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Argument and University ELL Composition

Teaching argument elements to English language learners (ELL) encourages reading comprehension because it demands understanding of assumptions informing texts; it also provides models to enhance character appeal and evidence selection in student texts. University ELL students may comprehend word meanings; however, embedded assumptions may remain obscure. An argument approach encourages examination of the values informing texts. Students investigate Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter From Birmingham Jail" for its claim, reason, evidence, persuasive appeals, and supporting assumptions. A close reading shows how King's selection of evidence takes his audience's values into account. A writing project requires a discussion of the values embedded in the "Letter" through an evaluation of King's character appeal. Then, students write a letter in which they take audience assumptions, values, and beliefs into account to select appropriate evidence and to increase their own credibility.

Why Is an Argument Approach Useful in ELL Reading and Writing Instruction?

An argument entails a belief about what is true in the world supported by good reasons and adequate evidence. Argument is pervasive in the US, in part because of the heterogeneity of our population. Age, gender, language, religion, history, socioeconomic status, education, and ethnicity—all influence the values and beliefs of every individual. When we speak, listen, write, or read, we cannot be assured that our interlocutor shares our values and beliefs because of his or her personal experience with history, economics, society, language, religion, or culture. As a result, even discourse between people who speak the same language can cause confusion because of the writer's and the audience's fundamentally different understandings of a topic. An understanding of argument elements may allow more comprehensible communication for many reasons.

An argument approach encourages high-level reading comprehension and more sophisticated writing ability because it teaches students to systematically look for the claim, reason, evidence, appeals, and assumptions in a text. The assumptions a writer makes while writing a text may give added or differ-

ent meaning to the denotation of the words in the text. Often, reading instruction for English language learner (ELL) students is conceived of as decoding words and phrases with the help of a dictionary or by looking at the textual context of the information. However, as Crable (1976) suggests, meanings "are not in the words: meanings are in people. And accurate communication may not arise from simple selection of 'right words'—but is concerned with how people interpret those words" (pp. 6-7). In *The Rhetoric of Rhetoric,* Booth (2004) discusses this in terms of "Aristotle's key term, *inventio* (invention or discovery of making of argument and thus of realities)." Booth suggests, "To read and write *well* one must learn how to read and listen to rhetoric *critically* and then write or speak *effective* rhetoric in response. And if you learn to do these well, the absorption of necessary information will occur as you read and write" (p. 93). Teaching ELL students to understand argument elements coincides with teaching them to identify realities that they, because of their lack of cultural information, may not have been taught to consider as they read. A way to help ELL students identify the collective significance in a text is to instruct them to systematically identify the assumptions made in texts. Thus, students may infer the collective significance of textual information to come to conclusions about the community for which the text was written.

This article focuses on how ELL reading and writing instruction may be improved through an argument approach. Specifically, it provides a general definition and an example of an argument approach, a brief comparison of argument analysis with genre analysis, and an example of identifying claim, reason, evidence, assumptions, and persuasive appeals in Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter From Birmingham Jail." This approach is used to improve student reading through teacher modeling and student practice of inference. The approach is used to improve student writing by demonstrating how the writer's awareness of audience augments the author's presentation of self through the character appeal of ethos. Likewise, the author's effective selection of supporting evidence depends on an understanding of audience.

What Is an Argument Approach?

Crable (1976) recognizes the Toulmin model for argument and adds to it when he says:

> What we must realize is that when we say meanings are in people, we mean two things: first, some of the meaning in a situation will be created by an *individual interpretation* of the words, but that second, some of the meaning of the language is created by *collective significance* of the words in the situation in which we find ourselves. (pp. 6-7)

The argument approach I present is modified from Toulmin's and focuses on teaching students five aspects of argumentation.[1] These five aspects are fewer than those called for in Toulmin's model and the terms "claim," "reason," "evidence," and "assumptions" seem to be more readily understood than Toulmin's lexicon. Students are taught to:

- Identify the claim of a text.
- Identify the reason of the text.
- Identify the evidence given to support the claim.
- Identify assumptions that the author and readers must share for the argument to be persuasive.
- Identify persuasive appeals such as the appeals to character, emotion, or logic.

Persuasive appeals are traditionally referred to as "ethos, "pathos," and "logos"—using Aristotelian terms. However, the terms "character," "emotion," and "logic" seem more accessible to students. A "character" appeal correlates with "ethos"—whereby the author constructs a text in which the credibility, status, and values of the author are apparent. Aristotle's definition classifies "ethos" into three components: "practical wisdom," "virtue/honesty," and "goodwill to audience." Practical wisdom indicates the author has personal experience with the topic as well as education and wisdom; virtue/honesty indicates the author understands and abides by the mores of his or her discourse community; goodwill to audience indicates the author takes into account the concerns and questions of the audience and has the audience's best interests in mind. An "emotion" appeal correlates with "pathos"—the author's use of emotion to persuade. A "logic" appeal correlates with "logos"—which includes text organization as well as relevant, accurate, and believable evidence.

Arguments A and *B* exemplify the five aspects of argumentation:

Argument A Claim: Smoking in public must be banned.
Reason: Because smoking in public is bad for everyone's health
Evidence: Research on nicotine's effect on health
Assumption: Anything that is bad for everyone's health must be banned.
Appeal: Possibly "logos" as the argument is based on research findings.

Argument B Claim: Smoking in public must not be banned.
Reason: Because smoking in public is an individual choice
Evidence: Constitutional rights of personal freedom
Assumption: Anything that is an individual choice must not be banned.
Appeal: Possibly "pathos" as the argument rests on a discussion of civil liberties.

As may be seen from the above examples, this argument approach requires students to use a heuristic method of identifying argument elements. The argument claim is accompanied by a reason. A systematic way to state claims and reasons is to use two sentences linked with a *because* clause.

[subject]	+	[predicate]	*because* [subject]	+	[predicate]
[smoking]	+	[must be banned]	*because* [smoking]	+	[is bad for everyone's health]

The subject of each of these sentences needs to be the same in order to easily identify the argument's underlying assumption. The assumption is located by placing the argument reason in front of the claim, just so: *Smoking is bad for everyone's health; smoking must be banned.*

Then, the argument is universalized, resulting in the assumption: *Anything that is bad for everyone's health must be banned.*

Arguments are based on shared values, assumptions, and collective understanding; however, if the reader does not first accept the fundamental assumption behind the argument—either that people must be protected from unhealthy environments, or that smokers' individual choice rights must be protected along with everyone else's individual choice rights—then the reader cannot accept the claim and reason.

The conflicting views of the above claims are common in the US: Many controversial topics are fueled by the opposition between the rights of the community and the rights of the individual. Because this conflict might not be so extreme or apparent in the societies our ELL students come from, arguments that are based on the balance between individual rights and community protection may seem incomprehensible. When ELL students are shown that fundamental belief systems may be inferred from the texts they read, they may use this approach to learn valuable information about the culture in which the text is written.

Argument appeals of character, emotion, and logic are also predicated on the values, beliefs, and assumptions of the audience. Take Argument A, for example: In researching his or her audience, the author might find that in addition to the assumption "anything that is bad for everyone's health must be banned," the audience also values personal responsibility. In that case, a simple emotional appeal of a photograph of a severely ill emphysema patient might not be enough to persuade. In addition, the author will need to address the audience's concern for personal responsibility with a logic appeal that shows the extreme likelihood of addiction to nicotine. When an author understands what the audience assumes to be true about the world, the author may select adequate and relevant evidence to support claims.

How Does an Argument Approach Compare With Genre Analysis?

This examination of assumptions is an important aspect of an argument approach and of genre analysis. The idea of argument assumptions is similar to the knowledge of the "community values" of a discourse community, which Johns (1997) discusses in her explanation of genre analysis, *Text, Role, and Context.* In both an argument approach and genre analysis, it is necessary for students to learn to identify the audience, or discourse community, of a text. Identifying the audience and its assumptions or "community values" helps students decide what supporting evidence is appropriate. For example, when students are writing in their disciplines, they will usually need to incorporate evidence from researchers in their fields. However, if students are writing letters to a student newspaper, then they will be able to use a more democratic approach to "who can speak" and may cite the comments of students, parents, or siblings.

A major area of difference between an argument approach and genre analysis is that genre analysis is traditionally used to aid instruction in reading and writing for academic and professional discourse communities. In an argument approach, "everything is an argument." In the US, we are surrounded by arguments: a song lyric, an editorial, a billboard, a textbook, a journal article, and a photograph—all of these texts have a claim and a reason, supporting evidence, underlying assumptions, and persuasive appeals. When students begin to look at texts through the "argument lens," they may be able to more deliberately read the culture through the text. They may also be more prepared to critique arguments and make personally responsible decisions in response to the arguments they encounter.

What Would a Sample Unit Look Like?

To begin an argument analysis, students first educate themselves about the context of the argument. To introduce Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter From Birmingham Jail," I assign prereading activities that include having students brainstorm what they know about King, the civil rights movement, and the 1960s era of U.S. history. First the students complete a "free write" about this topic, share their knowledge with a partner, and finally, share with the whole group while I write their comments on the blackboard. As homework, I assign the students an Internet search in which they use "Martin Luther King," "the civil rights movement," and "1960s era" as search words. They are asked to find a short article, a photograph, or a cartoon that provides information about this person, event, or time. In the next class period, students present their findings in an informal circle discussion. Through this collective research project, we all learn some of the social, political, and economic issues that led Dr. King to write his famous letter.

At this point, I introduce the "Statement by Alabama Clergymen" that prompted King's "Letter." In this statement, the eight clergymen call King an "outsider," and they call for a halt to the nonviolent protests taking place in Alabama because they are deemed "unwise" and "untimely." This preparatory contextual work gives the students the general and specific circumstances surrounding the "Letter." It also makes King's argument more comprehensible because it shows that he is responding to real accusations and commenting on real events of his time.

Key concepts that students need to know before their first reading of the text are claim, reason, supporting evidence, and assumptions. (Our class will have already worked with these four elements of argument before we read "Letter From Birmingham Jail." I use this letter to introduce the argument appeals, so it is the third assignment in the semester's sequence of four assignments.) I preview the text to show the students how King has organized his opening remarks to address the clergymen's concerns about King's being an "outsider," "unwise" and "untimely." Paragraphs 1-4 provide ample reasons why King is not an "outsider." Paragraphs 5-11 explain how King and his associates are wise, rather than "unwise," and paragraphs 12-14 address the accusation of "untimeliness." Students are assigned to read paragraphs 1-22 of "Letter From Birmingham Jail." (This letter and the "Statement by Alabama

Clergymen" are easily available on the Internet.) At the same time, I assign students to research specific references from the text, including the Apostle Paul, Socrates, Reinhold Niebuhr, the Supreme Court Decision of 1954, Saint Augustine, Saint Thomas Aquinas, Martin Buber, Paul Tillich, Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, and the Boston Tea Party.

In class, we read King's "Letter" out loud. I encourage students to volunteer to read by explaining that our classroom is a "safe environment" because every single person has an accent and every single person is working toward the same goal of acquiring standard English. As we work our way through the "Letter," we concentrate on comprehension. Students are asked to define the specific reference they had earlier been assigned when that reference appears in the text. At this juncture, the students' explanations may be expanded upon to show how the reference relates to the circumstances, place, and time of King's "Letter."

In addition to focusing on comprehension, I introduce the argument appeals that King uses. The student research into the references, and subsequent discussion, are especially productive when discussing King's character appeal to help students recognize that even though King was a Christian minister, he used references to other religions and secular sources for evidence, which results in his argument's being more persuasive for a broader audience. Use of a persuasive appeal is based upon what the author knows about the audience's values, beliefs, and assumptions. For example, King recognizes that he needs to enhance his character before the clergymen will take him seriously. He begins with a character appeal, using the elements of goodwill to audience, practical wisdom, and virtue/honesty. King's first two paragraphs incorporate all three of these elements:

> My Dear Fellow Clergymen:
>
> While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities "unwise and untimely." Seldom do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas. If I sought to answer all the criticisms that cross my desk, my secretaries would have little time for anything other than such correspondence in the course of the day, and I would have no time for constructive work. But since I feel that you are men of genuine good will and that your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I want to try to answer your statements in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms.
>
> I think I should indicate why I am here in Birmingham, since you have been influenced by the view which argues against "outsiders coming in." I have the honor of serving as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an organization operating in every southern state, with headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia. We have some eighty-five affiliated organizations across the South, and one of them is the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. Frequently we share staff, educational and financial resources with our affiliates. Several months ago the affiliate here in Birmingham asked us to be on call to engage in a nonviolent direct-action program if such were deemed necessary. We readily consented, and when the hour came we lived up to our promise. So I,

> along with several members of my staff, am here because I was invited here because I have organizational ties here.

I point out to the students that King demonstrates "goodwill to audience" by showing respect for his audience ("My Dear Fellow Clergymen"). He uses "practical wisdom" when he indicates his practical experience in the operation, the spreading, and the funding of civil rights projects. He reveals his "virtuous and honest" character when he says, "We readily consented and when the hour came we lived up to our promise." Students will benefit from realizing that argument appeals are not tidily separated in a text but intermix and reinforce each other.

For a second out-of-class reading, students are assigned to keep a reading journal in which they note areas where they see King's use of the character appeal and comment on why they believe the passage falls into that category. These journals are collected and read by the teacher or the tutor in order to assess whether the students understand the definitions and uses of argument appeals. Eventually, students develop their notes from this reading journal into a timed writing that serves as a draft, and finally, into a revised paper in which they identify King's use of argument appeals and its effectiveness.

A sample student paragraph by IR, done in an in-class, timed-writing situation, discusses King's use of character:

> Even when Mr. King wants to correct his audience in their assertions he uses a great deal of respect. Mr. King says, "In your statement you assert that our actions, even though peaceful, must be condemned because they precipitate violence. But is this a logical assertion? Isn't this like condemning a robbed man because his possession of money precipitated the act of robbery?" (247). Instead of just writing an angry letter and just sounding like a madman, Mr. King still maintains control and uses practical wisdom and goodwill to audience. Mr. King gives them examples to see the error of their ways. (IR)

IR began to understand the character appeal by recognizing it and naming it in King's "Letter." Through King's "Letter," students identify and discuss the use of character in constructing an argument that takes into account audience and purpose.

Audience and purpose also predict the kind of evidence that will be most persuasive. In the above student paragraph, the reader/writer has come across an example of an analogy used as evidence. The analogy exhibits sound logic. It concerns money and robbery; this topic and situation are familiar to the clergymen and this analogy will more clearly communicate the folly of blaming nonviolent protesters for the violence enacted by police and bystanders.

When students closely read King's "Letter," they are introduced to kinds of evidence that may be analyzed for credibility and that may be used as models of how to support their own arguments. King's support includes:

- Hypothetical situations;
- Analogy;

- Expert testimony;
- Definition;
- Research/known facts;
- Concrete examples;
- Personal experience.

Through King's argument, students notice how King's use of evidence is dependent upon the expectations of the audience—and how the evidence is collectively significant. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter From Birmingham Jail" is supported by evidence that refers to American assumptions and core Western civilization values. Students may investigate American culture and Western civilization as they analyze King's famous text.

One area of American culture that is particularly relevant for students is the tension between conservatism and liberalism. The Birmingham clergymen advocate a conservative stance to societal change. Conservatism, according to *Merriam Webster's,* "prefers gradual development to abrupt change." In contrast, the civil rights demonstrators value liberalism, which is based on "belief in progress." This basic difference between American political parties may help students to understand, and possibly navigate, many of the issues argued in America today.

One Western civilization notion that students may identify in the content of King's "Letter" is in his reference to Socrates. King uses Socrates as an ancient example of civil disobedience, the act of disobeying an unjust law. Socrates is considered to be one of the greatest of the Greek philosophers, and he was imprisoned and killed for his civil disobedience. This reference links King's activities to an important Western tradition. He reinforces his connection to this lineage in paragraph 21 when he uses personages from the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the American Revolutionary War (the Boston Tea Party) alongside the example of Socrates.

These various examples of civil disobedience give modern-day readers an indication of King's imagined audience. King is not only writing to the Birmingham clergymen. If he were, the reference to the Old and New Testaments would have been sufficient. However, his imagined audience is much broader, and indeed, King's "Letter" was published in urban newspapers across the US. To appeal to this larger audience, King uses the secular reference to Socrates, and he links his message to an American tradition when he recalls the Boston Tea Party. In paragraph 22, King brings his argument to contemporary times with the discussion of just and unjust laws in Germany under Adolf Hitler. The breadth of his references indicates the breadth of his imagined audience. Through King's example, students may begin to understand the importance of choosing appropriate and sufficient evidence that takes into account their readers' knowledge base.

"Letter From Birmingham Jail" is included in many rhetoric textbooks as an exemplar in the use of argument appeals. In addition, I have used Vesterman's (2006) *Reading and Writing Short Arguments* and Crusius and Channel's (2006) *The Aims of Argument* as class textbooks. It is not necessary to rely on a textbook, however, for this kind of instruction. Accessible texts, in terms of "easy to acquire," are magazine advertisements and newspaper edito-

rials. Teachers may use advertisements to point out and exemplify argument appeals. An exercise to help reinforce the instruction is to assign students, in groups, to create their own advertisement in which they use all three appeals. After the in-class presentation of the advertisement, the students of the class are asked to identify the appeals they noticed and infer what the commercial content reveals about the intended audience. Asking students to write about their choice and use of appeals may achieve further reinforcement. Newspaper editorials are easily found on many library databases and, surprisingly, even *New York Times* editorials are sometimes pitched to 7th- and 8th-grade readers. These editorials express current American arguments in focused and relatively easy-to-understand terms.

For longer texts, consider excerpts from the Declaration of Independence or Elizabeth Cady Stanton's (1848) Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions, which is an interesting American document in that Stanton uses the model of the Declaration of Independence to demonstrate that half of America still awaited equal rights. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech is also appropriate for this assignment. I recommend using an authentic excerpt that is manageable in terms of length and difficulty for the students. The use of simplified texts would diminish the effectiveness of the assignment.

What Conclusions Can We Draw?

As noted in Williams (2001), students incorporate characteristics of the text they are studying into the text they are writing. So the next step in this assignment sequence is for students to write a text deliberately using the character appeal to encourage them to consider how their own writing might be more persuasive if they demonstrated their own character and credibility as authors. King's use of the character appeal provides models for students to enhance their own character—resulting in writers who are more able to present information persuasively.

After studying King's letter, students are asked to write a "letter to the editor" or an editorial in which they demonstrate their own use of the character appeal. MS shows her understanding of goodwill to audience and practical wisdom when she indicates that she is "compelled" to write a letter to the editor because of her experience with driving a hazardous roadway:

> Encountering road improvement problems is of great concern to commuters and especially to Ramona residents. In response to your editorial [on] March 15, 2007 … I am compelled to respond out of urgent concern. I drive this highway many times a week along with hundreds of other drivers, encountering careless drivers on an unsafe road is stressful. The crosses marking the many deaths on this road serve only as a reminder that it is a deadly road to travel. (MS)

MS enhances her credibility with her audience by indicating that she is concerned about their welfare (goodwill to audience) and has personal experience with the issue she discusses (practical wisdom). Also, by actively taking her

audience into account, MS is able to determine which kind of evidence is most likely to persuade this particular audience. Her experience with driving the road and her depiction of the "crosses marking the many deaths" provide effective and relevant support for her overall claim.

Another student, AC, demonstrates goodwill to audience by taking her reader's concerns seriously, even though she disagrees with the reader's assumptions about child discipline.

> I am writing in response to your article on spanking children. … I am extremely interested in your opinion on this issue. You state that spanking can harm children not only physically but also mentally and conclude that it will lead to long-term side effects; this statement seems to be correct. We all know spanking can be harmful; however, I cannot say with confidence that spanking is completely unnecessary when it comes to disciplining children because I believe that corporal punishment should not be regulated in light of recent studies, my personal experience, and parents' rights. (AC)

Again, by taking her audience into account, AC recognizes her reader will not be persuaded simply by AC's "personal experience." AC will also use recent studies and a discussion of parents' rights to try to change her reader's mind concerning the proper discipline for children.

For both of these student authors, the deliberate use of the character appeal required them to understand their audience well enough to recognize the audience's values. Understanding their audience's assumptions helped both authors to write more persuasively and to select appropriate supporting evidence.

ESL reading and writing students may receive an "added benefit" when they are taught how to read arguments. First, an argument approach asks students to identify claims, reason, supporting evidence, and assumptions in texts they read; it then requires students to be able to produce these elements in texts they write. A greater understanding of how audience expectations and assumptions affect the writer's presentation of self and use of evidence results in more effective and persuasive writing.

Endnote

[1] The author would like to thank Glen McClish, department chair of the Department of Rhetoric and Writing Studies at San Diego State University, for sharing his knowledge of the theoretical underpinnings of argument.

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