

Development of Critical Thinking Skills in the Framework of the Argumentation Theory

By a widely accepted definition argumentation skills generally presuppose the ability to engage in reasoned discussion and the capacity to argue effectively. Argumentation is a basic requirement for active participation in a modern democratic society and argumentation skills are needed in many different community contexts [1:219]. The ability to communicate, to engage in a range of public or private disputes and discussions, to participate in online communication, in different types of blogosphere activities presupposes before all the development of good practical argumentative skills and the formation of critical thinking skills so as to be convincing and successful in the civilized argumentative discourse. To be sufficiently good at argumentation generally means not only to possess the ability to give one's reasoned arguments and to avoid the unsupported arguments that can lead to a breakdown in communication during reasoned discussions, but also the ability to evaluate the given arguments, to understand and perceive other people's ideas, to distinguish explicit and implicit arguments, to identify the conflict of views and to see an ambiguity in oral or written texts so as not to be led astray by someone's ideas or reports in private or public argumentative contexts, or not to be influenced by someone's emotions and public sentiment. The development of critical reasoning skills can be assumed to be based on the abilities to evaluate the quality of the content of the given arguments and to form a critical attitude to given oral or written information, on the abilities to produce one's own views on the problem under discussion and to develop freedom and independence from the influence of false arguments that can arise in the process of communication. Most frequently used false arguments that can arise in argumentation are: argumentum ad verecundiam (reference to one's own significance or to the authority) [2:126, 129], argumentum ad populum

(a direct or indirect influence on the emotional sphere of the hearer) [2:124-125], argumentum ad hominem (a direct personal attack at the opponent with the aim of defamation of character) [2:102], argumentum ad baculum (a threatening attack at the opponent so as to prevent his/her opinion to be expressed) [2:100-101]. The development of critical thinking skills to promote effective argumentation in discourse may include the following main strategies: students' critical analysis of the position of the opponent; the identification of students' own position in argumentative discourse and the formation of students' point of view on the discussed problem; the discernment of unsupported arguments in argumentation; critical evaluation of explicit and implicit arguments; the discrimination of true and false arguments; improvement of students' ability to identify the conflict of views. To improve students' critical thinking skills at the text-based lessons the following tasks can be formulated during discussion based on the book "Jane Eyre" by Ch. Brontë [3]:

A. Evaluation of the importance of the events, of the amount and volume of the information

What new information about Victorian England does the reader get from this part of Jane Eyre's narration? Is there enough information for the reader to have an opinion about the people Jane Eyre met at Thornfield?

B. Evaluation of the influence of the narrator, making a judgement about the narrator's being an unbiased person, estimation of the level of confidence in the narrator's words

In what key does Jane Eyre describe the events and the atmosphere at Gateshead? What, to your mind, is a description of facts and what is Jane's personal opinion? Why do you think Jane made false reasoning about Mrs. Fairfax as a person and about her social status? Why was she misled? Is there enough evidence in the narration to support Jane's high opinion of Mr. Rochester? Could she be under a self-delusion or a self-deception about him? Why? /Why not?

C. Analysis of the structure and of the scheme of argumentation, the recognition of the implicit and explicit arguments; evaluation of the given arguments

What pragmatic types of argumentation can be found in Jane Eyre's narration: moral instruction and judgements, logical reasoning, explanation of facts, description of events, common sense reasoning, conceptual statements, reference to experience, emotional impressions or something else? What does Mr. Rochester appeal to more in his talk to Jane: reason or emotions? What persuasive techniques does he use to manipulate Jane? What figurative language does Mr. Rochester use to increase his influence over Jane? Prove your point with the lines from the text. Do you find Mr. Rochester's arguments convincing and his behavior consistent when he, on the one hand, alludes to his youth and inexperience trying to explain his motives for having married Bertha Mason, and on the other hand, he himself tries to take advantage of Jane's youth and her inexperience? Find other cases of inconsistency and controversy in Mr. Rochester's argumentation and in his actions and comment on them. Motivate your answer.

D. Analysis of the position of the main characters, their behavior and actions.

What arguments, logical or emotional, are mostly seen in Mr. Rochester's story? In what way are you influenced by it and why? What arguments did Jane, the heroine, put forward in defence of Bertha Mason? Do you agree with her arguments? Are there any other cases of conflict of opinions in this part of narration? In what way can they be accounted for? What arguments are there for and against each of positions? Prove your point. Do you think St. John and Jane mean the same thing when they both speak about "justice"?

E. Analysis of the position and the views of the author of the work and his/her appeal to the reader

Find the lines of emotional strain in the text to show a melodramatic note and its emotional influence on the reader's feelings. In what way can Charlotte Brontë's views and her attitude towards Jane, as a young girl, and as an adult, be felt in the text? What can you

say about the author's presentation of herself and her feelings and views in the text. Try to prove your point. Find the lines in the narration in which the reader is addressed directly. Whose voice is heard here: Jane's, the heroine, Jane's, the narrator, or Charlotte Brontë's, the author's? Comment on the idea of the reader which is seen in this. What emotional and psychological atmosphere does this direct appeal to the reader create? Motivate your answer.

F. Formation of students' own points of view and their opinions

Do you agree with Mr. Rochester that Jane was really cruel towards him when she had left him at Thornfield without "confiding in him"? Do you believe his words that he would not have "constituted himself Jane's tyrant"? Why? /Why not? What do you think is the true ending of the story: a happy married life of Mr. Rochester and Jane, or a premature death of St. John on his mission in India, because "life without love is death"? Motivate your answer.

In conclusion it may be said that the basic critical thinking skills can be improved if the possibility of the literary text, viewed in the framework of argumentation theory, is regarded as helpful and rewarding for their development.

References:

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