

# ARGUMENTATION AND POLITENESS STRATEGIES FOR ENHANCING CRITICAL LITERACY COMPETENCE IN C1/C2 STUDENTS OF SPANISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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## **Abstract**

This work, proceeding from Ivanovic (2015), focuses on the linguistic manifestations of argumentation and politeness in expressing different points of view and how they can be applied in teaching Spanish as a FL to advanced level students according to the CEFR (2001) which suggests the critical interpretation of texts in levels B2/C.

For proving this proposal, columns published in two Spanish newspapers with different political orientation: progressive, *El País* (Carlos Boyero and Maruja Torres), and conservative, *ABC* (Antonio Burgos and Ignacio Camacho) were analyzed. Both the content and the strategies used by columnists have a persuasive goal and are considered materials that encourage students to think about social issues and trigger meaningful discussions.

Previous studies have shown that, on the one hand, argumentation is a way of being polite because it justifies communicative goals and is a way of collaborating with the speaker, and, on the other hand, politeness can be considered as a tool for argumentation (Fuentes, 2009: 117, 125). It is supposed that (im)politeness is an argumentative technique that can add value and convince the speaker of something (Alcoba and Poch: 2006, 2010).

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to approach Critical Literacy studies and develop critical literacy competence in C1/C2 students of Spanish as a FL focusing on argumentation and politeness strategies. In order to achieve that, as proposed in Goethals (2011), it is essential to enable students to identify different components of each text (text organization), to interpret its functional exponents and functions of certain strategies.

In that sense, to adopt critical approach towards media discourse and to be able to interpret the underlying messages it is necessary to emphasize the importance of the following

aspects to the B2/C students of Spanish as a FL: argumentation and politeness strategies used in columns and its significant exponents because it can allow us to show whether these manifestations of argumentation and politeness depend on ideology or rather on the personal style of each author.

## **1. Introduction**

This work, proceeding from Ivanovic (2015), focuses on the linguistic manifestations of argumentation and politeness in newspapers columns and how these techniques can be applied for enhancing critical literacy competence in teaching Spanish as a FL to advanced level students. According to the CEFR (2001), the critical interpretation of texts in levels B2/C is suggested so the aim of this work is to:

- Encourage students to develop critical attitude and incorporate that competence as an additional communicative competence in foreign language learning.
- Analyze techniques that can facilitate the acquisition of critical competence such as argumentation and politeness strategies.

That will allow them to see text, in general, and, each component of the text, in particular, from different perspectives and to finally see whether these manifestations of argumentation and politeness depend on ideology or rather on the personal style of each author.

## **2. Critical Literacy in the Framework of Foreign Language Learning**

The world we're living in is changing and evolving at an extraordinary rate and will continue to do so at ever-increasing rates. We live in an increasingly diverse, globalized, complex and media-saturated society which partly has to do with the penetration of Internet which has provided a common platform to communicate and share information. In this context, critical literacy competence has become vital.

Students must develop different literacies such as critical, multicultural, emotional, environmental, and media literacies. They need to know how to use their knowledge, information and to be able to think critically in order to grow personally and become thoughtful active citizens both on local and global levels.

Critical literacy is the ability to actively read different types of discourses so as to achieve a deeper understanding of socially constructed concepts such as ideology, power, domination, political, economic and gender inequality and injustice that are reflected in media, books, everyday conversations, etc. Critical literacy encourages students to understand and question ideology and power issues, attitudes, values, and beliefs of written or spoken discourses, as well as different visual applications. To become critically literate students have to develop and master not only simple reading comprehension, but also the ability to analyze, critique, and question the

messages inherently present within any form of discourse and to challenge these issues. Only in that way they can become active agents of change because critical literacy practices can contribute to change and the development of political awareness (Freire and Macedo, 1987; Luke and Freebody, 1999).

According to CEFR (2001), communicative language competence comprises several components:

- **Linguistic competences** include lexical, phonological, syntactical knowledge and skills and other dimensions of language as system, independently of the sociolinguistic value of its variations and the pragmatic functions of its realizations.
- **Sociolinguistic competences** refer to the socio-cultural conditions of language use (rules of politeness, norms that govern relations between different generation, sexes and social groups) which affects all language communication between representatives of different cultures even though participant may be unaware of its influence.
- **Pragmatic competences** are concerned with the functional use of linguistic resources (production of language functions, speech acts, mastery of discourse, etc.) in interactional exchanges.

Critical competence is considered in C2 level, both in case written production and visual reception (writing) (CEFR, 2001: 69)<sup>1</sup>:

Can understand and interpret critically virtually all forms of the written language including abstract, structurally complex, or highly colloquial literary and non-literary writings

Can understand a wide range of long and complex texts, appreciating subtle distinctions of style and implicit as well as explicit meaning.

Castellà and Cassany (2005) distinguish between a critical and a non-critical reader:

<b>Critic reader</b>	<b>Non-critic reader</b>
Seeking the unique and constant meaning	Aware that there are different meanings (dynamic and contextual)

Satisfied with his personal interpretation	Dialogues and seeks for social interpretations
Reads all texts in the same way	Reads each genre in a different way
Puts emphasis on the content and looks for main ideas	Puts emphasis on the ideology and looks for the intention
Pays attention on the explicit aspects	Draws attention to the implicit aspects
Satisfied with one source of information	Looks for different sources and contrasts them
Perceives quotations as accurate reproductions	Perceives quotations as interested reformulations
Argues that understanding is like believing	Argues that understanding is not the same as believing

Based on this distinction, we are primarily focusing on implicit aspects of each column, the author's' intention and ideology.

### 3. The relation between Argumentation-Politeness

Previous studies have shown that the relation between argumentation and (im)politeness in discourse is bidirectional (Fuentes, 2009; Alcaide Lara, 2014).

From one point of view, argumentation is bound to politeness since it can be used in favor of (im)politeness apart from the persuasive goal which is present in different degree in almost any kind of discourse as proposed by Anscombe and Ducrot (1994)<sup>2</sup>. When we provide the speaker with arguments, we in a way justify our communicative goals. When we give reasons, we collaborate with the speaker and respect his face. Persuasion doesn't have to be concealed always. Therefore, the argumentative structure can operate as a mechanism that regulates the speakers' face as well as a mechanism that reinforces (im)polite activity.

On the other hand, (im)politeness is considered a mechanism in favor of argument and its function is purely persuasive. It is supposed that (im)politeness is an argumentative technique that can add value and convince the speaker of something (Alcoba and Poch: 2006, 2010). The argumentative goal of politeness is to get something from the other and of the impoliteness to indirectly achieve something, to transmit the position of power, to convince or cause a reaction in the other (for example in politics discourse).

In conclusion, although politeness emphasizes more the sociological and psychological aspect of communication and has other functions<sup>3</sup> apart from persuasive, in this work we will focus on its purely argumentative goal and we consider it a persuasive technique per se.

#### **4. Argumentation – Politeness Strategies in FLT and for enhancing Critical Literacy**

Critical literacy competence is fostered by analyzing different types of texts and meanings: newspapers, magazines, TV and radio programs, texts on the Internet within different social and cultural contexts. The focus should be on materials that can trigger meaningful discussions in the classroom and encourage students to think about social issues that are seen in their everyday lives. In that sense, critical literacy is more an attitude, a way to position towards discourses which implies the activation of previous knowledge and exchange of different points of view (Cots, 2006). That is why, as we have already mentioned, for proving this proposal, columns published in two Spanish newspapers with different political orientation: progressive, *El País* (Carlos Boyero and Maruja Torres), and conservative, *ABC* (Antonio Burgos and Ignacio Camacho) were analyzed.

Therefore, we suggest organizing the reading task in different stages: before, while and after reading.

**Stage 1 - Before reading.** Activate knowledge and vocabulary that is required for the understanding of the text by raising various questions concerning the context, discourse genre, the author, its communicative goal and the target reader.

- Cultural context
  - What kind of text it is?
  - In what kind of society it is produced?
- Situational context
  - In which section of the newspaper are these texts published?
- Communicative goals
  - For what purpose are these text created?
- Author/Writer
  - Who is the writer?
  - Which ideology does he reflects?

- What is his/her intention?
- Readers
  - Who's the target reader?
  - What kind of reaction is the writer looking for?
- Multimodality
  - The role and purpose of the images/videos? (if used)

The answer to all these questions lies in the general knowledge of the world so it is essential to activate these general competencies<sup>4</sup> and fully involve a learner in the comprehension of the text as the active member of the target language linguistic community.

**Stage 2 - While reading.** Check out the interpretational hypothesis, proceed with the content, and identify different components of the text. Since the aim of this work is to approach Critical Literacy studies and develop critical literacy competence in C1/C2 students of Spanish as a FL focusing on argumentation and politeness strategies, we suggest focusing on the following aspects as we did in our analysis.

The first aspect regarding argumentation focuses on the orientation of the arguments, whether they are co-oriented and lead to the expected conclusion or anti-oriented and lead to opposite conclusions; and the second one on the strength of the arguments, on two particular mechanisms: intensification and attenuation.

<b>Argumentation</b>	
<b>Orientation</b>	<b>Strength</b>
Co-orientation	Intensification
Anti-orientation	Attenuation

Since the argumentation is bound to the intention of the speaker to influence the reader, it means that the reader is implicitly present and, therefore, it is essential to bear this dialogical character of argumentation in mind. As Plantin (1990: 232) pointed out: "La argumentación es dialéctica; su lenguaje no es un lenguaje de objetos sino un lenguaje habitado por los interlocutores y marcado por sus puntos de vista".<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, as for the columnist, the focus is on the expressions of the personal view, polyphony (the use of different voices), and the use of impersonal structures for

depersonalization of the discourse. And as for the reader, the use of pronominal forms as a way of addressing the reader (T – V distinction)<sup>6</sup> and other types of reference to the reader that make columns more dialogical and interactive should be considered.

Interlocutors	
Columnist	Reader
Personal vision	T–V distinction
Polyphony	Reference to the reader
Impersonality	

Finally, when it comes to politeness, our starting point was Brown y Levinson’s distinction of politeness strategies (1987). So regarding positive politeness, in our analysis we focused on two strategies in particular: *claim common ground* and *convey that S and H are cooperators*<sup>7</sup>. The aim of the first one is to *attend the readers’ needs and wants* by justifying intentions and reformulating; *to exaggerate interest and sympathy with the reader*; and, to show *in-group solidarity* with the use of different pronominal forms.

As for the second strategy, its aim is *to include both the columnist and the reader in the activity* with the use of inclusive plural; and *to assume and enhance reciprocity* by strengthening reader’s positive face with the use of modality.

In relation to the negative politeness, the focus was on two strategies as well. The first one, *don’t coerce the reader* aims to *minimize the imposition* by limiting the writer’s attitude on the personal level avoiding generalization; and *give deference* by using different pronominal forms for addressing the reader. The second strategy, *communicate writer’s want not to impinge on the reader*, seeks to *impersonalize* both the columnist and the reared.

Politeness			
Positive politeness		Negative politeness	
Claim 'common ground'	Attend the H's (interests, needs, wants)	Don't coerce H	Minimize the imposition
	Exaggerate (interest, sympathy approval,		Give deference



	with H)		
	Use in-group identity markers		
Convey that S and H are cooperators	Include both speaker (S) and hearer (H) in activity	Communicate S's want not to impinge on H	Impersonalize S and H
	Assume or assert reciprocity		

**Stage 3 - After reading.** Get the global meaning and the main idea. As suggested in this work, one of the ways to construct the global meaning is by analyzing linguistic manifestations of argumentation and politeness in expressing different points of view in order to see whether they depend on the ideology or on the personal style of the columnists.

Furthermore, to encourage students to exchange opinions and read multiple or parallel texts further comparison tasks may be carried out.

- Compare possible interpretations of each column.
- Contrast different discourses that belong to the same genre which implies comparing columns published in the same newspaper and then with the ones published in the other that reflects different ideology (*El País* vs. *ABC*).
- Analyze different genres of texts dealing the same topic, for example columns and editorials, although this is just one of many possible comparisons.
- Contrast different modes of communication, for example written, oral, audiovisual.

In the framework of trans-cultural pragmatics, it may also imply the comparison of different linguistic tools used for a concrete purpose across different languages. In addition, these specific practices should be contrasted with the same practice in students' own culture.

## 5. Conclusions

Critical Literacy is a way to address texts from a global perspective and it involves not only linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competencies, but also the competence to compare discourses from a critical point of view. In that sense, comparison tasks are essential.

Reading comprehension activities should be focused on specific social practices, authentic and multimodal texts. The analysis should proceed from general contextual and communicative goals aspects towards more concrete, specific, linguistic dimensions of the texts to identify discourse characteristics, components, functional exponents and strategies.

In particular, the analysis of the argumentation and politeness strategies and its significant components used in columns can enhance Critical Literacy Competence because it allows to see:

- Which linguistic mechanisms are commonly used to persuade a reader;
- Whether these manifestations depend on ideology or rather on the personal style of each author.

From the analysis we have conducted, we proved that the use of argumentation and politeness strategies is not determined by the ideology that columnists reflect, but by their own personal and expressive style.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Users of the Framework may wish to consider for what purposes and in which modes the learner will need, or wish or be required to read (CEFR, 2001: 71).

<sup>2</sup> Anscombe and Ducrot (1994) have developed the linguistic approach to argumentation. They named their approach Radical Argumentativism because, according to their view, every form of language has an argumentative aspect. In other words argumentativity is a general feature of all language use.

<sup>3</sup> Apart from the persuasive functions, Fuentes (2009: 140-141) distinguishes other functions both for manifestations of politeness and impoliteness. In case of politeness, the author mentions: organizational and cohesive function in an interactive level (greetings, rituals, initiation of a conversation); and social function that goes beyond the linguistic aspect because it affects the social image that a speaker wants to project about himself.

In the same way, additional functions of impoliteness are the following: cohesive function to indicate the end of interaction; social function to project negative image because the speaker wants to break interactional bonds or wants to be seen in that way; and modal function when the speaker seeks to surprise the other or cause rejection.

<sup>4</sup> "Language use, embracing language learning, comprises the actions performed by persons who as individuals and as social agents develop a range of competences, both general and in particular communicative language competences. [...] *General competences* are those not specific to language, but which are called upon for actions of all kinds, including language activities." (CEFR, 2001: 9).

<sup>5</sup> The argumentation is dialectical; its language is not a language of objects, but a language inhabited by the interlocutors and marked by their views.

<sup>6</sup> In sociolinguistics, a T–V distinction (from the Latin pronouns *tu* and *vos*) is a contrast, within one language, between second-person pronouns that are specialized for varying levels of politeness, social distance, courtesy, familiarity, age or insult toward the addressee.

<sup>7</sup> S stands for Speaker and H for Hearer.

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