Finding a Voice for Argument in ELT
by Elizabeth O'Dowd

In the context of standards-based writing for middle and secondary school, English learners are required to write in a variety of text types. Each type has its own characteristic structure and grammatical features that combine to form a recognizable voice. For learners who have often picked up grammar "by ear" as they listen to native speakers around them, the transition to a writing voice can be mystifying. One of the most challenging text types is persuasion, or argument—largely because of the subtlety that it requires. Successful arguments depend on the construction of a credible, authoritative voice. They must not only present claims, but also structure them in a way that brings the reader or listener to the desired conclusion. They must project confidence together with respect for opposing views, and commitment based on logic rather than personal feeling.

To achieve a persuasive voice, the grammar of modality is key. Modality includes those language choices that show the author's attitude and certainty about his or her ideas. The most obvious choices include modal verbs, of which *should* seems to be the all-purpose choice among developing "ear" learners. However, overuse of *should* limits the range of expression needed for a truly persuasive voice. Other modals such as *might* and *may* show more nuanced commitment. And beyond modals there exists a whole toolbox of grammatical resources for constructing a well-modulated persuasive voice: for example, adverbs of probability (*possibly, certainly*) and intensifiers (*extremely, almost*), which developing writers seem to choose less frequently. When modality is effectively combined with grammatical resources that express logical relations such as causality, contrast, and concession (*since*; *while*; *although*; *it is true that…*), an objective, authoritative voice is assured.

The Teaching-Learning Cycle for Argument

For making such resources available to ear learners, I rely on the "teaching-learning cycle," (Gibbons, 2002).

- **The first stage** in the cycle involves helping learners notice the structure of the texts they read and the grammar choices that make them effective.
- **The second stage** involves scaffolding the use of those features through jointly constructed texts in class.
- **The third stage** encourages writers to use the features in independent compositions that they can then bring back to class for review and a further round of "noticing" by their peers.

In the rest of this article, I explain how the cycle can be applied to the construction of a persuasive voice, in an intermediate-level assignment for middle-school English learners.

Classroom Activity: Writing a Persuasive Letter

At this level, argument may be addressed as a letter to someone in authority, such as a school principal. Letters make a purposeful bridge between the personal texts that young writers are

already familiar with and the more academic arguments that they will need to write later. For the noticing stage, we need well-structured exemplars that showcase the grammar we want to teach. These are sometimes difficult to find, so you may need to write your own, keeping the focus on authenticity. I have included my own exemplar below.

Stage 1: Noticing Practice

Assignment: *Write a letter to the school principal. Ask her to change something in our school policy.*

> I believe all middle school students <u>should</u> wear school uniforms. If we all did this, we would <u>probably</u> concentrate better on our work. We would <u>surely</u> not be looking at our classmates' outfits or worrying about what to wear every morning. Wearing uniforms could almost <u>certainly</u>[4] make life easier for students who cannot afford designer clothes. Furthermore, it <u>may</u> give a sense of identity to the school. We would all feel as if we belonged to the same family. Some <u>might</u> argue that teenagers want to be individuals. This is true; nevertheless, they can be individuals without spending excessively on fashion. It is also <u>possible</u> that some <u>might</u> disobey the rule, but more students <u>will</u> feel protected by it. For these reasons, I <u>definitely</u> agree with the idea of having school uniforms.

For brevity's sake, I have omitted the formulaic opening and closing letter conventions and will focus only on the argument itself. First, we discuss the text critically as a class: Would these claims make sense to a school principal? How does the author respect disagreements? Elicit the structure: introduction of the major claim, supported by subclaims in a cause-effect relationship. Two counter-claims are acknowledged (*Some might argue…*; *It is also possible…*) but then dispensed with. The argument ends with a summary transition (*For all these reasons…*) and a restatement of the major claim. Help students notice how grammar choices contribute to this structure: how one conditional *if*-clause (*If we all did this*) holds the next four sentences together in a list of positive effects, and how transitions such as *furthermore* and *nevertheless* move the reader along logically.

I have underlined certain markers of modality: modal verbs and adverbs of probability. To discover their function, we can ask the class to rank their strength on a wall chart as in Figure 1 below, revealing how they work together. For example, my superscript suggests *certainly* at the strongest level (4)—but a student may correct me by noticing how this word is softened by *could* and *almost*. In the third column of the chart, we consider how the claims themselves express modality. We might ask why a concession (*This is true*) is stated strongly as a fact, when the author's own claims are nuanced with probability markers, or with expressions of personal commitment (*I believe….*). However, notice that this "truth" is immediately countered with *nevertheless,* giving the author the last word—all part of the strategic dance required for respectful argument!

Stronger / Weaker	Modal	Adverb	Claims
Stronger ↓ Weaker	will must should would may might could	certainly definitely surely probably perhaps possibly	This is true. I believe .... I agree with the idea of.... It is possible that....

Figure 1. Modality scale

There is always more to notice in a text, but as teachers draw attention to certain strategies, we can expect students to notice others and enter them on the wall chart. They may also suggest alternative words and phrases that they have heard in other arguments, and these can also be entered. The chart then becomes a collaborative resource for the joint and independent construction of future texts.

Stage 2: Classroom Composition

In the next stage, the whole class composes a different argument, suggesting claims and structuring or modulating them appropriately. As facilitator and scribe, the teacher encourages students to evaluate their choices, keeping the emphasis on clarity and credibility of voice but writing only the students' own ideas. As they negotiate, less confident writers learn from stronger peers while realizing that they also have a contribution in the messy business of composition. Depending on class level, the teacher may provide more or less scaffolding to structure the text, including sentence starters such as those in Figure 2 and drawing from other possibilities posted on the collaborative wall chart.

Claim	I believe
Reasons (3)	If _____, _____ _____ _____
Counter-claim	It is _____ that.... Some _____ that.....
Answers	However, ,but Nevertheless,
Claim (Conclusion)	For these reasons, I _____

Figure 2. Possible scaffold for argument

Stage 3: Independent Construction

Once the class has refined and approved their joint text, it becomes a model for independent construction. Their ownership of this text and the wall chart empowers ear learners to develop a persuasive writing voice as they build their own argument on yet another topic. It also provides the class with a common frame of reference for responding to each other's arguments when they bring them back to share and celebrate in class.

Reference

Gibbons, P. (2002). *Scaffolding language, scaffolding learning: Teaching second language learners in the mainstream classroom*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

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