their first language if they chose (though ultimately they wrote in English). Throughout the writing process, the teacher reminded students to use evidence from the historical sources and from the SAC discussions to support their points. As a further extension linking classroom learning to the real world, students were asked to develop a few talking points about the internment issue that they could share with family or community members, thereby practicing discussing historical injustices in a civic context.

Data Analysis

The primary data for this study consisted of the three EL students' written protest letters (the summative assessment) and a follow-up focus group interview conducted with the EL students and a few of their English-proficient peers. The letters were collected at the end of the unit and were analyzed qualitatively using an interpretive framework based on the NCSS thematic standards (NCSS, 2010). Specifically, we read each student's letter closely to identify evidence of understanding related to any of the ten NCSS thematic strands (e.g., Theme 1: Culture; Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change; Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions; Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance; Theme 10: Civic Ideals and Practices, etc.). Instances in the letters where students referenced cultural beliefs, historical continuity, institutional actions, power relations, or civic values were coded according to the relevant theme. For example, a sentence in a letter pointing out racial prejudice underlying the internment would be coded under Theme 1 (Culture) and Theme 5 (Individuals, Groups, and Institutions). Coding was conducted by two researchers working collaboratively, and disagreements were resolved through discussion. The goal of this analysis was to ascertain which major social studies concepts and themes the ELs were able to express in writing after the SAC-based instruction, thereby revealing the depth of their content understanding and critical thinking.

The focus group interview was conducted one week after the unit, in English, and lasted about 30 minutes. One researcher (not the classroom teacher) facilitated the discussion using semi-structured questions. The group included the three EL focal students and two fluent English-speaking students from the same class. The interview asked students to reflect on the unit, what they learned about the internment, how they felt about the SAC activity, whether thinking about the policy as potentially racist helped their understanding, etc. The conversation was audio-recorded and transcribed. We analyzed the transcript for substantive statements that illustrated the students' historical reasoning, their perspective-taking, and any continued

misconceptions or breakthroughs in understanding. In particular, we noted segments where students (ELs especially) demonstrated civic reasoning or empathy, as these related to the study's interest in critical thinking development. We then triangulated these interview findings with the evidence from the letters. In practice, this meant that if a theme appeared in the letters, we checked whether and how it came up in the oral discussion, and vice versa. This triangulation helped increase the trustworthiness of our interpretations: for instance, if an EL student spoke in the interview about why some Americans supported internment, we could see if her letter also reflected that nuanced view.

Throughout the analysis, we remained attentive to the fidelity of student voice. The EL students' writing contained features of interlanguage (grammatical errors, unconventional phrasing), which we report verbatim with occasional [sic] notations for clarity. All student names used are pseudonyms, and the study was conducted under the school district's research ethics guidelines with parental consent and student assent obtained.

FINDINGS

The findings are organized using the NCSS thematic standards as an interpretive lens. We first present evidence from the EL students' letters, showing how the content of their writing demonstrated understanding aligned with four NCSS themes. We then incorporate insights from the focus group interview to further illustrate how SAC enabled these ELs to engage in critical thinking and civic reasoning. All three EL students chose to write letters opposing President Roosevelt's internment policy, and their writings are quoted here exactly as written (with [sic] added only where needed for clarity). Despite language inaccuracies, their letters provide rich evidence of historical understanding and personal voice.

NCSS Theme 1: Culture

This theme addresses how students understand the beliefs, values, and behaviors of different groups, and how culture shapes human experience. In their letters, the EL students explored the internment of Japanese Americans not only as a government action but as an outgrowth of cultural attitudes—specifically, wartime xenophobia and longstanding racial prejudice in American society. Across all three letters, the idea of cultural exclusion and racism emerged as a central focus.

Felicia wrote: "They are American citizens and one of their rights is to be free. Let's remember that racism against Japanese American existed long before the war." In this sentence, she explicitly identified Japanese Americans as rightful citizens and invoked the principle of rights and freedom. She also pointed out that the racism underlying internment was not a sudden reaction to Pearl Harbor but was rooted in a culture of prejudice that predated World War II. Felicia's wording ("racism against Japanese American existed long before the war") highlights her understanding that being "American" is not just a legal status but also a cultural acceptance, one that was historically denied to certain groups. She alludes to the fact that the category of "American" had often been constructed in racially exclusive terms: some groups

(like white Europeans) were readily accepted, while others (like Asians and other minorities) were treated as perpetual outsiders, even if they were U.S. citizens. Felicia further noted in her letter that while Japanese Americans were being discriminated against during WWII, "German and Italian Americans were not put in camps like the Japanese. That is not fair." Here, she recognized the inconsistency in how different ethnic groups were treated by the U.S. government, implying that prejudice, rather than any uniform security rationale, explained why only those of Japanese ancestry were targeted.

Lucia's letter echoed this perspective and even incorporated a detail from a primary source: "One Japanese American man says, 'I'm an American' on a sign placed in the window of his store in Oakland." Lucia referenced a wartime photograph the class had examined, which showed a Japanese American store owner displaying a sign professing his loyalty and identity as an American. By including this in her letter, Lucia underscored the cultural theme that Japanese Americans felt compelled to assert their Americanness in the face of doubt. It resonated with her as an EL, perhaps, that someone would have to publicly declare "I belong here." Her use of this primary source indicates she understood the feelings of injustice and desperation experienced by Japanese Americans who were culturally marginalized despite being part of the American fabric.

Maria's letter also highlighted historical examples of anti-Japanese sentiment: "In 1906 the Americans start treating the Japanese American bad, for example the American says that 'no japs in our schools.'" Maria referred to the early 20th-century San Francisco school board incident (when Japanese American children were segregated in schools, prompting international protest). Her writing, though linguistically imperfect ("start treating... bad"), captured the idea that discrimination was systemic and institutional ("no Japs in our schools" being a quote that shows derogatory language and exclusion in education). This indicates Maria's awareness that the internment was part of a continuum of cultural racism against people of Japanese descent.

Collectively, these letters demonstrate that EL students were able to connect the WWII internment policy to broader cultural patterns of racism and exclusion in U.S. history. They did not simply see the internment as an isolated wartime measure; rather, they contextualized it within a legacy of anti-Asian racism (Theme 1: Culture) and questioned the inconsistency of American ideals versus American practices. The letters reveal an emerging critical stance: the students were implicitly asking, What does it mean to be an American, and who gets to be included? Their responses show a grasp of culture as a powerful force that can define group boundaries and justify injustices.

NCSS Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

This theme involves understanding historical continuity and change over time. The EL students' letters demonstrated an awareness that the social phenomena of prejudice and violation of rights were not confined to one moment, but persisted across decades. All three letters referenced discrimination against Japanese Americans in earlier decades (the 1900s and 1920s)

as well as during WWII. For example, as noted, Felicia explicitly wrote that racism against Japanese Americans “existed long before the war.” Both Felicia and Maria cited the year 1906, and Maria also mentioned the 1920s. These references show that the students understood internment as part of a continuum of anti-Japanese actions rather than an aberration caused solely by wartime hysteria.

By incorporating historical examples from 1906 and 1920, the ELs were recognizing continuity: the prejudicial attitudes and policies did not emerge overnight in 1942 but had roots in earlier periods. This reflects an understanding of cause and effect over time – a core aspect of Theme 2. The students grasped that beliefs and values (in this case, racial biases) can persist and influence events across generations. Moreover, by mentioning these earlier dates, the students implied a critical viewpoint that progress in American ideals (like equality) is not linear or automatic; injustices can repeat or endure if not addressed.

Through the SAC process and primary source work, the ELs also connected the historical content to contemporary relevance. In class discussions (as captured in the focus group), they drew parallels to more current events, such as post-9/11 treatment of Muslim Americans or immigration debates – noting that fear-driven policies often target particular groups and can violate rights. Although these contemporary issues were not detailed in their letters (since the task focused on the historical scenario), the focus group indicated that the students were thinking about continuity in a broader sense: the persistence of racism and the recurring tension between security and civil liberties. This demonstrates a developing understanding that “time, continuity, and change” means looking at patterns – how some injustices resurface in different forms, and how understanding the past can shed light on the present.

In sum, evidence for Theme 2 was present in the way EL students situated WWII internment within a timeline of racial prejudice. They saw change (e.g., overt discrimination in schools in 1906, then mass incarceration in 1942, then eventual apologies decades later) but also continuity (the same underlying prejudices fueling multiple events). This temporal awareness in their writing illustrates a level of historical thinking that goes beyond memorizing dates, showing they can analyze causes and consequences across time.

NCSS Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

This theme deals with how institutions (like governments) and groups (defined by race, ethnicity, etc.) interact, and how these interactions shape experiences. The ELs’ letters clearly demonstrated an understanding that the internment targeted a specific group (Japanese Americans) and involved institutions (the U.S. government, the military). All three students described how Japanese Americans as a group were treated and what that indicated about institutional bias.

For instance, Felicia’s statement, “They are American citizens and one of their rights is to be free,” combined an individual rights perspective with a group identity (“they” as Japanese Americans) and pointed a finger at the institution (the U.S. government) that was denying those rights. She understood that a government policy was stripping a certain group of its civil

liberties, which implies an analysis of institutional power and its misuse against a minority group. Felicia's emphasis that Japanese Americans were American citizens by law but still lost their freedom highlights a critical view of institutional hypocrisy or failure – essentially noting that institutions did not protect all citizens equally.

Lucia's use of the sign "I'm an American" from the store window also hits Theme 5: it's a vivid example of an individual asserting membership in the national community, pleading for fair treatment from fellow citizens and institutions. The fact that this assertion was necessary implies how institutions and other citizens were treating that person as an outsider. Lucia's inclusion of that detail shows she recognized the dynamics between an individual (or a minority business owner) and the wider society's perception shaped by prejudice.

Maria's reference to "Americans" saying "no Japs in our schools" explicitly contrasts a dominant group ("Americans," implying white Americans) with the minority group (Japanese Americans), and it references a public institution (schools). By bringing school segregation into her argument about internment, Maria connected different forms of institutional discrimination. Her letter also described some of the specific injustices of internment: forcing Japanese American store owners to close shops, preventing children from attending public schools, accusing loyal citizens of being disloyal simply due to their ethnicity. She wrote that doing these things was "bad" and underscored, "they are citizens and have the same rights." Maria's almost plaintive tone ("they have the same rights") suggests she grasped the fundamental civic principle that institutions are supposed to treat individuals equally under the law.

The letters collectively imply that the students saw the internment as not just the result of individual prejudices, but of systemic, institutional actions targeting an entire group. They noted that racism was "institutionalized" – for example, Felicia and Maria both highlighted that the U.S. government did something to one racial group that it did not do to others, indicating an understanding of institutional discrimination. The ELs were effectively critiquing how institutions (government, schools) can violate the rights of groups due to prejudice. This awareness is a key element of civic reasoning: recognizing when laws or policies conflict with fundamental principles like equality and justice.

Furthermore, by pointing out that not all groups were treated the same during WWII (e.g., "German and Italian Americans were not put in camps"), the students identified power dynamics in societal institutions – that some groups had the power of acceptance and others were powerless to resist exclusion. This finding under Theme 5 is significant because it shows the ELs moved beyond a simplistic understanding ("bad things happened") to an analysis of who it happened to and why those people were vulnerable. They connected the micro level (individual rights being violated) to the macro level (institutions enacting policies that reflect societal biases). In doing so, they demonstrated an emerging capacity for civic reasoning about how a democracy can fail some of its people – an important lesson in social studies learning.

NCSS Theme 10: Civic Ideals and Practices

This theme involves understanding the ideals of democracy (like justice, equality, rights) and the practices by which civic decisions are made and contested. The protest letters were inherently an exercise in civic expression – the students were writing as if they were citizens in 1944 petitioning their government for redress of grievances. In crafting these letters, the ELs invoked core democratic ideals repeatedly. A dominant refrain in their writing was that Japanese American citizens “have the same rights as other Americans” and that it was wrong to single them out. This reflects a grasp of the ideal of equal protection under the law.

Maria’s letter was particularly passionate on this front. She wrote that forcing Japanese Americans to close their businesses, excluding them from schools, and accusing them of being traitors was unjust. “They are citizens and have the same rights,” she emphasized. She appealed to the moral and civic principle that citizenship should guarantee equal treatment. Maria even took on a somewhat admonishing tone toward the nation, writing: “the U.S. have [sic] to be a country with peace and love to others who want to live here. That is one of the biggest ideals for this country: pursue peace... for all.” This statement shows a remarkable connection to American civic ideals – she references the pursuit of peace (echoing the ethos of the Preamble and perhaps alluding to the “pursuit of happiness” ideal) and explicitly says “for all.” Maria, an English learner, was effectively reminding “America” of its own professed values of inclusion and harmony. That she chose to include this in her letter suggests she understood that the internment was a betrayal of American ideals, and she was calling for a return to those ideals.

Felicia and Lucia similarly underscored democratic ideals in their letters by focusing on rights. Felicia’s mention of “one of their rights is to be free” alludes to constitutional rights like liberty and due process, which were denied to the internees. Lucia’s highlighting of an American-born store owner proclaiming his loyalty implies the question: What good are American ideals if a loyal citizen has to prove himself in that way? Their letters collectively argue that the internment policy was antithetical to civic ideals such as justice, equality, and the rule of law.

Through their SAC experience and writing, the ELs practiced civic practices as well, such as constructing an argument, addressing an authority (the President), and engaging in discourse about a public issue. These are real civic skills. The content of their letters shows that they comprehended the notion of civic responsibility too: implicitly, they took on the responsibility of speaking out (in the form of the protest letter) against a policy they deemed wrong. This indicates a developing sense of political agency – an essential part of Theme 10.

In summary, in their protest letters the EL students consistently invoked civic ideals (rights, equality, peace, freedom) and demonstrated an understanding that those ideals must be upheld in practice, even during times of crisis. Their strong opinions that Japanese Americans should have been treated the same as anyone else reflect a values-based reasoning that goes beyond just historical facts; they are engaging with the moral dimensions of history. This finding illustrates that, given the opportunity, ELs can and will address big questions of justice and ethics in civics, contradicting any assumption that their limited English might confine them to rote

learning or superficial understandings. On the contrary, with SAC and proper supports, these students articulated critical evaluations of U.S. policy grounded in democratic ideals.

Triangulated Findings: Focus Group Insights

The focus group interview with the students after the unit provided additional evidence of how the SAC approach fostered critical thinking and civic reasoning. In the discussion, students reflected on considering the internment policy through the lens of racism versus security. When asked, "I'm wondering if making you think about that policy as racist helped you understand it," the students responded with nuance. A non-EL student remarked, "It helped me see different points of view." Felicia, one of the ELs, gave a thoughtful and complex answer: Felicia: "Yes and no. Yes, because it helped me see how there were people who wanted to hurt them (Japanese Americans), but no, because most people didn't want to hurt them, they just wanted to protect their country. So, by being racist, they were hurting these people. Taking their lives and their houses, but no because they're just trying to take care of their country and they didn't know how to do it. That might not have been the right way to do it, but I don't think they wanted to do it out of racism. So yes and no."

This response is quite sophisticated for a student who is an English learner. Felicia was wrestling with the complexity of historical causation and human motivation. Her response indicated empathy and critical distance: she empathized with the American public's fear ("they're just trying to take care of their country and they didn't know how") and simultaneously empathized with the Japanese American victims ("by being racist, they were hurting these people, taking their lives and houses"). Felicia essentially posited a dual perspective, that some actors were driven by malice or racism, while many others were driven by fear and misguided patriotism. Her conclusion that it's "yes and no" whether racism was the cause reflects a nuanced understanding that historical events often have multiple causes and that people's intentions can be mixed.

Felicia's reasoning maps onto NCSS themes as well. Her awareness that Americans at the time felt a duty to protect their country situates the internment in the context of values and beliefs of the period (Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change). She understood that a nation at war might have collective fear and that those fears, however, led to injustices. She acknowledged the injustice explicitly (noting it was hurting innocent people and "not the right way") while also considering the institutional context of the time (Theme 5 and Theme 6). In fact, her reflection corresponds to Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance, which involves understanding how people negotiate the needs of security and order with the protection of individual rights. Felicia was effectively analyzing how the U.S. government's exercise of authority (internment) was an attempt at security that clashed with the ideal of individual rights. Her ability to "balance empathy with critique," recognizing the fear-driven rationale but still condemning the policy as wrong, is exactly the kind of higher-order thinking social studies aims to develop.

Another interesting point from Felicia's comments: she said, "I don't think they wanted to do it out of racism. So yes and no." This suggests she is grappling with the concept of intent versus outcome. She is considering that maybe the intention was not to be cruel but the outcome was cruel and racist in effect. This shows a developing ability to think in terms of historical perspective, understanding how people in the past might have rationalized their actions, which is a sophisticated historical reasoning skill.

The focus group discussion also highlighted how SAC gave ELs a platform to engage in extended discourse. Felicia, who in other contexts might have not spoken as much due to language barriers, took a "long turn" in the conversation, expressing a complex chain of thoughts. One of the researchers observed that Felicia "volunteered to speak and fully articulated her complex thoughts because the topic was powerful and meaningful to her." Indeed, Felicia's engagement suggests that when ELs are motivated and feel safe to express themselves, they can contribute profound insights to class discussions. The SAC structure, which values each student's perspective and requires active listening, likely contributed to creating that safe space. This is an important implication: providing ELs with structured yet open-ended speaking opportunities can greatly enhance their oral academic language production and confidence.

During the focus group, students were also asked about what they had learned or what resonated most. The ELs reiterated points from their letters: for instance, one mentioned how unfair it was that "people born here had to prove they were American," and another talked about understanding how propaganda and rumors can make a whole country panic. These comments reinforce the letter analysis, showing that the SAC and related activities indeed helped ELs internalize key social studies concepts such as propaganda (Theme 10's civic practices of recognizing misinformation) and societal panic leading to rights violations.

In connecting back to NCSS standards one more time, one exchange in the interview can be tied to Theme 9: Global Connections. When Felicia discussed how Americans were just trying to protect their country and didn't know how, she was touching on issues of war, conflict, and human rights in a global context (though implicitly). Later in the interview, another student mentioned that what happened to Japanese Americans in WWII made them think about "what could happen in other countries or now," indicating a nascent global awareness (Theme 9). Felicia's analysis of how beliefs of different groups can clash also relates to Theme 5 (Individuals, Groups, and Institutions), as it shows her understanding of social dynamics and institutional decisions.

Overall, the triangulation of the focus group with the letters strengthens our findings. The EL students' ability to articulate nuanced viewpoints in discussion mirrored the sophisticated understandings evidenced in their writing. It became clear that the SAC approach did more than teach them historical facts; it helped them practice civic discourse and engage in reflective thinking about democracy and injustice. The focus group confirmed that ELs, through

this instructional design, were not only consumers of historical knowledge but were becoming critical thinkers and active meaning-makers.

DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates that incorporating Structured Academic Controversy into a high school social studies unit can be a powerful way to support English learners' development of content knowledge, critical thinking, and civic awareness. Despite their developing English proficiency, the EL students in this case study engaged deeply with a complex historical issue and were able to express insights that align with key social studies standards. The SAC format, combined with scaffolded use of primary sources and targeted language support, created a learning environment where ELs could deliberate about justice-related issues and articulate their ideas both orally and in writing. As a result, these students not only practiced academic language in an authentic context, but also demonstrated forms of civic reasoning and problem-solving that are at the heart of social studies education.

Importantly, although the study focused on only three EL students, our analysis showed that their learning outcomes corresponded to several of the NCSS thematic standards. In fact, evidence of understanding appeared in at least half of the ten themes. This suggests that the instructional approach was effective in promoting integrative learning. Through SAC, ELs were simultaneously learning history (content), practicing literacy and language skills (by reading sources and constructing arguments), and engaging in civic education (grappling with questions of rights and racism). The challenges of high school social studies, (dense texts, difficult vocabulary, assumed background knowledge), can be formidable for ELs, and indeed, prior research has often documented ELs' struggles in this domain. Yet, our findings underscore that the solution is not to water down the content for ELs, but rather to increase support and scaffolding so that ELs can meet high expectations. Avoiding rigorous content for ELs due to language barriers would run counter to the fundamental goal of social studies, which is to prepare all students to be informed, critical, and active members of a democratic society. Our case study provides an existence proof that, when taught with appropriate methods like SAC, ELs can rise to the challenge of complex, grade-level content. They can analyze historical events, debate ethical issues, and produce evidence-based conclusions, all skills that are essential for civic life beyond school.

The rich responses from the EL students also challenge any deficit-based assumptions about ELs' abilities to think critically. Often, educators worry that because ELs are still learning English, they cannot engage in higher-order thinking or nuanced discussions. This study adds to a growing body of literature showing that when we give ELs meaningful opportunities, along with scaffolding for language, they are absolutely capable of deep engagement and sophisticated reasoning (Jaffee & Yoder, 2019). In Felicia's reasoning during the focus group, we saw a student thinking flexibly and empathetically about a contentious issue, skills of perspective-taking and critical analysis that are typically expected of advanced students. Her

participation and that of her peers illustrate that language proficiency should not be conflated with cognitive ability. With supports, ELs can demonstrate complex understanding. This aligns with the broader pedagogical point that we should maintain high expectations for ELs while also providing high support (Walqui & van Lier, 2010). In our study, SAC provided a structured yet intellectually open arena for ELs to push themselves and succeed.

Additionally, the role of motivation and emotional engagement emerged as a key factor. The issue of Japanese American internment, being inherently about fairness, rights, and identity, proved to be a “powerful and meaningful” topic for the ELs. All three expressed personal investment in the matter of discrimination and justice. This suggests that selecting culturally relevant and provocative content can boost ELs’ willingness to participate and persist despite language challenges. SAC was particularly well-suited here because controversial topics often ignite students’ passions. When ELs are motivated by a compelling topic, they appear more likely to take risks in speaking and writing, as Felicia did, and to invest the effort needed to formulate their thoughts in a second language. These findings echo other research advocating for the inclusion of controversial public issues in classrooms as a means to engage diverse learners in civic learning (Hess, 2009; Owen & Phillips, 2025).

Finally, our study has shown that scaffolding is indispensable in making such rigorous instruction equitable. The teacher’s use of sentence frames, graphic organizers, modeled paragraphs, and checklists was crucial in reducing linguistic barriers without diluting content. These scaffolds provided ELs with the tools to participate fully in the SAC and to express their ideas in writing. Consistent with findings from a recent systematic review of scaffolding research, we observed that scaffolding “nearly always bears positive results” for ELs. Indeed, with the support structures in place, our EL participants not only accessed the content but also produced work that demonstrated clear growth in content understanding and academic language. There is a balance to be struck: provide enough support to help ELs overcome language obstacles, but not so much that the cognitive challenge is removed. In this unit, that balance seemed well-managed, ELs were challenged, yet they had lifelines to hold onto as they navigated the challenge.

Implications

The findings of this study carry several important implications for social studies teachers and curriculum designers, especially those working with English learners. Teachers should hold ELs to the same high standards for critical thinking and content learning as their peers, but also invest in scaffolding strategies to enable ELs to meet those standards. As shown in this case, ELs can engage meaningfully with complex historical issues like Japanese American internment when provided with language supports (sentence stems, templates, glossaries) and instructional scaffolds (visual sources, background building, structured discussions). Rather than simplifying or “dumbing down” the curriculum, teachers can differentiate by scaffolding, thereby allowing ELs to grapple with rigorous content in a supported manner. The payoff for doing so is significant: ELs not only gain content knowledge but also develop their language and literacy

skills in context. This dual growth was evident as the students analyzed primary sources and produced well-reasoned arguments in their letters.

Integrate Disciplinary Literacy and Language Objectives

Social studies teachers need to design lessons that integrate content objectives with language development goals. Approaches like SAC inherently blend speaking, listening, reading, and writing with content learning. Teachers can leverage this by explicitly teaching the academic language needed for argumentation (e.g., how to signal a counterargument or cite evidence) during the social studies lesson. In our study, teaching phrases like “One reason...,” “On the other hand...,” or “According to the document...” gave ELs entry points to participate in discussions and structure their writing. Incorporating such mini language lessons within content instruction is an effective practice for ELs (Jaffee & Yoder, 2019). It builds their disciplinary literacy, enabling them to think and communicate like historians or civic analysts. Teacher education programs and professional development should emphasize strategies for teaching content and language simultaneously – for example, through instructional routines like SAC, document-based inquiries, and debates, all of which naturally demand the use of academic language in authentic ways.

Use Controversial Issues to Foster Engagement and Critical Thinking

Controversial historical and contemporary issues can be productive contexts for ELs' learning. These issues often tap into universal themes of fairness, power, identity, and justice that resonate with students from diverse backgrounds. When handled with care and structure, as in SAC, controversial topics do not alienate ELs – in fact, they can motivate ELs to contribute their perspectives. Our EL participants were eager to voice their thoughts on the internment once they had some background knowledge, and they related it to their own understandings of prejudice. Discussing controversial issues also inherently requires students to practice civic reasoning and perspective-taking, which are valuable skills for all learners. We recommend that social studies teachers integrate more inquiry units around contested historical questions or social justice topics, especially those with contemporary relevance. Doing so can increase ELs' engagement and provide them with purposeful reasons to use academic language. Of course, teachers should prepare supports (like norms for respectful dialogue and scaffolds for expression) to ensure ELs can participate on an equal footing during such discussions.

One notable outcome of the SAC was that EL students, who might otherwise remain quiet, found a platform to express themselves at length. This implies that the format and classroom culture were conducive to ELs feeling safe and valued. Teachers should strive to build inclusive classroom environments where multilingual learners feel their voices matter. Techniques include using small groups (which can be less intimidating than whole-class talk), giving students preparation time (e.g., writing down ideas or practicing with a partner before speaking), and explicitly affirming the importance of diverse perspectives. Additionally, the SAC requirement that everyone must understand both sides likely reduced the stigma around language errors – students were focused on ideas, not grammar policing. Educators might

replicate this by emphasizing communication of ideas over correctness during initial discussions. When ELs do take the floor and share complex thoughts, as Felicia did, teachers can spotlight that contribution (implicitly or explicitly) as an asset to the class, thereby reinforcing that ELs are intellectual resources in the classroom community.

Leverage Checklists and Reflection Tools for Responsive Teaching

The use of a culturally and linguistically responsive inquiry checklist in this study highlights a practical tool for teachers. By going through a checklist of “Am I doing X? Have I included Y?” (for example, ensuring the compelling question is accessible, including multiple perspectives, connecting to students’ lives, etc.), teachers can self-monitor and adjust their instruction in real time to better serve ELs. We suggest that schools or departments develop similar checklists or guidelines for planning and reflecting on lessons, especially in content areas. This could be part of collaborative planning where ESL specialists and content teachers review upcoming units for potential pitfalls and supports needed for ELs. In our case, the checklist reminded the teacher to verify comprehension of the inquiry question and to scaffold the summative task, which proved beneficial. Being intentional and reflective in lesson design for ELs is key – a simple checklist can promote that intentionality and ensure that well-meaning plans don’t overlook ELs’ needs.

Conclusion

This study’s insights advocate for an approach to teaching ELs in secondary social studies that is rigorous, inquiry-oriented, and supportive. When ELs are given the chance to participate in rich academic controversies, equipped with scaffolds, and situated in a classroom culture that values their input, they can demonstrate learning and skills on par with their peers. Educators are encouraged to adopt strategies like Structured Academic Controversy not as a special intervention for ELs alone, but as good teaching practice for all – with the understanding that EL-focused scaffolding will make the practice accessible to students at varying levels of English proficiency. By doing so, we move closer to a social studies classroom where equity and excellence coexist, and where every student, regardless of language background, is empowered to speak, think critically, and take informed action on the issues that shape our democracy.

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