

Factors Contributing to EFL Learners' Construction of Arguments in Culturally Infused Discussions

Factores que Contribuyen a la Construcción de Argumentos de Estudiantes de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera (EFL) en Discusiones Culturalmente Infundidas

Pablo Vergara-Montes¹

Universidad de Sucre, Montería, Colombia

Luzkarime Calle-Díaz²

Universidad de Córdoba / Universidad del Norte, Colombia

Abstract

This study describes the factors that enhanced students' construction of arguments when participating in culturally infused discussions at an undergraduate English as a foreign language British Culture course. The research was conducted at a university in Northwestern Colombia. This paper presents a section of the results of a larger project whose objective is to identify the elements that aid participants in building and elaborating arguments in culturally infused discussions. Socratic questioning was an integral element of the discussions. To attain the purpose of this study, a qualitative single-case design was employed. Findings show that the factors facilitating the construction of arguments could

¹ He holds an M.A. in English Teaching from Universidad de Córdoba. He currently works as an English and French teacher at Universidad de Sucre and as a primary English language teacher at a private school. He is keen on researching culture-related issues, argumentation, and discourse analysis.

pevergaramontes@correo.unicordoba.edu.co

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9702-2481>

² She holds a Ph.D. in Education from Universidad del Norte. She currently works as a graduate professor at Universidad de Córdoba and Universidad del Norte. Her research interests revolve around EFL research and practice, curriculum development, and the connection between discourse studies, language and literacy development, and peace education.

luzkarimec@uninorte.edu.co

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1459-8974>

Received: November 26th, 2022. Accepted: December 21st, 2023.

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-No-Derivatives 4.0 International License. License Deed can be consulted at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

potentially be peer scaffolding, previous knowledge, connection to participants' reality, and curiosity and inquiry. This study makes important contributions to the field of critical thinking skills work in English as a foreign language setting, particularly argumentation, as it sheds light on relevant aspects to foster students' collaborative argumentation.

Keywords: argumentation, critical thinking, culture, discussions, Socratic questioning

Resumen

Este estudio describe los factores que enriquecen la construcción de argumentos de los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera cuando participan en discusiones sobre cultura en un curso de pregrado de cultura británica. La investigación se realizó en un programa de licenciatura de lenguas extranjeras en una universidad en el noroeste de Colombia. El objetivo es identificar los componentes que ayudaron a los participantes de este estudio a construir y elaborar argumentos en discusiones sobre temas de cultura. Las preguntas socráticas fueron un elemento integral de dichas discusiones. Para lograr este objetivo, se empleó una metodología cualitativa bajo la forma de un estudio de caso. Los hallazgos muestran que los factores que facilitaron la construcción de procesos argumentativos en las discusiones pueden ser el apoyo entre compañeros, el conocimiento previo, la indagación y la conexión con la realidad de los participantes. Este estudio hace contribuciones importantes en el campo de las habilidades de pensamiento crítico en el contexto del aprendizaje del inglés como lengua extranjera, en particular, la argumentación ya que explica aspectos relevantes que se deben considerar al momento de fomentar la argumentación colaborativa.

Palabras Clave: argumentación, cultura, discusión, pensamiento crítico, preguntas socráticas

Introduction

The study of critical thinking has become an important aspect of university training. Students, teachers, and workers in general agree that critical thinking is the main purpose of education (Halpern, 2013). It is so important that it is, in fact, a defense against a world of too much information and too many people trying to convince others (Epstein et al., 2006). This study centers on one of the key components of critical thinking: argumentation. Bloom et al. (1957, revised later by Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) proposed a tool to set educational goals that would push students towards critical levels of thinking. Baker et al. (2019) claimed that students who engage in argumentative discussion are more likely to use intellectual and cognitive-linguistic abilities, resulting in a critical reflection and examination of participants' contributions to the interactions.

Argumentation, at the core of critical thinking, does not only require a social-scientific context but also a strong sense of ownership and engagement over the topic of discussion, as contended by Evagorou and Osborne (2013). Nonetheless, there is little exploration of the role that the cultural background of participants plays in supporting engagement with a given topic. Moreover, some traditional classroom practices (e.g., reading for grammatical analysis, writing extensive essays, or doing role-plays) do not foster argumentation as an

inherent part of students' discourse. When such argumentative practices are introduced in the class, students struggle to participate in dialogic, rational argumentation, or even in group discussions (Erduran et al., 2004).

One common strategy that has been used to promote thinking abilities such as argumentation is critical reading using literary texts. Liao (2009) proved that Literary Circles improve university English as a foreign language students' critical thinking skills by using Bloom's Taxonomy. Likewise, Kohzadi et al. (2014) asserted that teaching through literary texts has positive effects on developing critical thinking of EFL learners, attesting to the interrelationship between critical thinking and critical reading of literary texts.

Employing critical reading as a strategy to promote critical thinking abilities is very often mingled with another strategy: an argumentative discussion. It is believed that discussing after reading critically may enhance a stronger basis to develop critical thinking abilities (Helterbran, 2007). Hayes and Devitt (2008) estimated that small groups for discussion are an effective tool for developing critical thinking skills among young students.

These authors have indeed found a strong relationship between critical thinking skills, including the creation of arguments, and Socratic questions. Moreover, other researchers, such as Guo (2013) and Roberge (2018), have claimed that the creation of arguments is linked directly to socio-cultural aspects and cultural symbols. Yet, despite all the work that has been done to figure out the complex Socratic Questions-Argument and Culture-Argument relationship processes in oral discussions, a question remains as to what factors come into play for arguments to emerge. Especially, in situations where EFL students from a public university are asked to build them in an open oral discussion of a British Culture course. Holding debates, discussions, or conversations about any topic is a common strategy used in EFL courses, but there is very little research on how these arguments are constructed and framed within cultural topics of great relevance. To fill this gap, this study aimed to answer the following research question: What factors contribute to EFL students' construction of arguments when participating in culturally infused open discussions?

Theoretical Foundations

Argumentation

Argumentation is the most vital critical thinking skill in Bloom's taxonomy (1956, updated by Anderson & Karthwohl, 2001). Baker et al. (2019) explained that the term "argumentation" stemmed from the Latin word "argumentum". "Argu" alludes to the verb "arguer", meaning to indicate or bring to acknowledge, and "mentum" denotes the techniques that are utilized to put into practice the verb "arguer". Thus, argumentation pertains to "a

means for leading people to acknowledge what you say” (Rigotti & Greco Morasso, 2009, as cited in Baker et al., 2019).

O’Keefe (2003) discussed that the study of argumentation is often focused on two perspectives. One is oral interactions, either a debate or a discussion, in which two or more individuals engage in interchanging arguments. Another is written texts, either in the form of a speech or an opinion on an editorial. However, for argumentation to occur, there is a need for information to support and give meaning to arguments (Besnard & Hunter, 2008). If a person does not have any information, it is unlikely to have arguments, but tautologies. For this paper, argumentation was studied as an object of interaction because the case was researched and explored in oral discussions about culture-driven topics.

From a similar standpoint, Amossy (2009) proposed four elements to bear in mind when analyzing argumentation from a discursive point of view. The first element is called the situation of discourse within its socio-historical components. The situation of discourse comprises two subcomponents: (1) the framework of enunciation, in other words, who speaks to whom, where, and when; and (2) the situation of communication, which includes contextual elements such as the situation of the exchange, the selected media, and the reputation of the speaker. The second element has to do with the genre of discourse with its preplanned framework and limitations. The third element is the dialogical dimension, which is the social dialog that flows at a given moment. The fourth element is called the institutional dimension, which is related to the attitude that the speaker takes in a specific field.

Evagorou and Osborne (2013) explained that engagement and appropriation of information are key factors to construct arguments. Lastly, Baker et al. (2019) talked about collaborative argumentation, referring to the kind of argumentation that is dialogical and pluralistic, and involving different individuals who influence one another to share information. Veerman et al. (2002) confirmed that the participants of the discussion, the questions, the tutor, the instruction, the medium, and the task are circumstantial factors that influence argumentation through collaboration.

Socratic Questioning

70

Socratic questioning has its roots back in ancient Greece. More specifically, Socrates, from whom the technique derived. He believed that decisive, rational, and well-founded answers could be achievable with the use of the right suitable questions to open the source of knowledge that exists in every human being (Helterbran, 2007).

Socratic questioning can be thought of as a technique that guides students in producing as rational answers as possible when engaged in discussions (Tofade et al., 2013), thus promoting their argumentative skills (Maiorana, 1991; Paul & Binker, 1990). Similarly, Socratic

questioning incites analytical thinking in students' minds with a continuous examination of the subject under discussion by asking thought-provoking questions (Paul & Binker, 1990). As a result, through interactions, Socratic questioning can pave the way for students to elaborate their arguments by exchanging ideas continuously.

Hayes and Devitt (2008) claimed that Socratic questioning has a positive impact on classroom discussions. In addition, Socratic questioning proved beneficial to enhance critical thinking skills, including argumentation in content-based instruction (Burder et al., 2014; Sahamid, 2016). At present, three categories of Socratic questions can be distinguished: spontaneous, exploratory, and focused (Paul & Elder, 2008). According to these authors, spontaneous Socratic discussions go unplanned, and questions emerge depending on participants' answers. The authors continue to explain some spontaneous "*moves*", such as "*asking for evidence for a position*". Also, exploratory questioning aims at exploring participants' values and perspectives regarding a topic. One example of an exploratory question can be "Why do you say that?". Lastly, focused Socratic questions intend to analyze and interpret concepts in depth. Therefore, these questions are carefully pre-planned by the moderator of the discussion. Regardless of the types of Socratic questioning, all three are equally important for this study. The goal of discussions was for students to develop strong arguments and take increasing ownership of their thoughts and argumentation (Helterbran, 2007), and therefore, identify the factors that enhanced them to construct such arguments.

Why Culture?

Culture is "a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about the world and attitudes towards life" (Geertz, 1973, p. 89). Correspondingly, Goetz and Hansen (1974) claimed that anthropologists have limited the term culture to "the learned and shared knowledge that is used to generate behaviors" (p. 1). The study presented in this paper regarded three important topics, such as "The Partnership of Church and State", "The Magna Carta" and "Women's Rights" as symbolic forms of culture in which participants of the study developed their knowledge and attitudes towards life. The most practical way of applying this symbolic knowledge was an open argumentative discussion.

Culture-based knowledge has a direct impact on the production of critical thinking abilities such as argumentation (Guo, 2013). This author claimed that one strategy to do this is by administering small readings about a target culture, in the case of this current study, the British culture, a compulsory course in the participants' undergraduate program. Those readings should include different thinking dispositions so that the reader interprets them and provides arguments about them subjectively. Hence, implementing speaking activities is

necessary after the reading to activate critical thinking. Speaking about the reading, perhaps in a discussion, of the target culture can facilitate the activation of argumentative skills.

As noted above, culture, as the development of knowledge, has strong ties to the construction of arguments as a critical thinking skill. They both go hand in hand because culture provides a context or a setting in which a thinker can construct argumentative attitudes. Roberge (2018) proposed three suitable elements to develop critical thinking skills: social activism, socio-cultural, and pedagogical strategies. Any of these elements might be fundamental for the description of the case study of this paper. Roberge (2018) also suggested that teachers must create a socio-cultural atmosphere to develop critical thinking in the classroom. Culture and culture-related factors constitute the debated aspects that may influence people's thinking capabilities (Manalo et al., 2013). Similarly, other researchers such as Nisbett et al. (2001) have argued that the social, ecological, and cultural differences that affect the way that humans interpret the world require a reevaluation of certain cognitive techniques to develop argumentation as a skill.

Method

This study stems from the interpretive paradigm of research (Boas, 1995; Ryan, 2018; Willis, 2007). Our purpose was not only to describe a qualitative case but to deeply understand and interpret it within its socio-cultural context (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). Coherent with interpretivism, this study follows a qualitative approach (Allan, 2020; Creswell, 2007).

Using a qualitative single case study design (Creswell, 2007; Given, 2008; Stake, 1995, 2010; Tellis, 1997; Yin, 2003), we inquired into the experiences and perceptions of EFL students in a British Culture course, to unveil the factors that were potentially influencing the way they constructed their arguments to participate in culture-related discussions.

Participants

The participants of the study were purposefully selected from a group of students in a Foreign Languages undergraduate program at a public university in the northwestern part of Colombia. Participants were recruited through the British Culture course. All students were fluent in English (B2.2 on the Common European Framework of Reference). The course was taught by one of the researchers of this study.

All forty-two students who took part in the course participated in the discussions. The case used for collecting relevant data for analysis was built with 10 participants, who volunteered to participate in the interviews and who participated in all three discussions. These participants were assigned a number according to the order of the course list.

The researchers made sure that ethics was a major priority throughout the study. Thus, an informed consent form was required for each participant before participating in the study. All participants were over the age of 18 and none of them displayed any type of mental impairment. Also, no risk or threat to human subjects in this study took place. The confidentiality of all participants' information was respected, and none of their names were used in this paper. The data collected were only used for this research and all recorded materials were kept on Google Drive and will be deleted within a frame of three years to minimize any future risks related to confidentiality.

Data Collection

The main source for data collection was the discussions per se and semi-structured interviews. These two techniques were conducted to capture the essence of participants' experience after each culturally infused discussion, and henceforth, to comprehend and analyze the way they internalized the construction of their arguments while participating in a discussion.

The discussions began with Socratic questions about the cultural topics, very often containing traits from all three types of Socratic questioning. The choice of these genres of questions was grounded in the fact that they stimulated participants' minds into analyzing and reflecting on the topics of discussions in a continuous manner (Hayes & Devitt, 2008; Paul, 1993; Paul & Binker, 1990; Tofade et al., 2013).

Semi-structured interviews had different moments. First, they commenced with pre-designed questions to collect in-depth insights on the factors that aided participants in creating their argumentative contributions to the discussions. Then, some pre-designed open-ended questions continued about the participants' feelings during the discussion. They aimed to know whether some feelings such as anxiety or fear became obstacles for them to produce arguments. Lastly, semi-structured interviews continued by getting the participants' general perceptions of the exercise. It was pivotal to perceive whether the discussions were nurturing the most vital of Bloom's critical thinking skills, which is argumentation.

As suggested by Evagorou and Osborne (2013) and Besnar and Hunter (2008), the exercise of argumentation inherently needs a source of information. In consequence, the participants were first assigned short reading extracts on three cultural topics from the course syllabus: "The Partnership of the Roman Church and the English State", "The Magna Carta" and "The Rights of Women in British History". Such readings were taken from the book "An Illustrated History of Britain" (McDowall, 1989).

Throughout the discussions, all types of Socratic questions were asked (Paul & Elder, 2008). Focused Socratic questions were asked such as “What generalizations can you make about this issue?”, “What is an example of ...?”, “What are the strengths and weaknesses of ...?”, and “Why are we having this discussion today?”. However, some spontaneous or unplanned questions, such as “Why are you saying that?”, emerged from the discussion as the participants kept on intervening. Likewise, in some cases, spontaneous moves took place; for instance, when the participants illustrated their point or made it clearer. Finally, exploratory questions like “Can you deepen what you said?” or “Why do you say that?” occurred throughout the three stages. This exercise was done to encourage argumentation through the discussions.

After each discussion, the participants were interviewed in a private online room. Semi-structured interviews were used. Some questions were asked to certain participants and not to others. For example, some pre-structured questions, such as “How did you manage to construct your arguments to take part in the discussion?”, “How did you feel during the discussion?”, and “Do you think it was a good exercise? Why?” were used to know how the participants managed to construct their arguments to participate in the culturally infused discussions or to know how they felt during the exercise, or pinpoint participants’ perceptions on the activity. Not all the participants were asked why their intervention was so short or too general. The latter was a question that came up according to the participant’s previous answer to a structured question since not all contributions and discussions were alike.

Data Analysis

Data from the three semi-structured interviews were analyzed following a holistic analysis to report the themes of the case (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The analysis, informed by thematic coding (Gibbs, 2007), unfolded in three different steps: (1) preparation of raw data files, (2) close reading of data, and (3) creation of themes. First, transcripts of the interviews were written and uploaded to a cloud for continuous analysis as suggested by Yin (2003). As each interview was transcribed and coded manually, at each level and step of the analysis, a constant comparison was used to distill the data further until coherent themes emerged from the participants’ testimonies.

74

Texts from semi-structured interviews were divided into meaning units that were condensed and subsequently coded. The themes were interpreted and compared for differences and similarities, and finally, sorted into tentative themes of the case. Through a process of reflection, discussion, and systematization of findings between the researchers, the list of themes was reduced to pick the most relevant. The four most salient themes were formulated to unify the content of the case.

Findings

The coding of themes allowed us, as the researchers, to get a glimpse into the factors that aided participants in building their arguments for the discussions. The interviews were analyzed holistically, allowing a general description of the case. Four distinctive themes could be identified as potential factors that contribute to the participants' construction of arguments: peer scaffolding, previous knowledge, curiosity and inquiry, and connection to the participant's reality.

Peer Scaffolding

Scaffolding is a concept associated with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (1978, as cited in Tudge, 1992) which is described as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86, as cited in Tudge, 1992). That is why, teacher-student scaffolding is necessary, but student-student scaffolding can be even more powerful, too. Peer scaffolding usually occurs in social interactions in which a community builds knowledge together. One example of the latter can be a class discussion. Most of the participants shed light on peer scaffolding when asked how they constructed their arguments about the topics to participate in the discussions. Besnar and Hunter (2008) asserted that argumentation needs information. In other words, argumentation needs an input source, which can come from peers. Likewise, this theme reinforces Baker's et al. (2019) "collaborative argumentative" notion given that participants influenced one another's arguments by exchanging ideas.

In the three interviews, the participants notably seized the nature of what peer scaffolding stands for. For example, one participant shared his thoughts on how his peers aided him in building his arguments. He affirmed that he constructed a "bigger" argument thanks to the contribution of another peer:

... I had the opportunity to construct something more... Something bigger than the idea that I had at the beginning through the interventions that my friends did. So, yes, I had that opportunity to take some parts of them (sic) ideas. (Int_P5, November 2021).

Another participant shared a similar point of view, but provided more details as to how he constructed his arguments to engage in the discussion through peer scaffolding:

Knowing people's [their classmates'] decisions might actually help to rebuild your ideas, to connect them, even to include them in your repertory (sic). (Int_P8, November 2021)

Then, after being asked what he had done to build his arguments to take part in the discussion, the same participant claimed that he had used his peers' previous interventions to develop an argument of his own.

That's what I did in the few interventions that I made. I... I kind of used you guys [giggles] to complement my arguments because I was really good... good. I really needed to get to know what you were thinking and also bring complement for (sic) the development and my performance in the discussion. So, I think that that would be it. (Int_P8, November 2021)

When asked about how he felt during the first discussion, another participant said it was a good experience provided that not only did he learn from his peers, but also, he had expanded his knowledge. As the participant highlighted, being exposed to activities like discussions, the flow of information that comes from different perspectives may increase one individual's knowledge. Once knowledge is available and accessible, argumentation occurs.

In my case, I learned a lot. You know, hearing several points of view from different people is kind of enriching. You can ... you have like ... a magnificent lens (sic) [=magnifying glass] that allows to maximize (sic) the knowledge you acquire. (Int_P29, November 2021)

Almost identically, when asked how another participant constructed her ability to argue critically about the Magna Carta, she described how other classmates' comments were a base for her to construct valid genuine arguments.

I tried to read and to know what people said about it and then I constructed my argument based on other people's comments. (Int_P5, November 2021)

An additional contribution was the importance of listening to the other classmates to avoid repetitive arguments on the same topic. These participants provided deeper ideas about peer scaffolding being a fundamental factor for building an argument; asserting that contrasting previous peer information was key for them to come up with new arguments on the Magna Carta.

I think that every time that I tried to participate by saying something new or something that others didn't say, I took a point that no one had talked about. I say it because I listened to my classmates, and they didn't talk about it. Thus, I decided to talk about it. (Int_P8, November 2021).

Sometimes I want to say a point of view, but somebody said that, so I have to (sic) rethink what I have to say and... for me, it was a good exercise also because it's a good process. (Int_P9, November 2021)

Finally, as soon as the third discussion on "Women's Rights" concluded, a few participants still highlighted the notion of how peers' interventions impacted them meaningfully. Naturally, such importance resulted in the main source of inspiration to make their contributions to the discussion. One participant declared that there is a constant exchange of ideas among classmates in the course. This drill provided enough ground for this participant to put the arguments in order and, subsequently, contribute meaningfully to the discussion.

When asked whether discussing the partnership of Church and State, the Magna Carta and Women's Rights helped him argue critically, another participant provided sufficient understanding as to how peer scaffolding behaves in his mind and how it helps to improve

one's critical argumentation. Thus, the idea highlighted by all these participants supports the notion that other peer's arguments are the most accessible information to create new ideas, leading peer scaffolding to have a great influence on the participants' thinking.

These discussions provide (sic) me with things that I can't find in other place (sic). It's not like a videoconference; in this case, our discussions were special because, well, it's the most accessible information I can get. They have a lot of influence on my thinking. I'll try to get better to ... improve my critical thinking. (Int_P29, January 2022)

Another participant pointed out that diversity of thinking, ideas, and arguments help to complement one's thinking and learning. In simpler words, the participant asserted that reading information to prepare arguments about the cultural topic did not suit her best, as a result, learning together as a community aided to correlate with one another.

It is good because, maybe, there are people who don't read a lot about this or are not very into that, but we can learn together. We can notice that, as there are, like, diverse thinking and interests because there are many readers or students who read about different things and these readings complement each other. (Int_P32, January 2022)

Later, the same participant added that active peer listening strengthens the diversity of thought to make an argumentative point of discussion stronger.

I think that while listening to my other partners, I could realize that there were more things to add that could make my point stronger and other premises that I didn't have (sic) into account at the moment of studying the subject or being critical. It is stronger. (Int_P32, January 2022)

Previous Knowledge

Previous knowledge comprises the activation of students' memory of what they have comprehended about a topic and their understanding of it. Therefore, prior knowledge plays a pivotal role in influencing students' scientific argumentation (Liu et al., 2019). Yet, very little is known as to how it facilitates the enhancement of argumentation through culture-based discussions. Paul and Binker (1990) contended that Socratic questioning promotes analytical thinking by posing thought-provoking questions. Perhaps, the art of asking these sorts of questions opened a cognitive filter within the participants' minds that allowed them to retrieve past information and transform it into arguments. Previous knowledge is a broad term with many connotations, but it has its roots in diverse philosophical tenets and learning theories, such as postmodernism and constructivism. Some characteristics of these theories were found throughout the data analysis. For instance, the perception of a socially evolving world, dealing with postmodernism (Mirchandani, 2005), and the formation of an individual's understanding of the world based on past experiences as suggested by the constructivist theory (Jia, 2010).

When asked about his feelings after the first discussion, one participant claimed that he appropriated the topic under discussion very easily. By stressing that he likes to talk about political-religious issues, the participant related to the topic of discussion as his field. By making such claims, the participant has had enough experience talking about the topic. Therefore, she used her reservoir of knowledge to have a basis to support her ideas. Then, she proceeded to construct her arguments and get involved in the conversation.

It was very enlightening. I like [it] when I ponder because I mean, in these kinds of topics like history and religion, and the government, I feel like it's my field. (Int_P12, November 2021)

Another participant affirmed that she employed an experience to construct her argument in the second discussion. As the Magna Carta allowed more people to own private property, the participant remembered watching on the news that the notion of private property in China was not fully respected. Therefore, her argument on the topic was grounded on previous information that she connected with the topic.

I think that not at the moment, but the topic makes you reflect on the society, so it gives you a lot of information that maybe you know and you're connecting everything, so maybe we can construct something, but if we have a previous basis. (Int_P5, November 2021)

Another participant shared his thoughts about the Magna Carta, stating that as it is an international symbol, it has become “common knowledge” to talk about it. Put another way, this participant had solid previous input about the Magna Carta to the point that he labeled it as “the law of laws”.

For me, it was kind of the same, but Magna Carta, I think, it was easier than the other (discussions) because we have certain knowledge about it, since Manga Carta is in the whole world, so it is the law of laws. It's like the root that built the constitution of every country. (Int_P17, November 2021)

As for the participants' previous knowledge about Women's Rights, Participant 12 said it has been a topic they had already discussed several times. Consequently, this participant had enough input from previous experiences to elaborate arguments and partake in the discussion.

Likewise, another participant asserted that he constantly reads articles related to women's rights and that feminism is a common topic and a trend everyone knows of. The fact that some participants relate to some topics as “common” means that, for them, the acquired knowledge about such topics has become part of general culture, general knowledge. So, these general notions somehow activate their reservoir of knowledge to provide grounded arguments and engage in the conversation.

I mean, I had some knowledge about Magna Carta because I really love watching documentaries, in (sic) TV or YouTube videos. For women's rights, I always read articles related to women... feminism... topics related ... because I think ... not only because they are the trend nowadays, but because, generally, those things impact the way I behave in relation to women [...] It's a common topic. (Int_P29, January 2022)

Connection to Participant's Reality

Chall (1947) argues that one important factor of critical reading is the emphasis readers put on past experiences. In other words, the more a reader experiences events in their life, the more the reader will be able to understand a given written material. The participants' perceptions may shed light on this theory. For instance, one participant asserted that reading the material and comparing its content to reality was a foundation for him to create critical arguments.

Also, Roberge (2018) proposed social activism as a fundamental element to develop critical thinking skills. In this case, social activism, for instance, feminism, can be looked up as part of the participants' reality because it shaped and nurtured their reservoir of knowledge with which they were able to come up with well-constructed arguments. When discussing, for instance, Participant 12 claimed that although the discussion took place in the British Culture course, the topics went beyond Britain and applied to their context. Thus, relating the topic of discussion to the participants' reality became a source of inspiration to elaborate argumentative ideas and participate in the discussion.

I read the material, the document, the book, and I kind of adjust to a little bit of (sic) the situation. I like to compare things that happen in the present time and try to match them. So that's kind of - like - I always do with my arguments. (Int_P12, November 2021)

Moreover, Participant 9 confessed that the way she reads is always directed to putting the reading into perspective. She was very methodic when it came to constructing her argument. From a linguistic point of view, she organized her arguments so that they would respect her positions vis-a-vis the Magna Carta. Bringing up her context or reality undoubtedly aided her in coming up with sufficient arguments to intervene.

Well, when I read, I try to put that kind of things (sic) into the real life. So, I did a list of things that Magna Carta has (sic) similarities to these days, so I took those to make my intervention. (Int_P9, November 2021)

In addition, another participant highlighted the idea of personal context regarded as her reality to create solid arguments to participate in the discussions.

Always we speak about women's rights, I ask myself questions about the... the place we're living in, the social background ... I think it helps me to construct my answer. (Int_P12, January 2022)

This participant's reality also contributes to the construction of arguments when the topics are closely related to the class's interest and engagement in social activism or change. The third discussion (Women's Rights) was mainly the scenario where several participants confessed their involvement in feminism. So, when requested to ponder on the quality of her arguments, another participant insisted she was a convinced feminist. This is supported by Participant 18's constant comments in the discussion considering herself a feminist philosopher who likes to talk to little girls and boys about feminism as social work. This inspired her to "have a lot of things to say":

As a feminist, I have a lot of things to say that I have my mind going like this (snaps her fingers) in that discussion. (Int_P18, January 2022)

When inquired further about her involvement in feminism and the potential connection between her social and political engagement and the construction of her critical argumentation, she said:

I think that my perspective like (...) because I know that there are many branches of feminism and I've navigated a lot of them so... like... I have my own feminism myself - like a different perspective of things. (Int_P18, January 2022)

A similar case was spotted while interviewing another participant when he confessed to being a feminist himself, and feminism was the primary source to produce critical ideas during the discussion. He attested that he always ponders on it.

Curiosity and Inquiry

For some participants, inquiry and a curious state of mind were a solid base to produce critical ideas regarding the topic in discussion. They also reiterated that “going beyond” the cultural topic was imperative to create arguments to participate in the discussions. Saying something “worthy” and “meaningful” was pivotal given that discussions were sometimes seen as an arena where the best argument won.

In the first discussion, in particular, various participants highlighted the idea of investigating beforehand to have solid arguments and be fully prepared to get involved in the discussion. One participant added that inquiry was just primordial before the discussion to have substantial arguments to join in the conversation. Inquiring seems to provide a strong basis for the participants to come up with different arguments, and then, they select the most important argument to express in the discussion.

I also investigate more on the internet because to me, it is really important to have good arguments and write it (sic) because I want to keep my best point of view; because I know that many of my partners have really good points of view and sometimes, we can't ... don't have some words for some opinions but I really enjoyed this exercise. (Int_P9, November 2021)

80

Similarly, in the second discussion, some traces of this theme were found. Another participant, peculiarly, said that she researched the Magna Carta, and based on the research, she was able to predict the type of question that was going to be discussed.

Well, I first searched about Magna Carta, so I had the context. It was something very concise because I had to read many sources and I found new information in the reading that you assigned us; and after that, I tried to ask myself the questions that could appear in the discussion, like about the reasons and history of Magna Carta today. (Int_P18, November 2021)

Another participant confessed that she knew little about the topic; therefore, she did some extra research to get her arguments prepared to be expressed.

Of course, because that was like a useful part of the information to participate in the discussion, but besides that, I researched more about it online and that made it easier for me to answer the questions. (Int_P3, November 2021)

Like the previous participant, one more also described a similar experience. She explained that she was disciplined when she prepared her ideas by inquiring on the internet, combining it with some peer scaffolding.

At (sic) the beginning, I tried to read about it in (sic) the internet. So, by reading, I created the arguments ... (Int_P5, November 2021)

Another participant shed light on researching as much as he could to give his best and impress, given the academic and peer pressure he felt. Inquiry became a motivation for this participant because he wanted to show off his argumentative skills before his classmates. Thus, to build arguments, he devoted himself to researching many details about the Magna Carta to have sufficient ground to talk about.

Well, first of all, I had a basis on the last things. I actually searched on details and some dates and the causes and the consequences of Magna Carta and I built that with some arguments that I searched before [...] I considered that I needed to search more because I wanted to show more knowledge than my classmates. (Int_P17, November 2021)

Another participant said that inquiry comes naturally to him and that could explain his good performance during the discussions. According to the participant, his arguments emerged from an instinctive curiosity that motivated him to research on his own. Not only did he research for academic purposes, but also out of curiosity for personal growth. Consequently, when the participant is exposed to inquiry, he feels prepared to tackle any issue argumentatively.

Naturally, when it comes to the class, I was prepared. I always have an interest in investigating those topics, it doesn't matter if it's for the class, it's for my own private study because I want to learn more about religion and social matters. It comes naturally to me. (Int_P29, November 2021)

Discussion

The factors that potentially contributed to the success of EFL students in a British Culture course in the construction of arguments could be explored through a single case study. Findings suggest that four main factors are at play: (a) peer scaffolding, (b) previous knowledge, (c) connection to participants' reality, and (d) curiosity and inquiry.

Most participants referenced getting other participants' interventions, also known as peer scaffolding, as the key basis for producing valuable arguments and then participating in the discussions. Underlying some of these statements was pivotal for the participants to construct critical arguments and interpretations, even when they were not ready to participate or were not quite acquainted with the cultural topic.

Peer scaffolding played a vital role in developing the cognitive processes comprised in Bloom's Taxonomy (1956, updated by Anderson & Karthwohl, 2001). Similarly, Veermen et al. (2002) categorized the "student and the peer" as two inseparable factors in collaborative argumentation. Our findings reinforce the notion that peer interaction has an impact on the elaboration of arguments in culturally infused discussions. Even when peers share the same ideas on the same topics, they can refine arguments to create new ones. Evagorou and Osborne (2013) also highlighted the notion of the need for a source of information to support or give meaning to arguments. In this case, the source of information came in the form of another peer's interventions.

Having some prior knowledge vis-a-vis the culture topic under discussion was foundational to creating arguments about the topic per se. Our findings highlight that prior notions of topics represent a strategy employed during discussions to put into practice abilities such as argumentation. The idea is that previous experiences become previous knowledge that condenses into students' reservoirs of knowledge. Then, when the time comes to let that knowledge flourish, they use it as a strategy to construct arguments.

The scholarly literature on the field weighs the importance of previous knowledge as a key factor in the promotion of critical abilities, especially when it occurs in culture courses. Thurman (2009) believed that critical thinking skills involve identification and analysis of the sources of information to attain credibility, indicating previous knowledge, making connections, and, as a result, deducing conclusions. The participants in this study agreed that they analyzed every piece of information in the form of a YouTube video, article, or online forum. So, these sources became the most convenient and credible chunk of information, complementing and reinforcing what participants already knew about the topics of the discussions.

82

Students' personal lives and social or political engagement played a key part in their development of arguments as well. Some participants asserted that the way they read and construct arguments is always directed at putting the discussion into perspective or into "real life". Personal experiences such as being a social actor might potentially put into context students' thinking abilities, subsequently, bringing about well-structured arguments to discuss culture. As shown, some participants did confirm that they developed their knowledge and widened their attitudes towards life through the cultural topics, which, in part, are symbolic forms of culture, respecting Geertz's (1973) definition of culture.

Students' reality means context. As presented, the participants' insights coincide with Lipman's (2006, as cited in Roberge, 2018) idea of sensible context being necessary for argument development. He affirmed that individuals use thinking processes in a given context to help them discern the information they receive. Some participants alluded to this idea by claiming that they often brought about the discussion of the situations that they are living in today. The cultural issues we discussed in the course date back to previous centuries. Hence, the fact that the participants confessed that they were able to relate it to today's reality was a major finding of this study. Nisbett et al. (2001) claimed that the ecological, social, and cultural way that humans interpret the world requires a constant reevaluation of cognitive techniques. In this case, it could be added that personal experiences and the socio-cultural context of the participants in which they occurred indeed played a distinctive role in inspiring them to build arguments and take a stance on the discussion.

Some participants of this study thought of themselves as social actors and activists whose desire is to educate others to accomplish a better society. In other words, their engagement in current cultural issues of tremendous relevance, feminism, and politics in particular, became a source of inspiration to construct critical arguments for today's society. In this sense, Roberge (2018) asserted that three suitable elements could be used to develop critical literary skills: activism, socio-cultural climate, and pedagogical strategies. As explained by some participants, their social engagement and political views became a compass that helped them "navigate" through the discussed matters.

Finally, comparing and contrasting abilities as well as problem-solving skills are indispensable for inquiry. These types of exercises develop cognitive skills that activate argumentation dispositions (Lampert, 2006). As one participant pointed out, the students of the course very often engaged in thorough research about the cultural subject matter. That means they may have engaged in conversations about the topic before the discussion to share "*different points of the information*", "*investigate more*", and "*know more about the topic*".

Conclusions

The objective of this qualitative case study was to take a deeper look into the factors that enabled participants to build arguments in culture-driven discussion in an EFL British culture course. Findings suggest that peer scaffolding, prior knowledge, connection to participants' reality, and curiosity and inquiry are indispensable elements when creating arguments to take part in discussions about culture.

The findings of this qualitative case study can inform the context of argumentative skills development in university settings. It is no secret that enhancing EFL students' thinking and argumentative skills is a pressing need in the Colombian context. Culturally infused

discussions have been demonstrated to be rich sites where collaborative argumentation can grow when students can use their prior knowledge, enrich their thinking with their peers, and make clear and relevant connections to their realities.

Further inquiry into students' development of arguments could investigate the role of metacognition, as this was a theme that had some presence in the data but could not be investigated in-depth in this study.

References

- Allan, G. (2020). Qualitative research. In G. Allan & C. Skinner (Eds.), *Handbook for research students in the social sciences* (pp. 177-189). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003070993-18>
- Amossy, R. (2009). Argumentation in discourse: A socio-discursive approach to arguments. *Informal Logic*, 29(3), 252-267.
- Anderson, L. W., & Krathwohl, D. R. (2001). *A taxonomy for learning, teaching, and assessing: A revision of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives*. Addison Wesley Longman, Inc.
- Baker, M. J., Andriessen, J., & Schwarz, B. B. (2019). Collaborative argumentation-based learning. In N. Mercer, R. Wegerif, & L. Major (Eds.), *The Routledge International Handbook of Research on Dialogic Education* (pp. 76-88). Routledge.
- Besnard, P., & Hunter, A. (2008). *Elements of argumentation* (Vol. 47). MIT Press.
- Boas, F. (1995). *Race, language and culture*. University of Chicago Press.
- Burder, R. L., Tangelaki, K., & Hryciw, D. H. (2014). Use of content-based instruction and Socratic discussion for ESL undergraduate Biomedical Science students to develop critical thinking skills. *Journal of Curriculum and Teaching*, 3(1), 1-9. <https://www.doi.org/10.5430/jct.v3n1p1>
- Chall, J. S. (1947). The influence of previous knowledge on reading ability. *Educational Research Bulletin*, 26(9), 225-246.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among the five approaches* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications, Inc.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Epstein, R. L., Kernberger, C., & Raffi, A. (2006). *Critical thinking*. Thomson/Wadsworth.
- Erduran, S., Simon, S., & Osborne, J. (2004). TAPPING into argumentation: Developments in the application of Toulmin's argument pattern for studying science discourse. *Science Education*, 88(6), 915-933. <https://www.doi.org/10.1002/sci.20012>
- Evagorou, M., & Osborne, J. (2013). Exploring young students' collaborative argumentation within a socio-scientific issue. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 50(2), 209-237. <https://www.doi.org/10.1002/tea.21076>
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures* (Part II, Chapters 2 & 3). Basic Books, Inc.

- Gibbs, G. R. (2007). *Thematic coding and categorizing. Analyzing qualitative data*. SAGE Publications, Ltd. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781849208574>
- Given, L. M. (Ed.). (2008). *The Sage encyclopedia of qualitative research methods*. SAGE Publications, Ltd.
- Goetz, J. P., & Hansen, J. F. (1974). The cultural analysis of schooling. *Council on Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 5(4), 1-8.
- Guo, M. (2013). Developing critical thinking in English class: Culture-based knowledge and skills. *Theory & Practice in Language Studies*, 3(3), 503-507. <https://www.doi.org/10.4304/tpls.3.3.503-507>
- Halpern, D. F. (2013). *Thought and knowledge: An introduction to critical thinking*. Psychology Press.
- Hayes, K. D., & Devitt, A. A. (2008). Classroom discussions with student-led feedback: a useful activity to enhance development of critical thinking skills. *Journal of Food Science Education*, 7(4), 65-68.
- Helterbran, V. R. (2007). Promoting critical thinking through discussion. *Journal of College Teaching & Learning (TLC)*, 4(6).
- Jia, Q. (2010). A brief study on the implication of constructivism teaching theory on classroom teaching reform in basic education. *International Education Studies*, 3(2), 197-199.
- Kohzadi H., Mohammadi, F. A., & Samadi, F. (2014). Is there a relationship between critical thinking and critical reading of literary texts: A case study at Arak University (Iran). *International Letters of Social and Humanities Sciences*, 33(1), 63-76.
- Lampert, N. (2006). Enhancing critical thinking with aesthetic, critical, and creative inquiry. *Art Education*, 59(5), 46-50. <https://www.doi.org/10.1080/00043125.2005.11651611>
- Liao, M. H. (2009). Cultivating critical thinking through literature circles in EFL context. *SPECTRUM: NCUE Studies in Language, Literature, Translation*, (5), 89-115. <https://www.doi.org/10.29601/YYWYLL.200907.0006>
- Liu, Q. T., Liu, B. W., & Lin, Y. R. (2019). The influence of prior knowledge and collaborative online learning environment on students' argumentation in descriptive and theoretical scientific concept. *International Journal of Science Education*, 41(2), 165-187. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500693.2018.1545100>
- Maiorana, V. P. (1991). The road from rote to critical thinking. *Community Review*, 11, 53-63.
- Manalo, E., Kusumi, T., Koyasu, M., Michita, Y., & Tanaka, Y. (2013). To what extent do culture-related factors influence university students' critical thinking use? *Thinking Skills and Creativity*, 10, 121-132. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tsc.2013.08.003>
- McDowall, D. (1989). *An illustrated history of British History*. Longman, Pearson Education Ltd.
- Mirchandani, R. (2005). Postmodernism and sociology: From the epistemological to the empirical. *Sociological Theory*, 23(1), 86-115. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0735-2751.2005.00244.x>
- Nisbett, R. E., Peng, K., Choi, I., & Norenzayan, A. (2001). Culture and systems of thought: Holistic versus analytic cognition. *Psychological review*, 108(2), 291. <https://www.doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.108.2.291>

- O'Keefe, D. J. (2003). The potential conflict between normatively-good argumentative practice and persuasive success: Evidence from persuasion effects research. In F. H. Eemeren, J. A. Blair, C. A. Willard, & A. F. Snoeck Henkemans (Eds.), *Anyone who has a view: Theoretical contributions to the study of argumentation* (pp. 309-318). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-1078-8_24
- Paul, R. W. (1993). The logic of creative and critical thinking. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 37(1), 21-39.
- Paul, R. W., & Binker, A. J. A. (1990). Critical thinking: What every person needs to survive in a rapidly changing world. *Center for Critical Thinking and Moral Critique, Sonoma State University*, 269-298.
- Paul, R., & Elder, L. (2008). Critical thinking: The art of Socratic questioning, part III. *Journal of Developmental Education*, 31(3), 34-35.
- Pervin, N., & Mokhtar, M. (2022). The interpretivist research paradigm: A subjective notion of a social context. *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development*, 11(2), 419-428.
- Roberge, G. (2018). La littérature critique. In G. Kpazai (Dir.), *La pensée critique expliquée par des didacticiennes et des didacticiens de l'enseignement supérieur (2nd ed.)* (pp. 115-125). Editions JFD. <https://shorturl.at/jK568>
- Ryan G. (2018). Introduction to positivism, interpretivism and critical theory. *Nurse Res. Mar* 16(4), 14-20. <https://www.doi.org/10.7748/nr.2018.e1466>
- Sahamid, H. (2016). Developing critical thinking through Socratic Questioning: An action research study. *International Journal of Education and Literacy Studies*, 4(3), 62-72. <https://www.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijels.v4n.3p.62>
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. SAGE Publications.
- Stake, R. E. (2010). *Qualitative research: Studying how things work*. The Guildford Press.
- Tellis, W. (1997). Introduction to case study. *The Qualitative Report*, 3(2), 1-14.
- Thurman, B. A. (2009). Teaching of critical thinking skills in the English content area in South Dakota public high schools and colleges. *University of South Dakota*, 7-12.
- Tofade, T., Elsner, J., & Haines, S. T. (2013). Best practice strategies for effective use of questions as a teaching tool. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, 77(7), 155. <https://doi.org/10.5688/ajpe777155>
- Tudge, J. (1992). Vygotsky, the zone of proximal development, and peer collaboration: Implications for classroom practice. In L. C. Moll (Ed.), *Vygotsky and education: Instructional implications and applications of sociohistorical psychology* (pp. 155-172). Cambridge University Press.
- Veerman, A., Andriessen, J., & Kanselaar, G. (2002). Collaborative argumentation in academic education. *Instructional Science*, 30(3), 155-186.
- Willis, J. (2007). Foundations of qualitative research. Interpretive and critical approaches. *SAGE Publications*.
- Yin, R. K. (2003). *Case study research: Design and methods* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.