

## Argumentation in second-language academic writing: teacher and learner perspectives

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Fiona Dalziel  
University of Padova, Italy

Carole Sedgwick  
Roehampton University, London, UK

BALEAP Biennial Conference  
University of Portsmouth, UK  
10-12 April 2011

## The macro-context

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- ❑ Two degree courses in modern languages which require the study of two languages
    - ❑ Traditional literature-based course
    - ❑ Course with emphasis on mediation
  - ❑ Large numbers of students (50+ in a writing class)
  - ❑ Mixed ability classes
  - ❑ Facilities for blended learning provided by Language Centre
  - ❑ Most university assessment by means of oral examinations
  - ❑ Most (or all) writing carried out as part of language courses
  - ❑ 8,000 - 10,000 word dissertation to conclude degree course
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## The micro-context

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### The Writing Syllabus *for Mediazione Linguistica e Culturale*

- ❑ First year – B1/B2
    - personal profiles, learner diaries, online forum messages, informal emails, simple narratives, listening reports, newspaper summaries, formal reports (involving summarizing)
  - ❑ Second year – B2
    - statements of intent, note taking, listening reports, formal emails (business transactions e.g. negotiating, complaining, asking for information), translations of business profiles
  - ❑ Third year – B2/C1
    - translations of newspaper articles, statements of intent, academic essay
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## The micro-context

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### Why the academic essay?

- ❑ To improve general writing (and language) skills
- ❑ To prepare students for BA dissertation writing
- ❑ To prepare students for writing requirements of MA course
- ❑ To develop critical thinking

*I can write clear, well-structured texts on complex subjects in my field, underlining the relevant salient issues, expanding and supporting points of view at some length with subsidiary points, reasons and relevant examples, and rounding them off with an appropriate conclusion. (ELP, writing, level C1)*

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## The micro-context

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### Assessment

- ❑ 350-400 essay written in computer lab
  - ❑ Topic of essay closely related to content of degree course (translation studies, the role of the professional translator, intercultural communicative competence etc. )
  - ❑ Students required to use a limited number of bibliographical references
  - ❑ Stylesheet provided
  - ❑ Use of online resources encouraged (dictionaries, concordancers)
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## The micro-context

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### Course outline

- ❑ Classroom
    - ❑ discussion of genre requirements (criteria for peer review)
    - ❑ discussion of writing processes
    - ❑ collaborative writing (e.g. introductions, conclusions)
    - ❑ brainstorming topics
    - ❑ guest speakers (note-taking)
    - ❑ feedback on written work
    - ❑ language revision
  - ❑ Online
    - ❑ reflection on writing experiences and ability
    - ❑ three essays (first draft, individual peer feedback, group teacher feedback, final version, individual teacher feedback)
    - ❑ concordancing tasks (e.g. using British Academic Written English Corpus (BAWE)  
<http://the.sketchengine.co.uk/open/>)
    - ❑ online Dossier (motivating inclusion choices)
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## Micro-context

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Essay title:

What may get "lost in translation"? Are there any texts which you consider to be untranslatable? Discuss.

Readings with opposing points of view (Sapir-Whorf hypothesis v. Nabokov)

Brainstorming based on translation experiences (as readers and translators)

Guest speakers on audiovisual translation and translating children's literature

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## Rationale

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- ☐ Apparent discrepancy between what was valued and what was "officially" assessed
  - ☐ Comparison with research on MA theses, where argument was identified as a salient feature
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## PhD research – Carole Sedgwick

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Research of academic literacy practices of MA thesis writing on an English language major in two different national contexts, Hungary and Italy.

Qualitative study of three theses in each context, treating each thesis as a separate case study.

She interviewed student, supervisor and assessor for each thesis and collected drafts of the theses including feedback, criteria for evaluation and thesis and programme guidelines etc.

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## PhD research – Carole Sedgwick

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Argument integral to the process of thesis development and evaluation ritualised and concretised in the oral defence of the thesis.

Stated explicitly as a requirement in four case studies but implicit in all.

Determined the shape of the theses in five case studies but was also important in the sixth.

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## PhD research – Carole Sedgwick

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Findings demonstrate the importance of argument and that it is expected to shape text. Carole found that argument in the theses in her study varied according to:

- epistemological orientation
  - theoretical and methodological perspectives
  - topic selected
  - ideological perspectives
  - perception of student as insider or outside, which related to known or imagined authorities (disciplinary, subject specialism, practitioner or academic, the academy) that were indexed in talk about argument
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## Argument and argumentation

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Andrews (2005) distinguishes between argument (the overall phenomenon) and argumentation (the process of arguing), suggesting that the latter is most relevant to education

"Argumentative capacity is the hidden criterion in the assessment of student essays, research papers, critiques and syntheses from about the age of 16 upwards. Students who do well in the educational system are those who not only know their subject, but can also argue it well [...] Students are expected to be good at argument, but no-one tells them how to be good at it or helps them to do it better." (Andrews, 2007)

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## Argumentation and assessment criteria

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TOEFL writing score guide (Weigle, 2002)

*6. An essay at this level*

*Uses clearly appropriate details to support a thesis or illustrate ideas*

Michigan writing assessment scoring guide (Weigle, 2002)

*Ideas and arguments*

*6 The essay deals with the issues centrally and fully. The position is clear, and strongly and substantially argued. The complexity of the issues is treated seriously and the viewpoints of other people are taken into account very well.*

*1 The essay does not develop or support an argument about the topic, although it may "talk about" the topic.*

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## Research questions

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- ☐ How prevalent is argument in teacher and learner evaluation of academic writing?
  - ☐ Are there differences in how teachers and learners perceive argument?
  - ☐ How is argument shaped in highly-valued essays reflect what was valued
  - ☐ How can argument be fostered in approaches to teaching and assessment?
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## Methodology and data set

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- For concordancing:
    - written peer reviews of second essay (93)
  - For qualitative evaluation analysis 1:
    - introductory task (148); final reflection (dossier) (111)
  - For qualitative evaluation analysis 2:
    - tutor written evaluations of representative range of 30 essays  
– A, B, C, Fail + comment; peer evaluations of these 30 essays
  - For qualitative argument analysis 3:
    - analysis of highly-valued texts (graded A by tutors) for construction of argument
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## Learner perceptions of argumentation

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Concordance results:

Noun “argument” appeared 12 times, but 3 of these with meaning of “topic”. Of 9 cases, 5 involved praise while 4 implied criticism.  
Verb “argue” appeared once.

Overall, 50 out of 93 comments touched on argument, using words such as:

- support (your ideas)
  - logical connection
  - explain theories
  - express contrasting ideas
  - personalizing specialists’ opinions
  - develop (ideas)
  - express ideas
  - balanced
  - explain what you assert
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## Learner perceptions of argumentation

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Examples from peer comments:

*The examples you made are fine and **fit the argument**. However, I guess it would be nice if you try to make an example taken from your own personal experience, in order to **add a more "personal" feeling to your essay**, which is good, but it feels a bit too "academic" to me.*

*You need to try to strike up a balance between writing in a personal and in an impersonal way, because you did not write about your personal ideas and maybe you can say something about your personal experiences. You did not use sources but this is up to you. **You can put some sources to support and argument what you wrote.***

*it is not clear what is the gist of the essay, nor what argument it supports or the thesis she wants to support. In fact the essay is quite impersonal, and there is no thesis statement that gives an angle to her work, rather it is a summary of different points of view.*

*You used impersonal forms and also the first-person pronoun is well used. **You developed the argument both making quotations and explaining your own ideas** and this is very important!*

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## Learner perceptions of argumentation

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Beginning of course reflections:

***essays scared me a little** because I never produced this type of text, following a structure and using an higher register.*

End of course reflections:

*Thirdly, I want to insert in this dossier an essay. I had never done an essay before, therefore was pretty difficult to understand and write it. The topic was about translation, what could be getting lost and, in our point of view, if there was something that could be untranslatable. **It was a challenge because I had to reorganized my ideas in a clear way, giving personal examples and not only quoting someone else's ideas. It is always thought-provoking start with something new and I liked it. It was difficult to understand how to balance my opinion, quotes and examples and moreover was hard for me using the language in a polite way, by reporting my ideas softly and not directly to the reader.** I am very glad to have learned a new type of text and also a new way to write. It was firstly corrected and revised by a peer and then corrected and marked by my Professor.*

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## Learner perceptions of argumentation

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### Beginning of course reflections:

*To be honest, I do not like writing because I consider it the most difficult skill to acquire while studying a foreign language. **Writing should always be creative, coherent and well-structured**, which requires concentration, good knowledge of writing techniques as well as of grammar and vocabulary. Only when the initial intent and the final message of the author are clear to the reader, may we speak about successful writing.*

### End of course reflections:

*I composed this essay during the course in Academic Writing held at the third year of my studies at the University of Padua. It was corrected by the teacher. It is an example of individual work that reflects my ability to express myself in writing on a variety of topics of personal and academic interest. **I consider this activity useful for developing critical thinking and improving abilities in summarizing and synthesizing arguments from a number of sources as well as in text organisation.** I chose this essay because it indicates my actual command of English as far as writing skills are concerned.*

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## Teacher perceptions of argumentation

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How prevalent is argument in teacher evaluations?

1<sup>st</sup> scorer – 14 out of 30 comments related to argument

2<sup>nd</sup> scorer – 19 out of 30 comments related to argument

However, argument would appear to be assumed by tutors and this comes through in some of the comments.

Need for follow-up interviews

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## Learner and teacher perceptions

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11 essays rated highly by tutors in terms of argumentation  
All also rated highly by peers

10 essays given poor evaluation by tutors in terms of argumentation  
5 of these also given poor evaluation by peers

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## Learner and teacher perceptions

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### Essay rated highly by two teachers

Teacher comments:

*I enjoyed this essay - very convincing. His quotes and references are very successfully woven into the text.*

*The writer appears to be engaging with his/her assumed audience, puts forward an argument and attempts to support this in the course of the essay. He uses references but also own anecdotal evidence. There is evidence of originality/critical thinking in the essay. The essay is readable/involving.*

Peer comment:

*The essay is readable and enjoyable, the title used to separate each paragraph is helpful to follow smoothly the text and in this way you give to every of them importance. In my opinion, you used few quotation to explain your ideas, you need to use the quotes to express contrasting and different point between authors. Finally you write your personal experience and difficulties on a tourist guide translation, and it is an important aspect of the problem, but you didn't write if there is a type of text you consider untranslatable and why. To sum up, your essay is well done!*

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## Learner and teacher perceptions

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### Essay given low rating by teachers

*Introduction seems a long way off from crux of the matter – in spite of arousing interest. Writer doesn't really put forward an argument and the conclusion seems to refute what has been said - ie, uses references to say that translation is an 'approximation' then says no text can be considered. Not sure she got the point or was clear about what she thought.*

*English OK. Statements need further discussion and exemplifying. More quotations than well-argued text.*

#### Learner comment:

*I have to point out a couple of things that, in my opinion, are relevant that should improve your essay. I noticed that **your personal opinion is not clearly explained**, or you has not gone deeply into your ideas. You made few examples, I mean concrete examples of your personal experiences or about text that you studied or read. Secondly, **you have not explained your point of view regarding as untranslatable texts. You only quotes someone else's opinion but not write your idea.** In my point of view you used lot of quotations but few personal ideas, or when you expressed your personal opinion, **you didn't make examples to support your statements.** The only advice that I can give to you is to expand your personal opinion despite of quotations.*

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## Learner and teacher perceptions

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Peer comments influenced by desire to use positive politeness strategies.

*[...] you could take another one or two examples about what could be lost in translation to develop only a little more the body of your essay (maybe your own experiences about translations?).*

*I REALLY enjoyed your ideas about the impossibility to translated dialect: it's a very good example of an (often) untranslatable concept. A very very good argument, well done.*

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## Argumentation in highly-valued essays

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- ❑ Forming ideas

"Arguments can begin with unconnected heaps of associations. They attain the beginnings of unity when a central unifying idea is generated to hold them together." (Andrews, 2005)

- ❑ Taking up a position by making claims/propositions

Often in contrast to previous arguments (Kaufer and Geisler, 1991)

- ❑ Supporting one's argument

Developing a relationship between claims (propositions) and grounds (evidence (Toulmin, 1958), sometimes with mediation ("under some circumstances")

- ❑ Convincing one's audience

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## Future directions

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- ❑ More research into learner/teacher perceptions of argumentation and the process of learning to argue, by means of peer review and learner diaries

- ❑ More research into influence of disciplinary areas and how epistemology shapes practice and what authorities they are challenged (also in relation to BA dissertations)

- ❑ Reflection on to how to weave activities to foster the process of argumentation into the process of writing, including CT reading activities

- ❑ Reflection on how to combine academic writing with other forms of argumentation e.g. debate, online discussions etc.

- ❑ Exploration of "regenring tasks" (English, 2011)

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## Thanks!

[fionaclare.dalziel@unipd.it](mailto:fionaclare.dalziel@unipd.it)

[C.Sedgwick@roehampton.ac.uk](mailto:C.Sedgwick@roehampton.ac.uk)

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