

## *Original Paper*

# Review of “Let’s Discuss. Second-Language Learners Share Ideas” by Deanna Kuhn (Wessex Press, 2021)

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Received: July 27, 2021      Accepted: August 16, 2021      Online Published: September 16, 2021  
doi:10.22158/eltls.v3n3p12      URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/eltls.v3n3p12>

### ***Abstract***

*This review critically presents the “Let’s Discuss. Second-language Learners Share Ideas” monograph by Professor Deanna Kuhn as a classroom manual to be used in the Foreign Language (FL) classroom. Connections between critical thinking, global citizenship and critical cultural awareness, as part of a language teaching curriculum, are made. As a conclusion, “Let’s Discuss” is proposed as adequate to complement current FL curricula focusing on critical and global citizenship skills.*

### ***Keywords***

*critical thinking, global citizenship, second language learning*

Although argumentation (i.e., the process of forming reasons, justifying beliefs, and drawing conclusions with the aim of influencing the thoughts and/or actions of others) forms an essential part of reasoning, when reasoners argue, they are frequently lazy (Mercier, 2016), drawing on the first available information without supporting their claims on objective facts, let alone considering potential alternatives to their own theories about the world. This lazy reasoning behaviour has an impact on people’s critical thinking, dispositions and skills, which are generally medium to low, when not explicitly taught (Marin & Halpern, 2011). A curriculum explicitly focusing on the development of critical thinking skills by immersion in dialogic discourse is the extensively studied “Argue with me” curriculum developed by Professor Deanna Kuhn and her colleagues (Kuhn, Hemberger, & Khait, 2016). An essential part of this curriculum is the selection of the issues as well as the construction of Q&As as a way to help adolescents and young adults learn how to use the information that serves their position, rather than replicating “copy-pasted” text without successfully integrating it as evidence for their arguments.

These Q&As on selected significant and challenging real-world issues is the focus of the book titled *“Let’s Discuss. Second-language Learners Share Ideas”* by Deanna Kuhn (Wessex Press, 2021). The book is aimed to be used either as a stand-alone manual for individual use by adolescents and young adults as a guide for internally preparing and checking arguments against potential counterarguments on the same issue, or as complementary material to the “Argue with me” curriculum manual previously published by Routledge (Kuhn et al., 2016). This is the reason why the book is also accompanied by a teacher edition. The topics around which the critical Q&As are constructed are divided into four sections, beginning with “A personal future” (e.g., When you finish high school, you have the choice of going right to college or of working for a few years first), then proceed to “A community future” (e.g., Should town taxes help to pay the cost of buses and trains or should the cost be covered entirely by the people who use them?), “A national future” (e.g., Should people be required to pay a social security tax from each paycheck that will provide money when they retire, or should people save on their own for their retirement?) and “A world future” (e.g., Should a nation allow people from other countries to come live in their country based on what they can contribute or how bad life is where they come from?).

What is interesting and extremely useful from a pedagogical perspective regarding this book is its direct and appropriate focus on the use of evidence and its argumentative function(s). Evaluating available information and its potential use as evidence to support or refute one’s arguments is part of the so-called “reflective inquiry” (Dewey, 1910), which in turn is a foundational requirement for critical thinking. Living in nowadays’ world of fluid truths and alternative facts, equipping young people with the higher order abilities of constructing valid arguments, counterarguments and rebuttals, or of what is called “integrated” reasoning (Billig, 1987; Nussbaum & Schraw, 2007), is an essential pedagogical path. And as every path, it must be recognizable, accessible and akin to change. The method of Q&As construction for arguing about relevant issues, presented in “Let’s Discuss”, is easy to understand the logic behind, it addresses directly middle and high-school students (and I would add undergraduates, as well), and it is adaptable to any topic, not limited to the ones analyzed in the book using the Q&As method. It can therefore be considered a valid critical thinking tool, also adaptable to hybrid, blended or online learning environments (the codes used in each answer to the Qs give access to the Wessex website learning management system for a direct passage to a computer-supported learning experience if necessary or preferred by the students or teachers).

The value of the book as a critical thinking manual is difficult to deny given the explanations above. What I will further argue here is its appropriateness for Foreign Language Education (FLE). Several researchers view FLE as an ideal setting for the development of Global Citizenship Education (GCE) goals (Byram, 2008; Guilherme, 2002; Osler & Starkey, 2005). On the basis of this lies the assumption that FL provides a window to other ways of life, enabling learners to critically engage with their own and others’ worldviews (Lo Bianco, 2008). Moreover, language enables the primary means through which to express participation in social and political structures that mark out identity and group

membership; hence FL learning enables participation beyond the immediate community, extending local citizenship to include a wider notion of citizenship (Osler & Starkey, 2005). Although there has been recently much work done regarding the development of GCE goals through UNESCO's (2014) Agenda 2030 for sustainability, still it is not clear how youth and educators can immerse in GCE, including in a FLE setting. UNESCO (2014) has conceptualized GCE as a means to "empower learners to assume active roles to face and resolve global challenges and to become proactive contributors to a more peaceful, tolerant, inclusive and secure world" (p. 14). What "Let's discuss" offers is exactly this view on global challenges that need to be resolved through active and reasoned decision making.

Moreover, recent developments in FLE place significant importance on critical thinking through Byram's (1997) "critical cultural awareness" component of intercultural communicative competence. It is defined as "an ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries" (p. 53). This requires students to develop critical thinking to be able to see issues from different perspectives, ask questions and make connections with the cultures they are learning about. Therefore, the book may support FL educators invested in developing their learners' critical thinking skills.

Concluding, integrating Kuhn's (2021) Q&As materials with FL curricula also aiming at intercultural citizenship (Byram, 2008) seems a reasonable, if not necessary, option. Of course, this would require adaptation of the topics and language to learners' language use level. It would also be expected, according to the socio-constructivist learning-by-participation hypothesis (Cobb, 1994; Prawat, 1991), that learners improve their vocabulary and pragmatic language use along with their improvement of their critical thinking skills. Future research using the "Let's discuss" materials may confirm this possibility.

### Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank the English language teacher Shabnam Gulamhussen for sharing her interesting feedback and views regarding foreign language education needs from a global citizenship perspective.

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