

A Course Design for Scaffolding the Noticing of Textual Features of Argumentative Writing

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群馬県立女子大学紀要 第34号 別刷

2013年2月

Reprinted from

BULLETIN OF GUNMA PREFECTURAL WOMEN'S UNIVERSITY No. 34

FEBRUARY 2013

JAPAN

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Introduction

Many if not nearly all teachers who include critical thinking in their courses use an issues-based approach, often it seems as a matter of course. Is an issues-based approach appropriate for critical thinking instruction in ESL classes? The answer depends very much on the details of the aims of the curriculum and the details of the learning context. Beginning in 2008, the author taught critical thinking through issues in a reading class of about twenty-five first-year students at Gunma Prefectural Women's University. Over the next two years less than satisfactory results led to shift from an issues-based approach to a skills-based approach and the development of a four-stage process using blended learning. This paper discusses the two competing approaches and explains the author's current course design and methodology.

Background

There seems to be a common assumption that a social issue is needed as a vehicle in which to convey the principles of critical thinking; that without some current issue, the instruction may be too abstract. Textbook publishers may simply include the phrase critical thinking in the textbook title (i.e. *Critical Thinking and Current Issues*) as an effective enough means to move textbooks; or they may be genuine proponents of the *immersion approach* that has become popular. Also, just as teachers are led by the selection publishers provide, publishers make decisions concerning what textbooks they will and will not make available based on teachers' textbook selections.

It is understandable why a teacher might choose an issues-based approach over a skills-based approach. First, critical thinking skills acquisition requires either lecture style instruction that is anathema to teachers laudably dedicated to student-centered classes; or, in most cases, rather dry reading which ESL textbook publishers are unlikely to put into print and teachers are unlikely to select. Second, where attendance is a concern, students can miss a lesson involving one issue and then jump back into the next lesson involving a different issue. The explicit teaching of critical thinking skills, by contrast, is cumulative and this can be a detracting point for some teachers and therefore unattractive to publishers.

Teachers also may not be aware of the pedagogies behind each approach. Ennis (1992) has listed four approaches to teaching critical thinking. First is the General approach where the critical thinking instruction is separate from the main content. Second is the Infusion approach. Here, explicit instruction of critical thinking principles is concurrent with the

instruction of main subject content. Third is the Immersion approach in which the development of critical thinking is literally immersed in subject matter with no explicit instruction of critical thinking skills. Instead, it is expected that critical thinking skills will be acquired implicitly. Fourth is the Mixed approach. This combines the General approach and the Infusion approach so that there is explicit instruction but it is taught separately.

Issues-based textbooks are typified by the Immersion approach. Angeli (2010) makes a strong case for the Immersion approach providing that the subject matter instruction is “deep, thoughtful, [and] well-understood” (20) but she is not referring to an ESL learning context. Most issues-based ESL textbooks cover such a wide range of topics of that it is doubtful that most teachers could possess a deep understanding of more than a couple. Assuming a teacher is sufficiently knowledgeable to speak upon a range of topics in no way guarantees the effective intake of that information by students. From students’ perspective, they are asked to think critically about situations with which they are unfamiliar without any explanation of what critical thinking is. In light of research in cognitive psychology showing that “control processing associated with novice behavior cannot be carried out concurrently with other demanding tasks” (Schmidt 1990 : 136), it is clear that simultaneously introducing social issues and critical thinking skills in an ESL learning context involving first-year students will likely result in deleterious effects on lessons. First, there will an imbalance between class time allotted for teacher-fronted content presentation and time allotted for student-student interaction and completion of language learning tasks. Second, the demands of learning abstract principles of critical thinking and the meta-language used to convey them (in a second language no less) coupled with readings involving relevant social issues may create cognitive overload.

Whatever the motivations of publishers and the rationale of teachers, the result has been that since the early 80s when critical thinking instruction became stressed in the U.S. (Sternberg and Baron 1985; Ennis 1985) and since the early 2000s when Monbukagakusho issued an official policy urging schools to include critical thinking skills instruction in their curriculum (MEXT website), in ESL the Immersion approach to teaching critical thinking has become the preferred easy-way-out and as a result *critical thinking* has increasingly become a buzzword generally no better understood than it was twenty years ago.

Method

In order to escape the closed circle between teachers and publishers, in 2010 Gann and Bufton began production of *Critically Minded Podcast: Critical Thinking for 2nd Language Learners* (<http://criticallyminded.com>) in order to teach critical thinking using the Mixed approach. In order to make the content more engaging, a dialogue format is used instead of a lecture style and the tone is light, conversational and sometimes humorous. The goals of each lesson are well defined, concrete and realistic. Critical thinking is taught through explicit instruction as a skills set, identifiable through specific textual features associated with argumentative and persuasive writing. Furthermore, in order to maintain the classroom as a student-centered environment, the podcast is assigned as homework. Removing the explicit

instruction outside the class raised concerns about whether students would perceive the podcast as relevant. This has led to an extensive blended learning approach and in Gann's course design the development of a Four-Stage process.

"Noticing," Schmidt writes, "is the necessary and sufficient condition for converting input to intake" (1990 : p.129) and "task demands are powerful determinants of what is noticed" (Schmidt 1990 : p.143). Accordingly, students in the author's reading course engage in tasks distributed over four stages that direct them in noticing specific textual features associated with argumentative and persuasive writing.

In the first three episodes, these textual features include *premise indicators* (because, since, the reasons are, firstly, secondly, opinion, evidence, support) and *conclusion indicators* (consequently, hence, it follows that, indicates that, must, points to, proves that, shows that, suggests that, therefore, thus). Later, episodes introduce *issues indicators* that similarly aid students in determining whether an argument is descriptive, normative or prescriptive.

In the first three weeks students listen to three episodes of the fourteen-episode scripted podcast. By repositioning the explicit instruction from the classroom into a mobile medium, lesson time can be reserved for face-to-face small-group discussion and the material can be presented in a lively and engaging conversational format that students can access at their convenience. Students are also tasked to read the scripts to the podcast dialogues. The podcast is scripted and dialogs are available in text form either at our blog (<http://criticallyminded.com>) or embedded within the mp3 and accessible by single tapping most mobile devices. Scripts are color-coded, core concepts and essential examples in black and the less important passages in gray. The idea that comprehension is an ongoing process of meaning making that occurs in a social context is repeatedly emphasized. Thus, students keep notebooks including the scripts and they are tasked to make notes regarding any questions or ideas they have while listening, and they are required to bring those notes to class for small group discussion.

These discussions, in turn then prepare students for (TREs) which reinforce the noticing of salient textual features covered in each podcast (such as premise indicators, conclusion indicators major and minor premise indicators, issue indicators etc.). As these exercises are performed in pairs or triads students are encouraged to express their views on how to successfully complete the exercises in terms of conclusions (what they think) and premises (their reasons for thinking so). Students participate in TREs three times during the spring term. The first time is to simply familiarize students with the procedure of logging in and working with the software and so the TREs are short and simple. In the two subsequent sessions, the difficulty level increases.

Observation of learner-learner interaction as well as student feedback indicates that students have greatly enjoyed the TREs. These exercise have been instrumental in replicating the same kinds of success detailed in (Gutierrez 2006) and (Mercer 1996). In order for learners to feel that the TREs are a relevant component of overall course, the exercises should lead to a cumulative end. Thus students are tasked to produce a final on-line report in which they demonstrate practical use of the knowledge indicators words.

In stage four, students are therefore tasked to identify arguments from a pool of arguments

and non-arguments, isolate the premises and conclusions by the indicators used, and to comment on the quality of the argument. The location of this pool was the Books Department of Amazon (amazon.com) where each book is followed by a Customer Reviews section. Using this area solved two problems. First, finding an on-line collection of writings about a great many books of which our literature students might have some knowledge proved to be more difficult than expected. There are a number of sites featuring reader responses, but these tend to be sites administered by tertiary schoolteachers. Consequently, the range and number of books represented is quite narrow. Moreover, almost all of the reader responses are plot summaries rather than cogent arguments backed up by insightful observations.

Using Amazon has three advantages. First, nearly any book in print can be located there. Second, the reviewers tend to be adults and so the writing is typically of a higher quality. Third, not all of the customer reviews are argumentative. As one student noted, "It is difficult to find it because reviewers write as they like. I guess they think amazon is their diary or something." Therefore students' first task is to distinguish reviews that contain arguments (in the form of two or more premises and a conclusion) from reviews that only function as simple plot summaries; subsequently to select one such review; cut and paste the relevant passage; and to include the URL of the page where they find the review in order to instill basic academic values and competence. The second and third task is to identify the premises and the conclusion and then to assess the quality of the argument. This assessment is conducted by determining whether the conclusion is a reasonable result of the premises.

Students were directed to post their research reports on line at the forum of Critically Minded in a discussion thread created specifically for that purpose. They were also invited to comment constructively on the work of other students, offering assistance if they felt able.

Discussion

As this course of study progressed, an interesting but troublesome contradiction arose between argumentative form as described in the podcast and as found in these authentic sources. Although, the premise and conclusion indicators listed in our scripts are fundamental to the academic vocabulary of even a first-year university student, they do not frequently occur in academic writings written at a level within the range of comprehensibility of our students; nor were they to be found in the more colloquial writings such as the Reader Reviews at Amazon. Instead, the premises and conclusion tend to be inferred or indicated by other textual features. Therefore the task became as much of a research project as a test and the students turned up some very interesting facts that Gann and Bufton plan to include as a patch to their episode on indicators.

Below are several examples of insightful observations made by the students in the author's Reading class.

One student focused on this line from a review: "*If you are interested in iconography, the development of myths, or the origin (surprisingly late) of Pandora's Box, you will certainly enjoy this fine work.*" She commented:

"I think it is the conclusion, but it's written as IF w and x and y, THEN z. So, I separate

this sentence w, x, y, and z. Conclusion: Readers with interest in ‘iconography’, ‘the development of myths’ and ‘the origin of Pandora’s Box’ will certainly enjoy ‘Pandora’s Box: The Changing Aspects of a Mythical Symbol.’”

This essentially fulfilled the task requirements and it also seems this student recognizes the form of the hypothetical premise which is not covered in our podcast until Episode Six. Still it not unreasonable to think that the general awareness raising activities in my course may have activated knowledge of argument to which the student may have been exposed at an earlier date. It was worth noting in a subsequent class session that this student had replaced the word “or” (connecting the premises in the review) with the word “and.” It was noted that the substitution of one conjunction for another significantly changes the logic of the argument.

Another student helped by commenting on a common indicator that had been neglected. She wrote:

“As for the conclusion, ‘*I would recommend this to anyone, particularly if they have the chance to read this WITH a child*’ is the conclusion. Because I think the previous word, ‘*In short,*’ is a conclusion indicator.”

Another student wrote on the review of The Brothers Grimm’s version of Little Red Riding Hood:

“So, now we have only to find the conclusion. Look at this sentence carefully: ‘*I believe the book may be a little more suitable for older kids and it has excellent illustrations.*’ Why does the writer need to say ‘I believe?’ [. . .] We readers know it is the writer thinking these opinions!”

The student here is demonstrating that she understood the point from an earlier lesson in which it was pointed out that premises are widely taken as facts while conclusions are opinions. Thus, the phrase “I believe” rarely precedes premises but often precedes conclusions.

Another poignant observation was made by a student writing about a review of Charles Dickens’ “Nicholas Nickelby.” She wrote:

“As for the conclusion, I think [it is] the last sentence: ‘*The important thing is to know that this is earlier Dickens- thus, not as good as some of the masterpieces that came later. Read it and see the beginnings of Dickensian greatness.*’ This argument has no conclusion indicator. But, an imperative sentence, ‘Read’ is [the] indicator.”

The author was also impressed that although the first sentence of this excerpt from the review includes a common conclusion indicator, that this student inferred that in this case it does not indicate the conclusion of the overall argument but rather the conclusion of a mini-argument which then in turn becomes a premise in the large argument.

One very insightful student pointed out that the word *however* may infer a premise. She wrote: “First, we can see the premise indicator “however” in the first line. It says “*The book itself is a rather easy read; however, the characters seem somewhat shallow.*” What she is pointing out here is that the word *however* indicates that the second statement is at odds with the prior statement; and that if that second statement is linked logically by a third statement we then have a first and second premise. The first clause, although it is a statement, is not a premise because, as the student quite correctly points out, it does not lead to the conclusion and is therefore not part of the argument.

Conclusion

In this paper the case has been made for teaching critical thinking to first-year second language learners as a skills set. Four approaches to teaching critical thinking were introduced and it was noted that the Infusion approach involves explicit instruction and that the Immersion approach favors implicit learning. The pedagogical problems of teaching first-year students critical thinking via issues using the Immersion approach were discussed and some possible explanations were given for its current popularity. A case was made for the Mixed approach in a blended learning context as it allows two separate threads, one explicit and taught outside of class through mobile learning and the other student-centered in the classroom.

The author's Four-Stage process was delineated. Critical thinking instruction in an ESL Reading class was defined as the method by which noticing of specific textual features associated with argument are scaffolded so that input becomes intake. Some examples of unexpected challenges were presented as well as examples of students who successfully selected suitable advertisements, identified premise and conclusion indicators, presented focused distillations of arguments, and made critical assessments of claims and reasoning. Moreover, several students demonstrated an exemplary ability to read between the lines and detect premise and conclusion indicators in phrases that had not been mentioned in the podcast and even some that were subtly embedded in grammatical constructions.

Currently, the aspect most lacking in this program is the student-student communication in the fourth stage. It had been hoped that students would comment constructively on other students' posts in such a way as to develop a sense of classroom community both in-class and on-line. Evidently, however, this needs more careful scaffolding and closer monitoring. It may be that the limited time available in the first term was insufficient to develop students' on-line identity and their perception of the blog as a community space to which they belong. Other social factors may have been present, such as a reticence to comment either positively or critically upon each other's work. In subsequent terms it is the author's intent to improve the course program so that the shortcomings noted here do not reoccur. It is also his intent to exploit with greater efficiency the positive points of this program.

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