

**AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY ON TEACHING ORAL ENGLISH
ARGUMENTATION TO HIGH SCHOOL EFL LEARNERS IN TAIWAN**

Shau-Ju Chang

ABSTRACT

The study employed action research as a method to devise a pedagogical model and approach for teaching oral English argumentation to Taiwanese EFL learners. Twelve students from a municipal high school volunteered to participate in a ten-session oral English argumentation course offered by the researcher. With the help of a dyadic argumentation pre- and posttest, weekly feedback sheets, after-class discussions with the students' English instructor, and the researcher's reflections, a five-component argumentation model (i.e., position, justification, challenge/refutation, defense and concession) and a five-phase instructional approach (i.e., overview, component coaching, modeling, guided practice, and independent practice) were conceived.

Key Words: Oral English argumentation, pedagogy, action research, EFL learners, Taiwan

INTRODUCTION

Argumentation, defined as the generation and evaluation of arguments, is a fundamental tool of reasoning, and skill in argumentation is therefore basic to a person's ability to reason (Voss & Means, 1991). Argumentation is useful as it can lead one towards truth, while in its absence one can be easily fooled. Training in argumentation, thus, may help people to evaluate what constitutes truth in a variety of circumstances. In addition to the development of ability in the pursuit of truth, instruction in argumentation will also provide a better understanding of arguments in various subject matters, and facilitate the acquisition of skills, such as reading and writing, which cut across various domains. Although not the sole path to securing truth, knowledge and intellectual skills, the process of argumentation is undeniably an important one.

Being an integral part of the English language, argumentation is deeply embedded in the social structure of English-speaking countries and the affective expectations of its speakers. Native or fluent speakers in those communities at some point in their lives are socialized to deem argumentation an appropriate communicative strategy and one which, in certain genres, such as academic writing, is preferred or privileged (Marini, 1999). For the above reasons, some EFL educators (e.g., Marini, 1999; Lubetsky, LeBeau & Harrington, 2000; Stewart, 2003) maintain that even students with a beginner or lower level of English proficiency should have the ability to express themselves in a rudimentary claim/evidence structure.

Teaching of debate/argumentation, however widely endorsed and commonly practiced in all levels of schooling in the West (particularly in the US and UK), is at best received with reservation in many communal or Eastern Asian cultures (Becker, 1986; Brenner & Parks, 2001; Nakamura, 1964/1985; Peng & Nesbitt, 1999). Take Chinese culture as an example; there are social, historical, linguistic, and philosophical barriers to the acceptance of argumentation as a method of intellectual discourse. Chinese emphasize harmony and hierarchy, and thus see argumentation as an act of threat to one's relationships with others. Their ingrained belief in 'naïve dialecticism,' as termed by Peng and Nesbitt (1999), which assumes that there can be some truth to each one of two opposing propositions, that concepts and words are flexible and only auxiliary to human actions, and that verbal debate and argumentation are not meaningful tools for understanding truth and reality, is another culturally rooted reason for the Chinese de-emphasis on debate and formal argumentation (Peng & Nesbitt, 1999). However, in spite of the forces which act as a deterrence to argumentation, Yeh and Chen (2004) have found that the Chinese distaste for being argumentative have begun to show some significant changes in recent years. Their research on the cultural values and argumentative orientations of the Chinese living in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China demonstrates that more and more individuals are beginning to realize the importance of public debate in matters of social concern. In Taiwan, debate and formal argumentation have continued to receive attention not only in the political arena (much political oratory is based on mechanism of argumentation and persuasion) but also in school curricula, particularly in secondary English education. Cases in point for the latter include an increased attention to an annual municipal high school interscholastic English debate competition (i.e., the

Taipei Cicero English Debate Tournament) which has had eight years of history up to date), the recent addition of critical thinking to high school English curricular standards (Ministry of Education, Department of Secondary Education, 2009), and an increased number of talks and workshops held for in-service high school English teachers on debate and argumentation in the past couple of years.

Along with an increased recognition of the importance and utility of training in oral argumentation for learners of English in Taiwanese high schools, there is also the unfortunate reality that there have not been many opportunities in and outside the regular school curriculum for Taiwanese high school students to cultivate such competence. Neither has there been much guidance or support from the academic community for teachers on how to teach oral English argumentation to Taiwanese high school learners. Almost all of the related local studies found were about debate as a college-level course, a tool for training English speaking/writing, or a competition (e.g., why or how to teach debate [Chi, 1996, 2000; Her, 1993], effects of debate on developing college students' oral English communication skills [Lee, 2005], local high school students' motivations in participating in competitive English debate and their perceptions of its benefits [Chang, 2009] or local high school students' performance in competitive English debate [Chang, 2008, 2009]), none of which are directly relevant to the teaching of oral argumentation to local high school students. The nature of the component parts of oral argumentation and how to teach them are two pressing issues that need to be tackled to promote the integration of oral argumentation into high school English education. To this end, an action research study was embarked on to devise, implement, and assess oral argumentation pedagogy for developing local students' competence in oral English argumentation. Specifically, the following questions are pursued:

1. What does pedagogy for cultivating the competence of Taiwanese high school students in oral English argumentation entail?
2. How effective is such pedagogy?
3. What should be heeded when teaching oral English argumentation to Taiwanese high school students?

ACTION RESEARCH

In recent years action research has been popularly used in the educational field as a tool for professional development, such as solving pedagogical problems or improving teaching outcomes. Action research, according to Lewin (1946), one of the early proponents of such method of research, is defined as “comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action, and research leading to social action (p. 35)” that uses a spiral of steps which include planning, action, and fact-finding about the result of the action. Ferrance (2000) defined action research as a process in which participants examine their own educational practice systematically and carefully, using the techniques of research. In a nutshell, action research, when implemented in educational settings, can be deemed as a reflective process of progressive problem-solving adopted by the teaching professional with his/her students to improve teaching practice and help students become better learners.

Many models of doing action research have been proffered over the years (e.g., Kemmis, 1993; McNiff & Whitehead, 2002; Whitehead, 1985). Disparate as they are in the specific procedure to be taken, they all have certain steps in common, i.e., identifying an area of focus, developing an action plan, implementing and monitoring the plan, and finally evaluating and adjusting the plan. Whenever possible, the above steps should form a spiral of cycles to be repeated by the researcher until the actions are in line with what he/she wishes to happen (e.g., Mills, 2000; McNiff & Whitehead, 2002; Richards, 2003).

THE STUDY

Participants

To devise a pedagogical model and a teaching approach that can be applied to teaching oral argumentation to average Taiwanese high school students, twelve first-year senior high school students (four females and eight males) were recruited on a voluntary basis from a municipal high school¹ with an intermediate-level academic standing compared with the

¹ The school was chosen because it had twice participated in the Taipei Cicero English Debate Tournament and was over-all rather supportive of training in English debate for its students. In the semester prior to the one when this action research study was

other public high schools located in the same city. Among the participants, two had a final English score from the previous semester above 90; six had a score between 80 and 89; three had a score between 70 and 79; and one had a score between 60 and 69. With regard to their oral English proficiency, three could speak relatively fluent English, two could manage to express themselves without serious problems, and seven had to struggle to get their meaning across from time to time. The participants' English teacher, who was interested in learning about oral argumentation, also took part in the project as an assistant and participant observer.

Five-step Action Research Procedure

Adopting McNiff and Whitehead's (2002) action research model for its simplicity and conciseness, the present study proceeded in the following five steps: 1) Identify an area of practice to be investigated, 2) imagine a solution, 3) implement the solution, 4) modify solution in light of the mini-evaluation, and 5) evaluate the solution at the end of the instruction. The enactment of each of the steps is detailed as follows:

Step I: Identify an area of practice for investigation

As mentioned earlier, oral English argumentation, due to its pivotal role in academic discussion and on many other formal or semi-formal occasions, is an important genre to be acquired by EFL learners. The fact that many local high school English teachers have only a limited knowledge of how to teach oral argumentation to students ought to be changed as the skill of critical thinking was added into Taiwan's High School English Curricular Standards in 2009, and debate, a form of oral argumentation, has been proved time and again to be one of the most effective tools in cultivating critical thinking (e.g., Allen & Berkowitz, 1999; Allen, Berkowitz, & Loudon, 1995; Colbert & Biggers, 1985; Fukuda, 2003). Given that this study was a pioneer research endeavor in exploring this pedagogical issue in the local high school context, the area of practice to be investigated was the devising as well as the assessment of possible materials and methods for teaching English argumentation to Taiwanese high school EFL learners. Argumentation here is defined as a

conducted, the researcher had offered a series of competitive debate training sessions to another group of students and some teachers from the same school. It was at that time that the researcher had become acquainted with the participants' English teacher.

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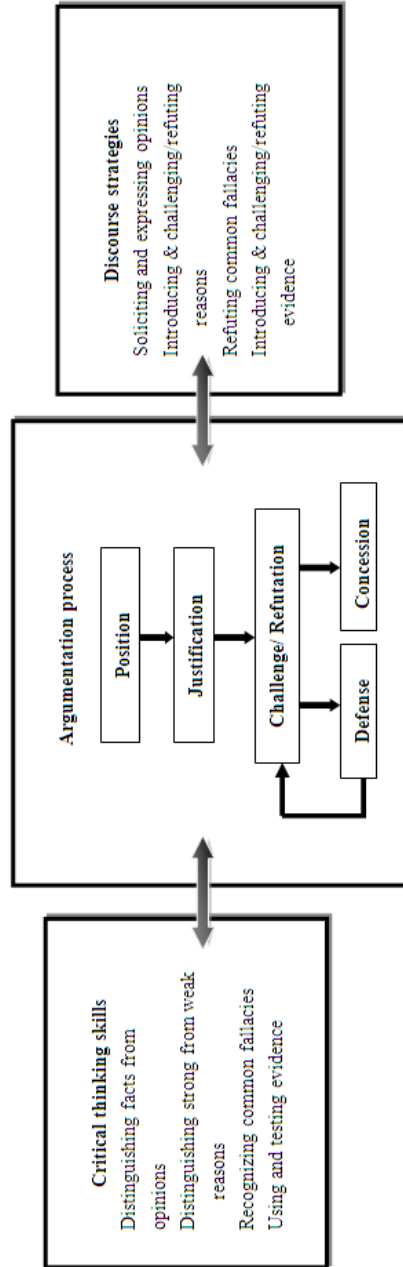
verbal, social and rational activity in which individuals advance competing claims by putting forward a constellation of propositions justifying or refuting the proposition expressed in the claim (van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Snoeck Henkemans, Blair, Johnson, Krabbe, et al., 1996; Felton, 2004).

Step II: Imagine a solution

To tackle this unprecedented and challenging task, a pedagogical² model that captures the gist of the process of argumentation is first called for. Based on the four stages in Van Eemeren and Grootendorst's (2004) pragma-dialectical model of critical discussion, i.e., confrontation, opening, argumentation and concluding, and the four elements in Felton's (2004) "Argument Structure Reflection Worksheet" devised for teaching American middle-school students argumentative discussion, i.e., "opinion," "reason," "criticism," and "defense," the researcher developed a working model of a process of argumentation that consists of "position" "justification," "challenge/refutation," and "defense/concession." The logical sequence and connection of these five components of argumentation were then mapped out in a flow chart as shown in Figure 1. In this pedagogical model, the process of argumentation was initially envisioned as one beginning with one speaker proclaiming his/her position and justification for that position, followed by the challenge or refutation of the first speaker's justification by the opponent, then followed by the response of the first speaker to the challenge or refutation, which can be either to defend his/her justification or to concede to the refutation of the opponent. The loop between challenge/refutation and defense indicates that there can be several rounds of challenge/refutation and defense as the process of argumentation unfolds.

² What the study aims to conceive is a working model for instructional purposes, and not one that truthfully captures or reflects real life argumentation in all its points. To this end, some simplifications or alternations are not only desirable but also necessary.

Figure 1. A pedagogical model of oral English argumentation process and skills repertoires (initial version)

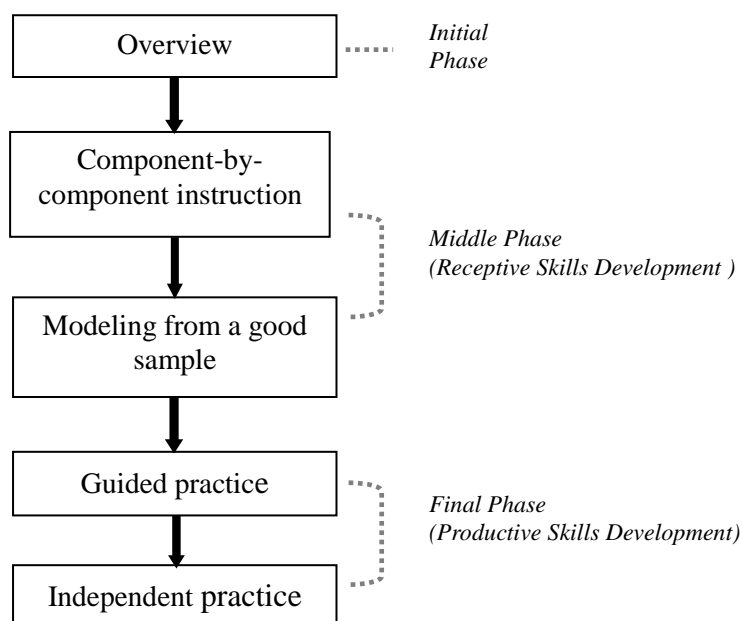


With the major components of the process of argumentation in place, the next task was to identify the fundamental abilities or skills critical to the realization of the components. To select from a plethora of related skills to argumentation, the concept proposed by Felton (2004) that skilled argumentation entails two distinct though related sets of cognitive skills, i.e., argument construction and discourse strategies, was borrowed and modified. The skill set of argument construction was broadened to include argumentation-related critical thinking skills, which, together with discourse strategies, were then added to the process of argumentation in the model. The critical thinking skills and discourse strategies identified in the model as well as the exercises used to cultivate those skills and strategies were primarily selected and adapted from the debate training materials that the researcher and some high school teachers had designed earlier in another research project, which eventually led to the book *English Debate and Argumentation Made Easy for Chinese EFL Learners* (Chang, 2011, in press). The time available for implementing and testing the pedagogy led to a highly selective list, resulting in only four critical thinking skills being included in the pedagogical model (i.e., distinguishing facts from opinions, distinguishing strong from weak reasons, recognizing common fallacies, and using and testing evidence) and four discourse strategies (i.e., expressing and soliciting opinions, introducing and challenging/refuting reasons, refuting common fallacies, introducing and challenging/refuting evidence) (see Figure 1).

Following the construction of a pedagogical model of argumentation was the task of devising an instructional approach. Because of the participants' scant knowledge and experience of argumentation in English, an explicit teaching approach was adopted to strive for the best possible outcome in a short period of time. The aim of the approach was to tackle the complexity of the components of argumentation and their related skills/strategies directly and systematically. Specifically, a five-stage teaching approach (see Figure 2) was devised for this purpose. It contains stage one, overview (i.e., presentation of a holistic view of the argumentation process and of the repertoires of skills involved in the process), stage two, component-by-component instruction (i.e., expounding on the nature of each component and teaching the skills/strategies relevant to the enactment of that component), stage three, modeling (i.e., provision of good samples of argumentation with all components and imparted skills included), stage four, guided practice

(i.e., practice of argumentative discussion by the students with assistance from the instructor), and, stage five, independent practice (i.e., practice of argumentative discussion by the students on their own). The five stages were then grouped into three learning phases: awareness-raising, development of receptive skills, and development of productive skills. The instruction offered in the overview stage is for cognitive awareness, i.e., making learners aware of the essential components and features of oral English argumentation and of some pronounced differences between English and Chinese argumentation, that offered in the component-by-component instruction and modeling stages is for the development of receptive skills, i.e., helping learners recognize and understand each argumentation component and the corresponding skills for realizing that component, and that offered in the guided and independent practices is for the production of the knowledge and skills learned in the previous two phases for arguing a position concerning the controversy at hand.

Figure 2. A five-stage approach for teaching oral English argumentation



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Step III: Implement the solution

To assess the entry ability of the participants, a dyadic argumentation pretest was administered prior to the oral argumentation instruction. Following the pretest, ten weekly teaching sessions were conducted by the researcher with some assistance³ from the participants' English teacher.

Dyadic argumentation pretest

For the pretest, the participants were paired up for a dyadic argumentative discussion. The purpose of the pretest was to help the researcher understand the participants' entry knowledge and ability concerning oral English argumentation, and to serve as a basis with which to compare and contrast their post-course argumentation performance. To minimize the confounding effect of arguing on a topic and stance about which they had little knowledge or about which they had to speak against their true will, the participants were asked to fill out their positions and interest levels concerning five controversial policies that had received some media attention around the time that the study was conducted and thus knowledge of which was considered more likely to be within the participants' grasp (i.e., "Smoking while walking should be legally prohibited in Taiwan," "An English listening test should be included in the Specified Subject Test," "First-year university students should choose a college, instead of a department, to study in," "Homosexual marriage should be legalized in Taiwan," and "Capital punishment should be abolished in Taiwan"). Based on their answers, they were then paired to have a 10-minute discussion on a topic and a position they were more willing to argue on and to prove to their partner that they were right. In the end, three pairs argued on "legally prohibiting smoking while walking," two pairs on "legalizing homosexual marriage," and one pair on "abolishing capital punishment" in the pretest. All of the dyadic argumentative discussions were videotaped and transcribed for later analysis.

Oral English argumentation course

³ In the implementation stage, the participants' English teacher primarily served as a contact person between the researcher and the participants, as a participant observer during class, and as a consultant in after-class discussion.

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The oral argumentation course consisted of ten weekly sessions, with each session lasting for approximately 90 minutes. In order not to interfere with the regular curriculum, the course was conducted outside the school hours. Table 1 lists the critical thinking skills (CTS) and discourse strategies (DS) dealt with in each session and the instructional phase to which those skills or strategies belong. No more than two skills/strategies were covered each time given the amount of practice required for each skill/strategy and the length of the session.

Table 1. Instructional Content and Approach Adopted for the Argumentation Course

Session	Content of Instruction	Instructional Phase
1	a. Understanding the argumentation model b. Recognizing examples of argumentation	Overview
2	a. Revisiting the argumentation model b. CTS—Distinguishing facts from opinions	Component-by-component instruction: Position
3	a. DS—Soliciting and expressing opinion b. CTS—Distinguishing strong from weak reasons	Component-by-component instruction: Position & Justification
4	a. DS—Introducing and challenging/ refuting reasons b. CTS—Recognizing common fallacies	Component-by-component instruction: Justification & Challenge/Refutation
5	a. Quick review b. CTS—Recognizing common fallacies (cont.)	Component-by-component instruction: Justification & Challenge/Refutation
6	a. DS—Unveiling common fallacies b. CTS—Using and testing evidence	Component-by-component instruction: Justification & Challenge/Refutation

Table 1. Instructional Content and Approach Adopted for the Argumentation Course (continued)

Session	Content of Instruction	Instructional Phase
7	a. CTS—Using and testing evidence (cont.) b. DS—Introducing and challenging/ refuting evidence	Component-by-component instruction: Justification & Challenge/Refutation
8	Group debate	Guided practice
9	Debriefing on group debate	Guided practice
10	Group or Pair debate	Independent practice

To solicit the participants' feedback on the content and activities adopted in each session, a simple feedback sheet was distributed to the participants at the end of each class. After each teaching session, the researcher then spent another hour or so discussing the participants' responses with their English instructor who was present during class observing the researcher's instruction and students' responses.

Given the large scale of the task involved in the study and the limited time granted for tackling it, it was not possible to implement all of the modifications or adjustments which were derived from the after-class discussions and reflections and re-test them for their effects in a spiral of research cycles as advocated by many action researchers. Minor adjustments to the ways of explaining the materials or to the content of the class exercises, for example, could be observed and assessed for their effects on students' learning. However, some structural changes to the pedagogical model (e.g., re-graphing the argumentation process) or the teaching approach (e.g., rearranging the five stages) unfortunately stood no chance to re-assess for their effects in this study.

Step IV: Reflect on and modify the solution

Based on the researcher's observations as an instructor, her after-class discussion with the participants' English teacher, and the participants'

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responses on the feedback sheets, reflections and modifications were applied to the devised pedagogy after each class session as well as at the completion of the whole study. To strive for more parsimony in report, they are categorized into reflections and modifications regarding 1) the pedagogical model, which can be further divided into argumentation components and process, 2) the teaching approach, 3) teaching of discrete argumentation skill, and 4) other aspects of teaching.

The five-component pedagogical model of argumentation

Components of argumentation

The open declaration of one's stance on a controversy, though it may differ from the participants' cultural practice of not stating one's stance overtly as a way to avoid confrontation, was not a difficult or complicated component for the participants to learn. However, the ease of learning it should not detract from its importance as a component in English argumentation because it facilitates the oral activity by setting the tone and crystallizing the goal of the exchanges. When introducing the component of "position" in oral English argumentation, future instructors can also call students' attention to additional cultural differences between Chinese and English-speakers in their management of the "position" component. Peng and Nesbitt (1999), for example, noticed that Chinese often deal with contradiction through what might be a compromise approach, showing tolerance of contradiction by finding a middle ground by which truth can be found in each of two competing propositions. Thus, they posited that Chinese might be less likely to take sides in a conflict. The implication of this cultural difference for teaching oral English argumentation to local high school students is for the instructor to stress that students are often expected to side with one position in oral English argumentation rather than fence-riding.

Compared with position or stance-taking, there is no doubt that justification or stance-supporting is a more challenging and cognitively demanding component for students to tackle in argumentation (Chandrasegaran & Kong, 2006). The performance of the participants in constructing a justification for the position that they had to uphold in the debate during the guided and independent practice stages suggested that they had trouble in forming reasons that were clearly differentiated from one another. Thus, to prepare students for any form of argumentation, the

instructor needs to check and ensure that the reasons students construct are clear and independent of one another to begin with. Moreover, it was found that making unsupported assertions, (e.g. “students in star high schools do not have time for extra-curricular activities” or “students in star schools are overly confident from being labeled as good students and so do not want to study” as reasons for the topic of eradicating star high schools in Taiwan), was a common and tenacious tendency among the participants. To cope with these problems, future instruction of this component, as suggested by Chandrasengaran and Kong (2006) could capitalize on the stance-support skills already existing in students’ repertoires. In this case, the participants’ understanding of such Chinese expressions as “to speculate (臆測),” “unfounded remark (無稽之談),” or “let the evidence speak for you (有幾分證據說幾分話)” can be utilized to illustrate the difference between supported and unsupported arguments and to scale the strength of an argument. A checklist that contains the criteria of a sound argument (including the reason and evidence) can also strengthen students’ performance in the justification component. Questions like “How do I know that’s the case?” “Is there a commonly held belief about the truthfulness of the point?” “Is my argument supported with concrete evidence?” “How many pieces of evidence do I have for my argument?” and “What type of evidence makes the argument most convincing, examples, statistics or testimonies?” can all help students bolster their justification.

Challenge/refutation, when compared with position and justification, could be the component that is most likely to escape the attention of Taiwanese students in oral argumentation. An examination of the participants’ comprehension of the process of argumentation showed that most participants had completely overlooked the component of challenge/refutation when the dialogue in the exercise that contains only position-justification from both arguers was nonetheless deemed as an example of argumentation. To reiterate the gist of challenge/refutation in English oral argumentation, a Chinese idiomatic expression, i.e., “grandpa contends that he makes sense, and grandma argues that she is in the right (公說公有理, 婆說婆有理),” which only concerns the component of justification, was incorporated into the instruction but changed to “grandpa contends grandma is wrong, and grandma contends grandpa does not make sense (公說婆沒理, 婆說公沒理).” This slight twist on the Chinese saying appeared to drive home to the participants the true essence of the component as their performance in this regard was greatly

improved in the post-test (see the evaluation section for more discussion). The use of the parallel reasoning pattern, however common in Chinese argumentative discourse, falls short in English argumentation which markedly rests on the clash of two or more stances. Woods and Wang (2008) made a similar observation when positing, “To Americans, particularly American debaters, nothing seems more natural than being ready to disagree when it comes to dealing with different opinions in the process of developing one’s argument. This, however, is by no means true across cultures worldwide” (p. 37). This cultural difference certainly should be borne in mind when teaching local students English oral argumentation.

Judging from the use of what was primarily a repetition of one’s justification in both the group and dyadic argumentation, the participants did not master the skill of defending. This result, however, was not surprising because only a little time and attention was allocated to this component during the course. To modify the teaching of this component, more detailed instruction should be provided. To do that, the instructor perhaps can gain some insight from the ways in which competitive debaters construct their rebuttal speech by having students do one of the following to rebuild their original arguments: (1) challenge/refute the opponent’s challenge/refutation of their justification (i.e., rebut), (2) both rebut and submit new evidence, and (3) concede the challenge/refutation but submit new (and stronger) evidence in support of the original position. By transforming the abstract task of “defense” into these concrete moves, the instructor can help students to better understand how to tackle this phase in argumentation.

Concession as a component of argumentation also warrants more attention. Although it is less cognitively and linguistically challenging than the other components, it calls for as much explicit instruction as they do. As will be shown in the following section, the fact that a needed concession signal was absent and so the argumentation was prevented from unfolding smoothly can underscore the pragmatic function of concession. To ensure that students are capable of enacting the concession component, the discourse strategy of agreeing can be added into the argumentative discourse repertoire.

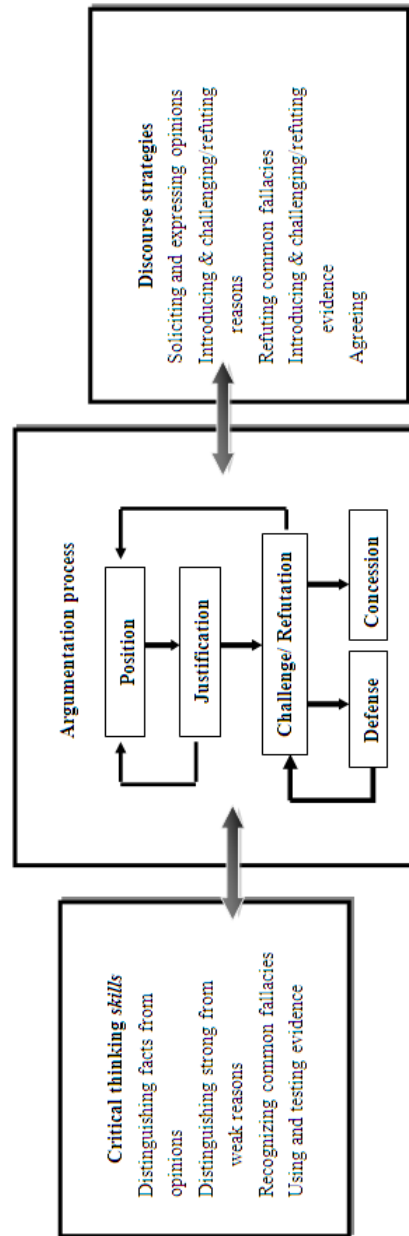
Process of argumentation

Although almost all of the participants indicated on the feedback sheet

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that they found the model easy to understand and useful in helping them to conceptualize the process of oral argumentation, their performance in class exercises seemed to speak otherwise. Much of their confusion resulted from the failure in the design of the original flow chart to demonstrate how exactly the five components are actualized in a co-constructed dyadic argumentation process, i.e., when and which component is introduced or activated by which arguer in the argumentation process. Obviously in the co-construction of oral argumentation, these components are activated in different ways. For example, one can challenge the other's position and justification either before or after one expresses one's own position and justification. While the initial model was too simplistic to prepare the participants to engage in dyadic argumentation, it is neither necessary nor productive to capture and include all of the intricacies in the co-construction process into the model. If the model is a pedagogical one, an important feature of such a model should be clarity, simplicity, and a fair representation of the reality even though it entails a certain degree of reduction and deletion. To enable the participants to visualize how "both" arguers maneuver the components, the researcher decided to add two arrows to the original process (see Figure 3) to indicate that as equal participants, both parties have to state their positions and provide justifications for them at a certain point in the process of the co-construction of the argumentation. The second speaker may declare his/her position and justification right after the first speaker announces his/her justification or after he/she challenges/refutes the first speaker's justification.

Figure 3. A pedagogical model of oral English argumentation process and skills repertoires (2nd revision)

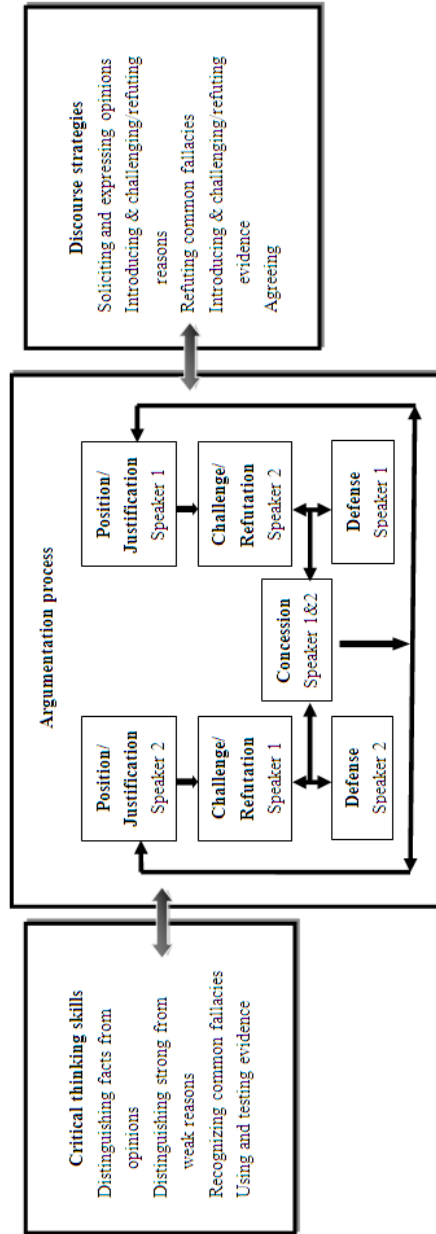


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Although the model, after revision, was clearer in capturing the interactive nature of the process of argumentation, it was not without flaws as another problem was detected when the participants' post-test argumentation performance was examined. It was noticed that the repeated loop of challenge/refutation-defense exchanges in the post-test led the participants to a difficulty in terminating the discussion of one argument and introducing another argument. Long pauses occurred in the argumentative discussion of half of the dyads when a difference of opinion over a reason could not be resolved and thus neither party knew when to move on to their next reason. A possible explanation for this stand-off could be that when they were in the midst of refutations and rebuttals both parties were eventually waiting for a concession signal (e.g., "I now see your point," "I guess that makes sense," etc.) from their partner, and so before such a signal was sent as a wrap-up for the earlier part of the discussion in the argument, there was a halt or discontinuation. If this explanation holds, the argumentation process originally charted in the pedagogical model which placed the arrow from "justification" or "challenge/refutation" back to "position" has to be modified so that it can better facilitate students' progression to their next argument to uphold their position.

To better capture the dynamics of the interaction involved in two parties each building their own case, refuting the other's case, and rebuilding their case in the process of argumentation, and to drive home the point that the challenge/refutation-defense loop for each reason has to eventually come down to one party conceding to the other's challenge/refutation or defense of that reason, the argumentation process in this pedagogical model was revised again after the post-test by, this time, marking out the two arguers and sequencing the moves that they made regarding each component of the argumentation in relation to their opponent's moves (see Figure 4). In this revised version of the process, concession is the component that ends the argumentation on one argument and begins the critical examination of another, in contrast to the earlier version where concession was seen more as an end result.

Figure 4. A pedagogical model of oral English argumentation process and skills repertoires (final version)



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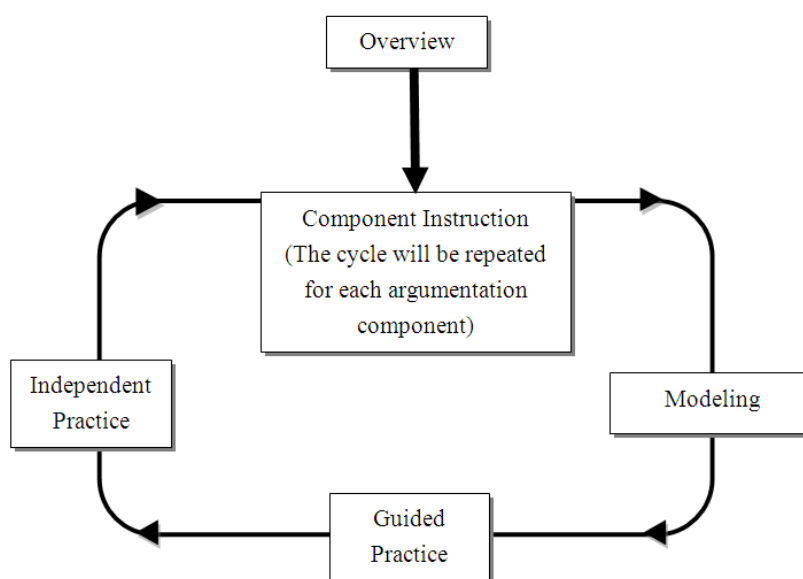
The five-stage teaching approach

Halfway through the course, a problem began to emerge: The component-by-component instruction stage in the teaching appeared to be too lengthy. Some participants began to show signs of impatience and voiced their desire for hands-on practice in debate or oral argumentation even though they were not fully ready for it. To tackle this problem, the modeling stage was skipped, and the participants were ushered directly into the guided practice stage to work, with the researcher's assistance, on a group debate. To no surprise, the performance of most of the participants in the full-scale argumentation exercises in the guided and independent practice stages left much room for improvement. The participants understood what each argumentation component constituted or what each argumentation skill entailed, but failed to assemble them together into a complete process of argumentation; the researcher had to give constant cues to the participants to activate a particular component or to call for a particular critical thinking or discourse skill. What the participants appeared to need but failed to have was a chance to see how all of the components and skills imparted in the component-by-component instruction stage could be put together to perform this oral activity, and such chance can be provided through the instructor modeling from a sample argumentation and walking the participants through it.

The five-stage instructional approach was later modified again after the post-test. Provided the participants' overall positive responses about the level of helpfulness of the materials and activities imparted respectively in the overview, component-by-component instruction, and guided practice stage, the problem with this five-stage instructional approach seems to lie more in the arrangement or sequence of the stages than in their purpose or functions. To shorten the time spent on the stage of component-by-component instruction and to make time for the modeling and guided and independent practice stages, a major modification was made to the sequencing of the five stages. While the overview stage still marks the beginning of the instruction process, rather than having all the argumentation components and their related skills/strategies introduced in one lengthy stage two and then modeled and practiced altogether in stages three to five, stages two to five can actually be repeated for each argumentation component, respectively (see Figure 5). That is, after the overview stage, the instructor can move on to the instruction, modeling, guided practice and independent practice, in that order, for position, the

first argumentation component. The same cycle can then be repeated for justification, challenge/refutation, defense and concession, respectively.

Figure 5. A pedagogical approach for teaching oral English argumentation (final version)



In this way, not only is there less to be imparted at each stage, there is also a clearer focus on the skills and strategies to be modeled by the teacher and practiced by the students. This new arrangement is also more adaptive to the students' language proficiency and learning ability. Based on how fast or how well students learn each argumentation component, each stage in the cycle can be extended or shortened to meet students' needs.

Teaching of discrete argumentation skills

The participants' responses in class and on the feedback sheets showed that they did not have difficulty in telling strong from weak reasons (Lubetsky, LeBeau, & Harrington, 2000). However, some participants might overlook the logical connection between the reason and the essence of the issue under debate. For example, in the case of "banning

smoking in public,” some students lost sight of “smoking ‘in public’” and only considered “smoking” when evaluating the reasons to support banning smoking in public. This problem is not uncommon as it was found in Larson, Britt, and Kurby’s study (2009) that college students were not accurate at recalling the predicate (main verb or adjective predicate) of the claim; students seemed to rely on a gist rather than verbatim representation of the claim predicate. If students often rely on gist representations when making such judgments, it is then understandable that they would have difficulty judging whether a reason logically supports a claim. To tackle this problem, students need to be reminded to keep the whole of the claim in mind, and not just a part of it when learning to critically evaluate the justification (particularly its logical relevance to the position).

It also needs to be pointed out that the seemingly straightforward definitions of strong and weak reasons may be deceptively easy. In reality, Larson, Britt and Kurby (2009) found that high school and even college students who had not received an argument tutorial frequently failed to distinguish structurally acceptable from structurally flawed arguments. While a short 15-minute tutorial may help students to improve their rejection of unsupported opinion as acceptable argument, it would require immediate feedback, given at multiple appropriately spaced sessions, for students to be able to master the skill of detecting unwarranted arguments.

With respect to the skill of detecting fallacies, the responses on the feedback sheet showed that some of the participants found that the number of fallacies, which was fourteen, overwhelming and indicated a difficulty in remembering and distinguishing them. To tackle this problem, a simpler classification system was later found and could replace or be used to structure the discrete fallacies in the future. Based on Johnson and Blair’s (2006) categorization systems, a wide array of fallacies can be grouped into failures of acceptability, failures of relevance, and failures of sufficiency. Failures of acceptability refer to fallacies whose conclusion builds on premises that lack logical acceptability or common presumption; failures of relevance are fallacies whose premises are irrelevant to the conclusion; failures of sufficiency refer to fallacies whose conclusion is drawn from evidence that is insufficient. Such categorization, when accompanied with many real-life examples, can help students better understand the nature of fallacies and help them to avoid them. Moreover, when practicing the skill of detecting fallacies, students should be required to argue whether and how a fallacious argument can be improved

(Blair, 2008).

However easy the skill of using and testing evidence appeared to the participants as indicated by their responses on the feedback sheets, the learning performance between understanding and utilization of the materials could be quite different as the earlier discussion of the justification component has shown. A similar conclusion was found in Kuhn (1991) and Sá, Kelly, Ho, and Stanovich (2005) as the participants in both studies, at a request for evidence in support of a theory or argument, also commonly provided only a reiteration or elaboration of the original theory or claim rather than a solid proof. Peng and Nesbitt (1999) specifically pointed out that the dialectical approach that Chinese are accustomed to using may be accompanied by a tendency to accept too much at face value. This tendency, the researcher contends, may have contributed to the participants' not using or not demanding proof of the truth of an assertion. To help local students combat this culturally-conditioned (but still possibly human) tendency, the instructor of a future argumentation course should stress the importance of seeking proof for any argument that lacks acceptable premises or is not based on common presumptions. Moreover, instructional materials and activities for training students to search for and use concrete data to substantiate general claims can also be added.

In this study, critical thinking and argumentative discourse were conceptualized and taught as generic skills rather than as skills contextualized in a specific knowledge domain or tied to certain topics/issues related to a particular discipline. The difference between these two methods actually echoes back to the on-going debate between the process and infusion approach as to which is more effective in developing students' reasoning ability. As in recent years the infusion approach has gradually received more recognition and as the participants' final performance indicated their failure, to an extent, to transfer some generic skills they studied to an argument on a real life issue, the method adopted for imparting critical thinking skills and discourse strategies needs to be re-examined. Due to the practical difficulty in identifying a knowledge domain or topics/issues that can meet the interest and entry knowledge level of a group of high school students, it may still be more feasible to treat the skills/strategies as if they are generic when first introducing them in the overview, component instruction, and modeling stages. But once students have progressed to the guided and independent practice stage for the first time, they can choose a topic that is of their own

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interest and apply the generic skills that they have just acquired in the earlier stages to form the needed arguments for each stage of the argumentation. The integration of argumentation skills with topic-specific content knowledge in the guided and independent practice phases hopefully can help the participants internalize and eventually transfer the de-contextualized generic skills to various real life scenarios of argumentation.

Other teaching tips

Many participants indicated in their feedback sheet that the number of unfamiliar words, e.g., in the examples used for illustrating fallacies or types of evidence, were overwhelming and had caused them difficulty in comprehending the materials or completing the exercises. The researcher was reminded in the after-class discussion with the participants' English teacher that the purpose of any exercise in an argumentation course should be first and foremost to cultivate students' skills in argumentation rather than to enlarge their lexical or syntactical knowledge. Thus, unfamiliar words in the examples and exercises should be kept to a minimum. There is, however, an exception to the rule of thumb mentioned above. Essential technical terms related to argumentation (e.g., "argument," "assertion," "counter-argument," "warrant," "fallacy," "evidence," "statistics," "testimonies," "biased," etc.) should be included in a glossary and introduced to students. A similar suggestion was made by Voss and Means (1991), who, when discussing what to teach about argumentation, suggested that students need to acquire knowledge about the nomenclature of arguments, such as argument, counterargument, claim, thesis, reason, and qualifier.

Step V: Evaluate the solution

In addition to the informal, formative evaluations that went on throughout the course, the effects of the course on the ability of the participants in oral English argumentation were also examined through the use of a formal, summative evaluation scheme which included a final feedback sheet to elicit the participants' perceptions of all of the skills imparted in the course and through a post-test which was used to compare and contrast the performance of the participants in dyadic argumentation in the pretest.

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Participants' perceptions of the course

Over all, the participants had a high regard for the course. This is evidenced by the fact that nearly all of the participants thought that the course had helped them learn the process and components of English argumentation (two circled “very helpful,” eight “helpful,” and one “so so”); almost all of them deemed that participation in the course had been helpful to them in cultivating their reasoning and critical thinking ability to engage in English argumentation (four circled “very helpful,” six “helpful,” and one “so so”); and most (nine circled “helpful,” and two “so so”) deemed that the course had strengthened their oral ability to take part in English argumentation.

Apart from giving a general assessment about the course, the participants were also asked their opinions of the critical thinking and argumentative discourse skills imparted in the course. Among the former, “distinguishing strong from weak reasons” was deemed by seven participants as the most difficult, followed by “recognizing common fallacies” and “using and testing evidence” with each chosen by two participants. “Recognizing common fallacies” was seen by seven participants as the most beneficial, followed by “using and testing evidence” chosen by three participants and “distinguishing facts from opinions” chosen by one participant. Among the argumentative discourse skills learned, “refuting common fallacies” was seen by five participants as the most difficult, followed by four choosing “introducing and challenging/refuting reasons” and two choosing “introducing and challenging/refuting evidence.” “Refuting common fallacies” was also most frequently chosen, i.e., by five participants, as the most beneficial, followed by “introducing and challenging/refuting evidence,” “soliciting and expressing opinions” and “introducing and challenging/refuting reasons,” with each being chosen by three, seven and one of the participants, respectively.

Over all, fallacy-related critical thinking and training in discourse skills, while posing some difficulty to the participants, was deemed the most beneficial topic in the course. Evidence- and reason-related topics were also commonly chosen as challenging but useful training by the participants. What the above findings suggest is: First, more practice was needed to train the participants' reasoning skills, and second, the participants were able to tease out their subjective feelings when assessing the merit of their learning, and that had possibly helped them persist in the

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learning of some difficult skills.

Dyadic argumentation post-test

A post-test was conducted a week after the course was completed to assess the overall effects of the pedagogical model and the instructional approach used in this oral English argumentation course. The procedure adopted for the post-test was the same as that for the pretest so as to ensure a similar basis of comparison. However, only ten participants (the absence of one participant led to the exclusion of his partner from the post-test) were engaged in a 10-minute[§] dyadic argumentation for the same position on the same controversy with the same partner as in the pretest. Among the five pairs of arguments, one was eventually excluded from the final data for analysis, because the two participants, by mistake, switched their position and argued for a position opposite to the one which they held in the pretest, leaving only four argumentations used for comparison and contrast with the pretest performances.

It was found that the course had helped the participants to become more aware of the components of the process of argumentation, and as a result, they engaged in more challenges/refutations of their opponent's arguments in the post-test than in the pretest. In the post-test, four participants were found to use argumentation-related meta-language like "My position is...", "Another reason is...", "That's my challenge," "Is that your challenge?" in their arguments. Because of a heightened awareness of the different components of argumentation, the participants proceeded with rather different patterns in the pre- and post-test argumentations. The pattern of most of the dyadic argumentations in the pretest resembles a parallel-track reasoning where the participants took turns in developing only their own arguments, and not in questioning or refuting the other's arguments, as clearly captured in the following extract taken from an argument on the topic that smoking while walking

[§] When the post-test was in session, it immediately became clear to the researcher that the participants had a lot more to say in response to their partner's arguments than they had in the pretest, and so if the argumentation were terminated at 10 minutes, it would be curtailed to a much larger extent than it had been in the pretest and would possibly cause much frustration in the participants. Thus the researcher decided on the spot to extend the time by allowing the participants to cover most of the reasons that they had constructed for their position, but to only use the first 10 minutes of each of the tests for the pre- and post-test comparison.

should be legally prohibited (“N” refers to the negative, and “A,” the affirmative):

N: I think many chain smokers have problem with that habit (of smoking). They need help. Maybe take some medicine to quit that habit of smoking.

A: Yeah, maybe you are right, but *smoking smell can make somebody inhale the smell and make the environment bad.*

N: Maybe the smell will make the environment bad, but I think *banning smoking in walk isn't a good way because if a chain smoker want(s) to smoke, they wouldn't care what they smoke anywhere or in any time. OK?*

A: Maybe a smoker can smoke in the house and less in the public place.

N: But the issue is banning smoking in walking, not quitting smoking, OK? *I think it's waste of time and money in banning that.*

A: Maybe banning that cause a lot of time and money, but *the pose and smell makes others uncomfortable.*

In the above example, both arguers kept reiterating and elaborating on their own reasons (as shown in the italic lines), which for one were related to “banning smoking while walking is a waste of time and money” and for the other were related to “the smoke makes others uncomfortable.” Note that a temporary concession led by the discourse marker “Maybe” was often given by the participants to hedge the justification for their stance.

This pattern, however, was greatly rectified in the post-test with one or both participants often able to follow their opponent’s reason with a direct challenge or refutation as illustrated in the following excerpt (see the parts in italics) given by the same participants for the same positions on the same topic:

N: ...Some people just need to relax in a big place at work. They

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may not have other ways to relax and they think smoking is an easy way to relax themselves.

A: *But we are talking about smoking while walking, not just about smoking as one thing.*

N: Smoking while walking maybe make[s] some people comfortable. Maybe you have something to do. You cannot just stay there smoking.

A: *Why not? You can just smoke here. Why should we walk?*

N: You mean smoke while walking?

A: I said why smoking (smoker) should walk? Why not stay at one place?

N: Just like I said, they maybe have an important date, work. Maybe that will change their life that they should do it right away. They maybe hurry; they can't just stay there to smoke.

A: *If they are hurried, why should (are) they smoking?*

In this excerpt, the arguer who agreed to a legal ban on smoking while walking delivered his challenge and refutation of his opponent's reason in three consecutive turns. He first pointed out that his opponent had digressed onto a topic (i.e., smoking only) that was different from the one being debated (i.e., smoking while walking). Then, he indirectly pointed out, when challenging the reasons given by the opponent, that the reasons which his opponent gave were either irrelevant to the controversy under discussion (i.e., banning smoking is different from banning smoking while walking and thus smokers can still relax by smoking and staying at the same place) or contained premises that were contradictory to each other (i.e., if the smoker is really in such a hurry, he/she would not even have the chance to smoke, and thus the hypothetical scenario would not exist).

While improvement was found in the form of the participants' argumentation and in how quick some had become in challenging/refuting their opponent's arguments (e.g., challenging an

unsupported assertion with “how do you know that?”), much was still left to be desired in the quality of the justification proffered as support for their stance, be it with regard to the nature of the reason or to the use of evidence. In both the pre- and post-test, most of the reasons proposed for the position taken in each controversy were of the weak type. There were reasons the meaning of which was vague (i.e., “homosexual marriage is not ethical” or “banning smoking while walking is simply a waste of time and money”); there were reasons in support of a position (i.e., “banning smoking”) which were different from the one in dispute (i.e., “banning smoking while walking”); and there were also justifications that were unsupported assertions (e.g., “children who see people walk and smoke on the street would like to do the same” “people in jail would reflect on what they did and maybe they will reflect on what they did and won’t do it anymore” and “If foreign tourists visit our country, they will think it [i.e., smoking while walking] ugly”) or unwarranted conclusions (e.g., “if homosexual people love each other, they should have the right to get married,” and “if homosexual people cannot be happy after they get married, why do they want to get married”). The fact that about the same numbers of unsupported assertions were found in *the* argumentation in the pre- and post-tests suggests that there was not much improvement in the ability of the participants to use evidence to bolster their justification, either.

Equally unsatisfactory was the participants’ enactment of the “defense” component. In both the pre- and post-test argumentation, many of the responses following the opponent’s challenge/refutation (which are termed “defense” in the pedagogical model) were simply a reiteration of the original reasons, instead of a rebuttal of the challenge/refutation and/or provision of additional support to reestablish the original reasons. The responses (see the italic lines) given by the arguer opposed to banning smoking while walking in the following extract are an example of such reiteration:

N: I disagree about it.

A: Why?

N: Maybe it cause inconvenience to the other, but it cause inconvenience to smoking people too.

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- A: I think first of all that smoking is not good, and you can't deny that. It did damage to your lungs and all the other organs. And, it's just not good for yourself and all the other people around you.
- N: *But it's their choice; they just want to smoke. Maybe it can help them relax or make them more comfortable.*
- A: Well, if they want to smoke, they can smoke at places there are smoking rooms, not just smoking and walking all around on the street. It won't be good for people waiting for buses or other people who come to our country and see all the people smoking and walking around.
- N: *But they need to. It becomes their life because they smoke for a long time.*

As the above excerpt illustrates, when facing refutations from the opponent for the first time (“...it is not good for yourself and all the other people around you”), the arguer only went on to reiterate the initial reason that she had given as to why banning smoking while walking would cause inconvenience to smokers (“Maybe it can help them relax or make them more comfortable [and thus when smoking in public is banned, these people have to go through trouble to find a place to smoke to relax]”). When confronted with a more direct refutation from her opponent (“...if they want to smoke, they can smoke at (*in*) places (*where*) there are smoking rooms...it won't be good for people waiting for buses or (*for*) other people who come to our country...”), the arguer again only reiterated the original reason that smokers need to smoke (“But they need to. It becomes their life...”). No rebuttal or challenge of the opponent's refutation was put forward as a way to reestablish the reason that had been presented initially.

Judging from these results, the argumentation course was not as effective in improving the ability of the participants to justify their stance, to detect fallacies, particularly unwarranted conclusions, or to defend their stance as it was in heightening their awareness of the argumentation process in general and strengthening their ability to spot and question unsupported assertions.

CONCLUSION

To explore ways of teaching oral English argumentation to average-level Taiwanese high school students, this action research study has devised, tested, and modified a pedagogical model and a teaching approach. To recap the findings for the first and third research questions on what to teach about oral argumentation and how to teach it, a five-component argumentation model (i.e., position, justification, challenge/refutation, defense and concession), a five-stage teaching approach (i.e., overview, component instruction, modeling, guided practice, and independent practice), and related critical thinking and discourse skills were devised and assembled. When implementing the argumentation model, teachers should pay heed to the critical thinking and/or discourse skills that are entailed by the components of justification, challenge/refutation, and concession. When adopting the teaching approach, teachers can repeat the modeling, guided practice and independent practice stages in a cycle for each argumentation component and also combine the generic and infusion approaches to facilitate the transfer of skills.

As to the second research question on the effectiveness of the pedagogical model and the teaching approach, while it was found that the participants perceived that the instruction was helpful in cultivating their ability to reason and argue in English, and their post-test performance also proved that the instruction was effective in heightening the participants' awareness of the process of argumentation and in strengthening their ability to spot and question unsupported assertions, it fell short in enhancing the ability of the students to provide reasons for their stance, to detect fallacies, particularly unwarranted conclusions, and to defend their stance. While only a moderate level of success was found with such a model and approach, the students' improvement in wake of the training was nonetheless encouraging; it showed that even ordinary Taiwanese high school students have what it takes to develop the ability to engage in such highly challenging oral activity. EFL scholars and teaching professionals are certainly welcome to explore the current model and approach for further modifications. Only with more joined hands and efforts can we eventually lead our students to claim triumph in this less attempted but equally essential oral activity.

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CORRESPONDENCE

Shau-Ju Chang, Department of English, National Taiwan Normal University, Taipei, Taiwan
E-mail address: t22028@ntnu.edu.tw