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FROM PERSONAL RESPONSE TO REASONED ARGUMENT: SCAFFOLDING CRITICAL THINKING IN COMMUNICATIVE WRITING

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Abstract

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has long privileged fluency, interaction, and the negotiation of meaning, yet it has been criticised for paying insufficient attention to the higher-order reasoning that academic and professional contexts increasingly demand. This article argues that the writing classroom is a particularly fertile site for cultivating critical thinking within a communicative framework, provided that instruction deliberately moves learners along a continuum that begins with personal response and culminates in reasoned argument. Drawing on sociocultural theory, models of the writing process, and research on second language argumentation, the article proposes a staged, scaffolded pedagogy in which teacher support is gradually withdrawn as learners internalise the dispositions and skills of critical writing. It outlines concrete instructional strategies—structured questioning, source engagement, claim–evidence–reasoning frameworks, counterargument, peer review, and reflective revision—and considers issues of feedback, assessment, and the local educational context. The discussion suggests that critical thinking and communicative competence are complementary rather than competing goals, and that scaffolding offers a principled means of integrating them.

Keywords: critical thinking, communicative language teaching, academic writing, scaffolding, argumentation

Introduction

Communicative Language Teaching emerged as a reaction against approaches that treated language as a system of forms to be mastered in isolation, foregrounding instead the learner's capacity to use language meaningfully for genuine communicative purposes (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Its emphasis on interaction, authentic tasks, and the negotiation of meaning has reshaped classrooms worldwide. However, a recurrent critique is that, in privileging fluency and message exchange, CLT can leave the quality of learners' thinking under-examined. Students may become adept at expressing opinions while remaining unpractised in justifying, qualifying, and defending them. Nowhere is this tension more visible than in writing, where the permanence of the text exposes both the strengths and the limits of a writer's reasoning.

This article addresses that tension by examining how critical thinking can be deliberately fostered in communicative writing instruction. It takes as its organising metaphor a movement from personal response to reasoned argument: from writing that reports unexamined reactions toward writing that weighs evidence, anticipates objections, and arrives at warranted conclusions. The central claim is that this movement does not happen spontaneously for most learners and must instead be scaffolded—supported by carefully sequenced tasks and teacher guidance that are progressively withdrawn as competence grows. Far from contradicting communicative principles, such scaffolding extends them, treating reasoned argument as the most demanding and socially significant form of communication learners can undertake.

Critical Thinking and Communicative Writing

Critical thinking is notoriously difficult to define, but influential accounts converge on a core. The Delphi consensus describes it as purposeful, self-regulatory judgement issuing in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, together with explanation of the evidential and conceptual considerations on which that judgement rests (Facione, 1990). Ennis (1985) similarly frames it as reasonable, reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do. Crucially, these definitions combine cognitive skills with dispositions—open-mindedness, a habit of seeking reasons, and a willingness to revise one's views in light of evidence (Halpern, 1998). Writing instruction that aspires to develop critical thinking must therefore attend not only to what learners produce on the page but also to the intellectual habits that produce it.

Writing and thinking are intimately connected. Cognitive models portray composing as a recursive, problem-solving activity in which writers continually plan, translate ideas into text, and review what they have written against their goals (Flower & Hayes, 1981). Because the demands of articulating an idea in writing force the writer to make reasoning explicit, writing becomes a means of thinking rather than merely a record of thought already complete. Bean (2011) develops this insight pedagogically, arguing that well-designed writing tasks are among the most powerful tools available for provoking and refining critical thought across the curriculum. The communicative writing classroom can capitalise on this relationship by treating writing tasks as occasions for reasoning with and for a real audience.

It should be acknowledged that the place of critical thinking in language teaching has been contested. Atkinson (1997) cautioned that critical thinking may be a culturally specific social practice rather than a universal, transferable skill, and that exporting it uncross into diverse classrooms risks imposing particular ways of arguing. Subsequent commentators responded that, while cultural sensitivity is essential, the capacity to reason and to support claims with evidence is widely valued and teachable (Davidson, 1998). The position taken here is a pragmatic one: critical thinking in writing is best understood as a set of discourse practices that can be made visible and learnable, while remaining alert to the cultural and rhetorical expectations of learners' own contexts.

The Continuum from Personal Response to Reasoned Argument

Personal response is a valuable starting point, not a deficiency to be eliminated. When learners write about what they think and feel, they generate content, establish ownership of a topic, and engage affectively with the task—conditions that communicative pedagogy rightly prizes. The limitation of personal response alone is that it tends to assert rather than argue. A reasoned argument, by contrast, makes a claim, supports it with relevant evidence, connects evidence to claim through explicit reasoning, and acknowledges alternative positions. Toulmin's (2003) influential model captures this structure in its account of claims, data, and the warrants that license the inference from one to the other, together with qualifiers and rebuttals that register the limits of the claim.

Research on second language writing indicates that learners frequently struggle precisely with the elements that distinguish argument from assertion. Stapleton (2001) found that the argumentative writing of university students often contained opinions and topics but comparatively little evidence, reasoning, or engagement with opposing views. Wingate (2012) similarly observed that many students do not understand argumentation as the central purpose of academic essay writing, defaulting instead to description or unsupported opinion. These findings

underline the need for explicit instruction: the move from response to argument is a learned achievement, and the components of argument can be taught, modelled, and practised.

Counterargument deserves particular emphasis because it is both cognitively demanding and pedagogically productive. Engaging seriously with positions one does not hold requires decentring from one's own perspective, a hallmark of mature reasoning (Kuhn, 1991). Liu and Stapleton (2014) demonstrated that instruction explicitly targeting counterargumentation can improve the quality of learners' argumentative writing, suggesting that this is a teachable disposition rather than a fixed trait. A pedagogy that aims to move learners along the continuum will therefore treat the anticipation and rebuttal of objections not as an optional flourish but as a defining feature of reasoned writing.

Scaffolding as a Pedagogical Principle

The concept of scaffolding originates in research on how expert support enables learners to accomplish tasks they could not yet manage alone, with that support gradually withdrawn as competence develops (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). It is grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) notion of the zone of proximal development, the distance between what a learner can do independently and what becomes possible with guidance. Applied to writing, scaffolding implies that critical reasoning is first performed jointly—through teacher modelling, structured prompts, and collaborative tasks—before learners assume increasing responsibility for it themselves.

Scaffolding for critical writing operates on several levels. At the level of the task, instruction begins with heavily supported activities and progresses toward open, self-directed composition. At the level of language, learners are supplied with the rhetorical resources—the metadiscourse of claim, concession, and evaluation—that argument requires, since reasoning in a second language is constrained by the linguistic means available to express it (Hyland, 2003). At the level of disposition, repeated, supported practice in justifying claims and considering alternatives helps learners internalise the habits of mind that critical thinking entails. The defining feature throughout is the planned fading of support: scaffolding that is never removed becomes dependence rather than development.

Instructional Strategies for the Communicative Writing Classroom

A scaffolded sequence might begin with structured questioning that transforms a personal response into the seed of an argument. After learners write an initial reaction to a stimulus, the teacher or a peer poses referential and evaluative questions—Why do you think so? What might someone who disagrees say? What evidence would convince a sceptic?—that push the writer beyond assertion. Such questioning makes the invisible moves of reasoning explicit and is consistent with communicative principles, since it embeds critical thought within genuine interaction.

Source engagement provides the evidential foundation that argument requires. Communicative reading-into-writing tasks, in which learners gather, evaluate, and synthesise information from texts before composing, help them ground claims in evidence and develop the related skills of attribution and source evaluation. Genre-based instruction complements this work by making the conventions of argumentative writing explicit; analysing model texts allows learners to see how skilled writers structure claims and evidence, and provides a template that can later be adapted and eventually transcended (Hyland, 2007). A claim–evidence–reasoning

framework, presented as a simple heuristic, gives learners a portable structure for paragraphs and whole texts and a vocabulary for discussing the quality of their own writing.

Collaborative and dialogic tasks distribute the cognitive load of argument and align naturally with CLT. Group discussion and debate before writing allow learners to rehearse positions, encounter counterarguments, and test reasoning against an audience, so that the eventual text emerges from genuine deliberation rather than solitary opinion. Peer review extends this collaboration into the revision stage. When learners evaluate one another's drafts against explicit criteria for argument quality, they exercise the very skills of analysis and evaluation that critical thinking comprises, and they learn to read their own writing more critically as a result (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Finally, reflective revision—revising not merely to correct surface errors but to strengthen reasoning, add evidence, and answer objections—reframes rewriting as re-thinking, returning the writer to the recursive problem-solving at the heart of composition (Flower & Hayes, 1981).

Feedback and Assessment

If critical thinking is to be valued, it must be addressed in feedback and assessment, since learners attend to what is rewarded. Feedback that targets only grammatical accuracy signals that surface correctness matters more than reasoning. Research on response to second language writing recommends prioritising higher-order concerns such as the development and support of ideas before attending to local errors, and delivering feedback in ways that prompt revision rather than simply marking faults (Ferris, 2003; Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Comments framed as questions—prompting the writer to supply missing evidence or to consider an objection—extend the scaffolding metaphor into the feedback cycle.

Assessment likewise requires criteria that make critical thinking visible. Analytic rubrics that include dimensions such as the clarity of the claim, the relevance and sufficiency of evidence, the explicitness of reasoning, and the treatment of counterarguments allow both teachers and learners to identify what distinguishes stronger from weaker argumentation (Stapleton, 2001). Sharing such rubrics with learners is itself a scaffolding strategy, since it externalises the standards of critical writing and gives learners a means of self-assessment. The aim is not to subordinate communicative quality to a checklist but to ensure that the reasoning underlying communication is recognised and developed.

Challenges and Contextual Considerations

Several challenges attend the integration of critical thinking into communicative writing. The linguistic demands of argument can outstrip learners' current proficiency, making it essential to calibrate tasks so that cognitive challenge does not collapse under linguistic load. Time and assessment pressures may push teachers toward formulaic writing that is easier to produce and mark but that suppresses genuine reasoning. There is also the cultural dimension noted earlier: rhetorical conventions and expectations about the expression of disagreement vary across contexts, and instruction should build on, rather than override, learners' existing communicative resources (Atkinson, 1997; Davidson, 1998).

These challenges are reasons for careful design rather than grounds for abandoning the enterprise. A scaffolded approach is well suited to addressing them, because it allows support to be matched to learners' proficiency and gradually withdrawn, and because it makes the conventions of argument explicit rather than assuming them. In contexts where reproductive and

exam-oriented writing has predominated, the deliberate teaching of reasoning, evidence, and counterargument can broaden what learners are able to do without discarding the communicative orientation that motivates them to write in the first place.

Conclusion

Critical thinking and communicative competence are often treated as if they pull in different directions, the one toward careful reasoning and the other toward fluent interaction. This article has argued that they are better understood as complementary, and that the writing classroom is where their integration can be pursued most directly. By conceiving of instruction as a scaffolded movement from personal response to reasoned argument, teachers can honour the communicative value of learners' own voices while equipping them to justify, qualify, and defend their claims. The strategies outlined here—structured questioning, source engagement, explicit frameworks for claim and evidence, counterargument, collaborative tasks, peer review, reflective revision, and feedback and assessment that reward reasoning—share a common logic: they make the moves of critical writing visible, practise them with support, and progressively hand responsibility to the learner. Reasoned argument, on this view, is not a departure from communicative language teaching but its most demanding and rewarding expression.

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