A Review on Critical Thinking and Argumentation

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Critical Thinking and Argumentation is the 4th level of a textbook series English composition: From Creative Thinking to Critical Thinking designed for Chinese English-major college students. It is an innovative practice for the creative use of the training of critical thinking as a way to teach writing. It brings the concept of critical thinking to the writing process to help learners brainstorm writing topics, to cultivate and develop learners’ creativity and to establish a wonderful experimental space for becoming a good writer as well as a critical thinker. By breaking the traditional model of teaching in a constrained content of language and structure, it breaks the walls in the minds of not only EFL learners, but also EFL textbook writers.

Zhang Zaixin, the author of the book, is a professor at Beijing Foreign Studies University, who got his MA in Arizona State University and his PhD in Louisiana State University where he taught English writing for six years. Zhang has been showing great concern on the teaching of EFL writing in Chinese colleges. As early as in 1995, he did research on the major problems in the teaching and learning of EFL writing in China. He found that the prominent problems shown from students’ writing were a lack of both content and skills in developing supportive details for the main ideas, and he related these problems to the teaching methods which contributed little to students’ global idea development and thinking skills (Zhang, 1995). Drawing upon the series of English composition: From Creative Thinking to Critical Thinking, Zhang advances a concept of improving writing through the development of thinking. Combining his studies in critical thinking with a process teaching approach, he focuses, in this book of argumentation, on writing with good logic and reasoning, which adds a higher value of the writing process as well as the outcome.

Zhang writes in a democratic style of face-to-face talking, welcoming students to figure out something by themselves rather than forcing them to follow. As an EFL writing textbook, Critical Thinking and Argumentation illustrates many unique features in its preface, unit introduction, key concept explanation, as well as course and exercise design.

At the very beginning of the book, he explains in the preface dedicated to the learners of this book, like an opening speech of a teacher in his/her first class, the
contents and characteristics of the book and the way to make a good use of it. He also provides the students with a syllabus, which is usually exclusive to teachers in most of the EFL textbooks. By illustrating a “tentative schedule” and the “standards for evaluating argumentative essays”, Zhang creates a “student-centered” atmosphere with a great sense of student ownership. Although some teachers may develop different syllabus of their own, it saves a lot of time for teachers to figure out the whole picture of the course. At the beginning of each unit, Zhang lists the new concepts and names this section “What to look for in this unit”, an amiable way to arouse students’ learning interest.

Being fully aware that critical thinking is a totally new concept to students who have never been given any training of it, Zhang develops a whole chapter explaining it just before Unit 1. While giving the definitions of concepts like “critical thinking”, Zhang puts a lot of efforts to fully explicate the origin and development of the concepts and elaborately relates them to the functions of argumentation, which makes thinking and writing a harmonious and integrated whole.

By comparing the table of contents of Critical Thinking and Argumentation with other EFL writing textbooks, a great difference reveals from the course design. The normal way of dealing with argumentative essays in widely used EFL writing textbooks, such as A Handbook of Writing (3rd Edition) (Ding, Wu, Zhong & Guo, 2009) and Advanced English Writing Course (2nd Edition) (Wang, Mao & Dong, 2009), is to show the structure and sample essays and then give some topics for students to write. However, in Zhang’s book, he elaborates a lot on the concepts related to argumentation and the ways of thinking while developing students’ writing skills. In Unit 1, he introduces the concepts of Logos, Ethos, Pathos and Needs. And he unites these concepts with argumentation by indicating that “good argumentation is based on reason and the intellect (logos), and these two faculties, in turn, promote the credibility of the writer (ethos). While sometimes we also need the emotional appeal, emotions (pathos) alone cannot stand as an argument but only to serve to add to the persuasive power of an argument” (p. 5). With this, Zhang establishes a natural flow of the following units from Unit 2 to Unit 10: Fallacious Appeals to Emotion, Fallacies about People, A Claim of Fact, Fallacies about Arguments (I), Fallacies about Arguments (II), A Claim of Value, Fallacies about Analogy, Fallacies in Deduction and Induction and A Claim of Policy. In Unit 11, Zhang extends a little bit on the mistakes that students often make while using statistics and illustrates several forms of ambiguities to arouse students’ attention of avoidance. The last unit, Unit 12, Arguments for Analysis: Putting It All Together, serves as a test of students’ ability of critical analysis.

Critical Thinking and Argumentation facilitates John Dewey’s “learning by doing” through its creative design of writing exercises. There are plenty of exercises in each unit, from advertisement/commercial analysis, fallacy analysis to claim of fact, claim of value and claim of policy. Instead of putting the exercises at the end of each unit as in many other EFL writing textbooks, Zhang interweaves the exercises in the context of the concepts and examples. While doing these exercises, students achieve a further understanding of what the concepts mean and why the examples are good or bad. With interesting sceneries and plots serving as stimulus for students’ thoughts, none of the exercises are of the boring type. Students are allowed to choose their own topics as well as
to choose from a given list. Thus, students would neither feel reluctant to write what they dislike nor feel absentminded of not being able to think of a topic to write. Considering the importance of critical analysis ability and the awareness of the audience, Zhang also designs some peer-evaluation tasks for students, which account for a great proportion of students’ overall grades according to his syllabus. To make such tasks a feasible process for teachers to conduct and a pragmatic way to benefit both the writers and reviewers, Zhang provides sufficient guidance by listing key questions in an evaluation form for students to follow.

*Critical Thinking and Argumentation* makes a significant contribution to the teaching of EFL writing in its concern of the cultivation of students for being both a learner with proficient language skills and a person with reason and logic. Zhang contributes his understanding of the value of critical thinking to the teaching of EFL writing, which establishes a milestone for the design of EFL textbooks in China. By inviting all the users of the textbook to become his friends on his blog where he posts his teaching methods and shares teaching resources, Zhang opens a new stage for all the English teachers in China to discuss the concepts in teaching EFL writing and to share opinions on how to make the best use of such teaching materials to facilitate their teaching practice. And the greatest significance of this book is not only the advocacy for the necessity of a training of thinking in the teaching of writing but also the pragmatic development of a practice that makes it possible.

Significant and pioneering as the book is, it still leaves some space for further development. First, there is an invisible gap between the objective and the feasibility. It might not be a problem for teachers like the author who is knowledgeable enough in the teaching of both critical thinking and EFL writing, but it might cause some difficulties for teachers who are passionate about the training of critical thinking but have little experience in its integration with the teaching of EFL writing. Thus, if more examples of this integration are provided by the author, teachers may feel much easier to handle the book in practice. Second, it might not be efficient enough to use Blog as the sole tool for author-user communication and resource sharing. Being a form of online diaries, Blog is usually taken as a way of presenting personal feelings and opinions rather than a professional platform for teaching and learning. It is therefore suggested that a web-based learning management system be designed to facilitate the use of the book. Being a software application for e-learning administration, a web-based learning management system not only allows different forms of communication among the author, the teachers and the students, but also offers a good management of resources.

It may take some time for Chinese teachers who are used to the traditional way of teaching EFL writing to use this book consciously. However, with the popularity of the book and the development of its affiliated resources, the time will come when there forms an active community of teachers who are to push this revolutionary reform of the teaching of EFL writing forward in the near future.
References


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