



## Enhancing L2 Writing: The Role of Feedback and Writing Conferences in Critical Thinking and Argumentation

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### ABSTRACT

Critical thinking is an essential skill for effective L2 writing. By thinking critically, learners can construct well-reasoned arguments, support their claims, and deal with opposing ideas. The role of corrective feedback and feedback conferences is pivotal in this process, because they provide learners with targeted guidance and opportunities for iterative development. This study explored the development of critical thinking skills in L2 learners' writing. Participants were students enrolled in the Intensive English Program of a large university in Türkiye. They had B1 level of English proficiency at the time of the study. A feedback cycle was designed, and primary data were obtained from multiple drafts of students' essays and interviews. To track the development of argumentation in the subsequent drafts of students, a qualitative text analysis was conducted using Stapleton's (2001) criteria regarding the number of arguments, the extent of evidence, the recognition of opposition, corresponding refutation, and the existence of

	<p>fallacies. Overall results indicated that L2 learners had substantial difficulty generating arguments and thinking critically. There were few instances of clear arguments, evidence, refutation, and supporting ideas in their drafts. However, the students were really motivated to develop their argumentation skills when appropriate instruction and scaffolding were provided.</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> critical thinking, L2 writing, corrective feedback, individual feedback conferences</p>
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## Introduction

Critical thinking is a cognitive skill and prerequisite competency for many other skills of professional life such as analysis, questioning and evaluation. It is, thus, pivotal for all educational sectors to raise individuals who can think critically (Barnawi, 2011; Liu & Zhao, 2023; Nejmaoui, 2019; Tsui, 2002). Despite high importance of critical thinking for professional and educational opportunities, the most pervasive form of educational practice in schools is didactic teaching (Elder & Paul, 1994). It is very challenging to make critical thinking a part of the curriculum when the ease of access to information sources is considered in the 21st century (Nejmaoui, 2019). Atkinson (1997) asserts that the implementation and integration of critical thinking skills into language education curricula cannot be achieved in contexts where it is not regularly practiced because critical thinking means “cultural thinking”. It cannot be thought of separately from the culture in which it operates, and thus it is very difficult to implement critical thinking instruction where it is not firmly established in society (Atkinson, 1997).

Other scholars (Ennis, 1993; Stapleton, 2001, 2002), however, strongly disagree with Atkinson (1997) and contend that the reasons why Asian learners and writers from other collectivist cultures were prejudicially regarded as non-critical and norm-submissive could partly be explained by the absence of “shared assumptions” between these learners and their non-Asian/foreign teachers. This cultural inconsistency between the assessed and the assessor may have made some scholars (e.g. Atkinson, 1997; Liaw, 2007) consider these learners deficient critical thinkers. It is true that so-called inappropriate implementation of critical thinking might lead to a cultural bias; however, it could also be applied in culturally sensitive ways. Critical thinking is both an individual activity dictated by Western ideologies, and a collective

group activity in which group members can think critically together. (McKinley, 2013).

Second language (L2) student writers are more likely to experience difficulties compared to their native speaker peers (Liu & Zhao, 2023; Reid & Chin, 2021) because of the sociocultural and linguistic differences in thinking styles, but context-specific and situated writing instruction would optimally enhance critical thinking skills of L2 student writers (Ramanathan & Kaplan, 1996). Thus, critical thinking goes beyond being a cognitive skill and shows itself as a socio-cognitive skill mediated by social interactions (Ramanathan & Kaplan, 1996). Only when adequate scaffolding is provided, and sufficient time to internalize these skills is given (Nejmaoui, 2019), can learners take a step further towards the active use of higher order thinking skills, and in turn benefit from global, educational and international opportunities in the future (Liaw, 2007). Therefore, explicit teaching of critical thinking should be included in classroom instruction (Liu & Zhao, 2023; Nejmaoui, 2019; Reid & Chin, 2021) through problem-based performance tasks (Cargas et al., 2017), scaffolding students through modelling and reflection (Mithers & Soden, 2000), and it should become a part of the assessment criteria (Sato, 2022).

## Literature Review

One of the first systematic conceptualizations of thinking and learning was devised by Benjamin Bloom and his colleagues, later referred to as Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1956; Forehand, 2005). The cognitive dimension of the model ordered six domains of thinking from less complex to more complex, which are knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation respectively. In addition to Bloom's taxonomy, the abilities of analysis, problem solving, evaluating evidence, opposing ideas, interpreting, taking positions, presenting information, persuading others, making comparisons, making inferences, drawing conclusions, content development, logical soundness and quality of ideas were named as frequently used micro-skills in the conceptualization of the construct (Cargas et al., 2017; Elder & Paul, 1994; Facione, 2011; Sato, 2022; Stapleton, 2001; Tsui, 2002). Tsui (2002) defined thinking as "students' abilities to identify issues and assumptions, recognize important relationships, make correct inferences, evaluate evidence or authority, and deduce conclusions." (p. 743). In our research context, we adapted Tsui's (2002) definition and broadly operationalized critical thinking as the ability to evaluate issues and make

logically accurate inferences by providing sound evidence, support, examples and explanations. We conceptualized argumentation as a sub-skill of critical thinking and defined it as the skill of presenting reasonable arguments, reasons and explanations to support a position or oppose a claim. We shaped our conceptualization in this way because in order to become critical thinkers/writers, L2 writers need to learn how to use reasoning and argumentation. Pedagogical practices such as scenario-based writing, class discussions and explicit instruction about how to write arguments have yielded benefits in the development of argumentation in L2 writing (Deane & Song, 2014).

Stapleton (2001), specifically, focused on the roles of content familiarity on the assessment of critical thinking skills of Japanese college students in L2 English writing. He came up with a framework of evaluating essays in terms of six key elements of critical thinking skills, namely arguments, reasons, evidence, recognition of opposition and refutation, conclusion and fallacies, and he made use of this framework to analyze the students' provocative essays triangulated with questionnaires and interviews. He revealed that most participants committed fallacies frequently, and they provided logical explanations, personal experiences and evidence such as facts, comparisons and analogies when they wrote on a familiar topic.

Stapleton's (2001) framework has been widely adopted in L2 writing research (Halum & Guna, 2021; Van, 2024) to evaluate critical thinking in student writing since it effectively identifies key elements of argumentation and emphasizes the areas of improvement. Halum and Guna (2021), for instance, used Stapleton's (2001) model to analyze EFL students' argumentative writing and showed that the six components of critical thinking were all present in students' essays to various extents. All students used arguments while few of them included refutations and fallacies. Students in Van's (2024) study struggled with logical inconsistencies highlighting the need for more training in critical thinking. All these studies regarded Stapleton's (2001) framework as a practical means of assessing writing, although more emphasis on teaching argumentation is needed to cultivate deeper critical thinking skills and higher quality arguments (Stapleton & Wu, 2015).

Critical thinking is essential for developing second language writing skills. Learners need to think critically to generate ideas, develop and support arguments, and evaluate their own or their peers' writing. Thus, a plethora of studies (Hu, 2005; Liaw, 2007; Mckinley, 2013; Metha & Al-Mahrooqi, 2015; Nejmaoui, 2019; Ramanathan & Kaplan, 1996; Stapleton, 2001, 2002; Tsui,

2002) have investigated the role of critical thinking skills in L2 writing development from different perspectives. Overall findings have uncovered that critical thinking is a teachable skill, which has paramount impacts on the development of L2 writing. The inclusion of analytical, rather than descriptive, tasks in the writing curriculum, explicit teaching of critical thinking skills (Stapleton & Wu, 2015; Nejmaoui, 2019), multiple drafting, whole class discussions as a way of verbalizing students' thoughts, teacher feedback, peer feedback (Kuyyogsuy, 2019) and adoption of content-based approaches (Liaw, 2007) are among the practices leading to improved criticality in L2 writing (Tsui, 2002) especially when they are combined with critical reading (Metha & Al-Mahrooqi, 2015). One-to-one draft workshops also provide opportunities for social mediation between writers, peers and teachers fostering the development of argumentation, and in turn critical thinking skills (Barnawi, 2011; Kuyyogsuy, 2019).

Agreement on the importance of critical thinking for L2 writing (Barnawi, 2011; Liaw, 2007; Stapleton, 2002) gave a new impetus to studies on the relationship between written corrective feedback and critical thinking through high level practice questions that promote conceptual thinking and inferential reasoning through retrieval of existing information (Fenesi et al., 2014), form-focused feedback (Keuk, 2009), classroom discussions and student-led feedback (Hayes & Devitt, 2008), and peer feedback (Hu, 2005; Tsui, 2002). Prompting students with high level questions helped them to identify, analyze, elaborate and evaluate problems, and corrective feedback enabled them to detect and contemplate their errors to gain a deeper understanding of their written piece (Fenesi et al., 2014). Corrective feedback in various forms such as student-led feedback or peer feedback can offer great benefits for the learners to develop higher order thinking skills, especially when it is coupled with classroom discussions and form-focused instruction (Hayes & Devitt, 2008; Hu, 2005; Lee, 2017; Tsui, 2002). Becoming critical peer reviewers of each other's papers empowered student writers to become more self-reliant and self-critical.

Written Corrective Feedback (WCF hereafter) was proved to be an effective tool, especially for improving students' accuracy in L2 writing (Bitchener, 2008). WCF can also be considered an opportunity for scaffolding learners to develop critical thinking skills and argumentation whether through student-led feedback (Hayes & Devitt, 2008) or peer feedback (Hu, 2005; Tsui, 2002). WCF was thought to be comparable with error correction, negative feedback or negative evidence (Karim & Nassaji, 2020). However, in the context of this study, WCF was more broadly operationalized as any

written instructional attempt by the teacher/researcher to improve students' writing in terms of issues such as accuracy, fluency, idea development, argumentation and critical thinking.

Turkish EFL learners have long been distressed about communicating their thoughts in writing. According to Alagozlu (2007), this prolonged difficulty stemmed from their weaknesses in the use of critical thinking skills. The abundance of unsupported claims, excessive copying of the source texts and poor representation of opposing ideas, refutations and evidence in Turkish students' essays revealed that Turkish learners found it very difficult to generate ideas in writing due to the excessive adherence to textbooks and the effect of collective Turkish culture valuing social harmony. Turkish scholars have also underscored the importance of scaffolding and explicit instruction to train students how to think independently, develop intellectual courage and evaluation skills since these skills do not inherently develop unless explicitly trained in the Turkish EFL context (Alagozlu, 2007).

Having discussed the importance of critical thinking skills for future opportunities and the need to provide scaffolding in this sense, the present case study aims to investigate the development of critical thinking skills in Turkish EFL learners' writing through the provision of Written Corrective Feedback and Individual Feedback Conferences (IFC hereafter). This study addressed the following research questions:

1. How do L2 writers develop critical thinking skills across subsequent drafts?
2. How does WCF contribute to the development of argumentation in L2 writing?
3. How does IFC contribute to the development of argumentation in L2 writing?

## **Methodology**

### **Participants and Context**

The participants in the current case study were three college students (one female, two males) in the Intensive English Program of a large university in Istanbul, Türkiye. They will be referred to with the pseudonyms Ali, Ceyda and Yağız to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Information regarding the participants' demographics and education is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1***Demographic Details of the Participants*

Participant	Gender	Age	Origin	Education	Department
Ali	M	20	Turkish	Undergraduate	Physiotherapy and Rehabilitation
Ceyda	F	20	Turkish	Undergraduate	Physiotherapy and Rehabilitation
Yağız	M	18	Turkish	Undergraduate	Digital Game Design

All the participants had an A2 level of English language proficiency measured via a Cambridge Placement Test at the beginning of the term. Since the study was conducted at the end of the fall term, they had completed the A2 level and reached the B1 level of English proficiency in the program. Throughout the semester, they had 25 hours of English language instruction a week, which was made up of 20 hours of mainstream academic skills courses and a 5-hour English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course which was in line with the content of their departments (See Table 1). All the classes were held online in the fall term because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Procedure**

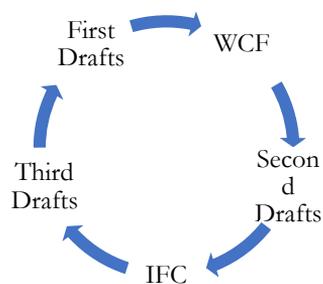
This case study aimed to investigate the development of critical thinking skills in L2 writing. We analyzed multiple drafts of L2 English writers' work to explore the roles of WCF and IFC in the development of argumentation in writing. The students were informed about the procedure of the study, and their consent was taken during the oral interview sessions. We designed a feedback cycle through which students could reflect upon their writing and develop their critical thinking skills. We decided to integrate WCF and IFC into the feedback cycle because we wanted to ensure the uptake of WCF on the part of the students. We made sure that WCF was incorporated into the students' later drafts through the use of IFCs. The feedback cycle began with the assignment of the writing task to the participants. We chose to assign an off-line writing task adapted from an IELTS Writing Task 2 (about taking a gap year before starting university) to ensure that students had sufficient time to complete it after class. Students were provided with the rubric on which their paragraphs would be evaluated together with the task, so they knew they would be evaluated on the key components of argumentation, namely (a) *number of arguments* (b) *extent of evidence* (c) *recognition of opposition* (d) *corresponding refutation* and (e) *fallacies*.

Following the submission of the first drafts, the second phase of the feedback cycle began. Students were provided with WCF using the Microsoft Word comment tool and highlight function. WCF was provided on grammar, organization and, most importantly, about ways to improve their arguments. For example, comments were added on how to develop stronger arguments and what kind of evidence could be provided to support those arguments. They were advised to elaborate on their opinions and exemplify their points. When all three participants received feedback on their first drafts, participants wrote their second drafts using the WCF provided. Afterwards, using Barnawi's (2011) suggestion to use one-to-one feedback conferences to scaffold students in the development of critical thinking skills, students were invited to individual feedback conferences upon the submission of their second drafts. IFCs were held online on Zoom, and they were in Turkish, students' L1, to ensure uptake of feedback. During IFCs, they were provided with feedback on their second drafts with explicit references to the rubric and were trained on how to generate better arguments, evidence, explanations and examples. The researcher and the students brainstormed and developed some of the arguments together to model the process of argumentation for the students. Also, the researcher directed thought provoking questions to the students in order to make them think critically about their positions and develop argumentation strategies following Fenesi et al. (2014). The WCF was better accommodated this way. Therefore, students were taught how to develop their critical thinking in all phases of the feedback cycle.

At the end of IFCs, an interview was carried out to explore students' perceptions about L2 writing development and critical thinking skills. Each conference lasted around 40 minutes. Afterwards, students were asked to write their third drafts, which was the last phase of the feedback cycle. The students were given enough time between each phase of the feedback cycle to revise and prepare their drafts because we believe that critical thinking requires time and effort. Figure 1 illustrates the procedure of the feedback cycle designed for this case study.

**Figure 1**

*The Feedback Cycle*



## Data Collection and Analysis

The data were gleaned from two main resources. The primary data source was multiple drafts written by students in the argumentative writing task. We conducted a qualitative text analysis on these drafts to track students' progress in developing argumentation. We had an aim to explore the ways in which students developed critical thinking by proposing arguments, providing evidence through reasoning and refutation. Therefore, we adopted Stapleton's (2001) criteria to analyze the student texts in terms of the number of arguments, the extent of evidence, the recognition of opposition, corresponding refutation and existence of fallacies. Stapleton's (2001) model provided a structured approach to analyze critical thinking and argumentation in writing through the use of the aforementioned criteria which were central to our research.

A cross comparison of three subsequent drafts was carried out to observe the development of argumentation for each student. The second data source was the short interviews conducted at the end of the IFCs. The interviews were analyzed by developing themes and all the findings were interpreted under the light of these themes. Data were coded by two independent raters and the interrater reliability using Cohen's Kappa ( $\kappa$ ) was found to be 0.76, which indicated substantial agreement between the coders.

## Results

### Qualitative Text Analysis

This case study examined the development of argumentation skills in three Turkish EFL learners' writing through a five-step feedback cycle. The students wrote three drafts in total, and their drafts were evaluated based on Stapleton's (2001) criteria for critical thinking. Overall results showed that participants' first drafts mostly included overly general, vague and unsupported claims and ideas. They lacked proper argumentation, depth of thinking, evidence, reasons and elaboration. Interestingly, though, none of the students had fallacies or false arguments in their papers. Their arguments were truly general and weak but not false or inappropriate. Later drafts, on the other hand, were much more successful in terms of argumentation, elaboration, depth of thinking, exemplification and even structure, which demonstrated signs of uptake and benefits of feedback for these learners. As their writing covered more elaborate and well-supported arguments, the length of the texts also increased from the first to the last draft. The average

length of students' first drafts was 255 words which increased to 341 and 386 words in the second and the third drafts respectively. It was also found that students did not make use of recognition and/or refutation of the opposing idea as an argumentation strategy to a great extent. Table 2 summarizes the main findings of the text analysis conducted on subsequent drafts of the students in relation to each of Stapleton's (2001) criteria.

**Table 2**

*Text Analysis Findings*

	Ali			Ceyda			Yağız		
	First Draft	Second Draft	Third Draft	First Draft	Second Draft	Third Draft	First Draft	Second Draft	Third Draft
Number of arguments	2	6	6	3	4	7	1	1	3
Extent of evidence	3	8	9	3	5	6	2	2	2
Recognition of opposition	0	0	0	1	1	1	2	2	2
Corresponding refutation	0	0	0	2	2	2	2	2	2
Fallacies	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

As demonstrated in the table, the number of arguments and the extent of evidence increased considerably from the first drafts to the last drafts for Ali and Ceyda while Yağız needed more work on main idea development and thus had fewer supporting sentences. There was no change in refutation and opposition strategies throughout subsequent drafts. In the program, they are taught to present at least two supporting ideas for a well-developed paragraph. Therefore, the increasing numbers of arguments and evidence presented in Table 2 show remarkable improvement. Under the following subsections, we will provide more detailed explanations and small excerpts from students' subsequent drafts in order to track the development of critical thinking skills and argumentation in terms of Stapleton's (2001) criteria for each student.

## *Ali*

Ali preferred to use reasons, explanations and examples to provide evidence for his arguments. There was no instance of opposing ideas and corresponding refutations in his drafts. Being informed about the evaluation criteria and encouraged to make use of refutation in addition to the provision of evidence notwithstanding, Ali was only in favor of using other means of evidence like reasons and examples to support his arguments.

When strategies of argumentation were tracked across his subsequent drafts, there was a clear improvement in the number of arguments. He had very few arguments and provided very little evidence to support them in his first draft. However, he provided many more arguments in the second and third drafts. How Ali's argumentation skills developed qualitatively over multiple drafts is demonstrated in the excerpts below:

Firstly, this gap year is an excellent opportunity for students' experience. Students gain skills, get the opportunity to work and of course have fun. They learn about the culture and language of that country and learn many other things about that place...- Ali, First Draft

Firstly, this gap year is an excellent opportunity for students' experience. Students gain skills, get the opportunity to work and of course have fun. They learn about the culture and language of that country and learn many other things about that place. I would argue that this topic is very effective in learning a new language. With all, helps students expand their minds, they learn to think differently and their courage increases.... - Ali, Second Draft

Firstly, this gap year is an excellent opportunity for students to learn new knowledge and experience social relationships. Students learn about the culture and language of that country and learn many other things about that place. I would argue that students' exposure to that country's language is very effective in learning a new language because that country's language can also help them in daily life. Overall, this helps students expand their minds, they learn to think differently and their courage increases. - Ali, Third Draft

As can be seen, very few arguments and little support were present in his first draft. As he received feedback which focused primarily on argumentation through WCF and IFC and trained on how to think critically

on an issue, he started to make use of better arguments in later drafts. Thanks to the written corrective feedback he got, Ali was well-trained to support his arguments. It can clearly be seen in the underlined parts in his third draft that he incorporated the feedback into his writing, which showed that “uptake” occurred. Following WCF and the second drafts, individual feedback sessions also helped him understand how he could come up with better arguments and evidence by thinking critically. He presented the new arguments quite overtly by using phrases like “*I would argue that ...*”, which also showed his increased to put forward claims. While Ali expressed his arguments in very broad terms like “this topic is very effective” in his earlier drafts, he was able to specify the reasons he provided in the final draft and elaborated on these reasons with examples.

### ***Ceyda***

Ceyda was relatively more successful in thinking critically and generating arguments even in her first draft. She used evidence and refutation strategies to support her claims. Nonetheless, she did not really know how she would manage these strategies, which she explained in her interview. Thanks to the focused feedback she received, she learnt how to incorporate supportive sentences into her writing to a considerable extent. She had only three cases of argumentative claims and evidence in her first draft, but in the later drafts, she was able to integrate four more arguments along with evidence into her paragraph and utilize refutation as an argumentation strategy. It seems that Ceyda benefitted considerably from both forms of feedback and produced a qualitatively better draft after each phase of the feedback cycle, as shown in the underlined part of the excerpts below.

Generally, people think aimlessly traveling is a waste of time rather than learning a new language or something before starting university because it needs money. However, it is better to travel when we are young and healthy... They can make money when they travel, it is not hard at the moment, or they can join a program which they can travel and work. – Ceyda, First Draft

Generally, people think travelling aimlessly rather than learning a new language or something before starting university is a waste of time because it requires money. However, it is better to travel when we are young and healthy... They can make money when they travel, it is not hard at the moment, or they can join a program where they can travel and work. For example, some programs provide volunteer work abroad. Sometimes, they help poor people or children, and sometimes they take care of animals. This

gives people a relief of conscience. People understand what it means to be helpful and they become grateful for themselves. I think this is the best way to benefit from the gap year. - Ceyda, Third Draft

Ceyda's arguments were clear but unsupported in her first draft. She reported that she did her best to improve her writing in the second draft but could not totally understand WCF. Therefore, she was taught how to make use of examples, personal experiences and readings to present supporting ideas in the IFC. In the third draft, she wrote about an article she had read and shared her experiences. She also further explained what she meant by study abroad, and consequently, she developed her drafts to include more examples and support for the parts where she recognized and refuted the opposing idea. She also expanded her writing by adding one more well-supported and well-evidenced paragraph. This showed that when she was trained on how to generate better arguments, she could transcend what she had learnt into further arguments and further paragraphs.

### ***Yağız***

Yağız made several naïve attempts to present arguments, which showed that he was conceptually ready to produce well-evidenced paragraphs. He made good use of examples and comparisons between hypothetical cases. However, he seemed to have difficulty in presenting his main argument. Even though he presented good examples, it was unclear which opinion he was arguing against and what position he held. He was provided with WCF on this issue, and he put great effort into fixing it later. His second draft included a main idea, but it was still not well-presented. We talked about different ways to present arguments for/against an opinion during the IFC and his efforts paid off in the third draft. He was able to come up with a clear and well-presented topic sentence in his last draft. The following excerpts show how he improved the way he presented his main argument from the first to the last draft.

I think this opinion is wrong in a way for me because experience and learning are different things. If I want to learn about department or academic things, I have to go to university.— Yağız, First Draft

I think this opinion which is 'Many students choose to take a gap year before starting university, to travel or gain work experience.' is wrong in a way for me because experience and learning are different things. If I want to learn about

my department or academic things, I have to go to university.– Yağız, Second Draft

I think having a gap year before university to gain experience is wrong in a way for me because experience and learning are different things. If I want to learn about my department or academic things, I have to go to university. – Yağız, Third Draft

To sum up, Ali, Ceyda and Yağız were all successful in the incorporation of teacher feedback into their writings, and their drafts became more elaborated and well-written from the first to the last as the number of arguments and evidence increased in each subsequent draft. They were able to produce stronger and better-developed arguments in response to the provision of feedback. Yağız also incorporated feedback when it was clarified during IFCs, but he mostly worked on the presentation of main arguments as opposed to Ceyda and Ali, who were able to extend the evidence they provided in their drafts. Therefore, all three students improved their L2 writing performance both quantitatively and qualitatively.

### **Interview Analysis**

Overall findings of the qualitative text analysis revealed that students made substantial use of the feedback they received not only in the WCF phase but also during IFCs on Zoom. Furthermore, their argumentation and critical thinking skills improved considerably over their subsequent drafts. We wanted to interpret these results in relation to the perceptions of our L2 writers. For this reason, we conducted mini-interviews with the participants at the end of the IFCs. We asked them about their writing processes, source use and critical thinking strategies retrospectively.

### ***Idea Generation and Critical Source Use***

Participants all said that they did research on the task before started to write. They reported that they searched online sources for a variety of reasons. Checking for comprehension of the prompts, finding supporting ideas and examples for their arguments, and looking for key vocabulary and alternative ideas were among the reasons given. Although they mostly generated their own ideas, they read about alternative opinions on the Internet in order to synthesize them with their own ideas, which was reflected in the comments below.

Of course, I have my own ideas, but I do research about the examples I will use. I write my own ideas and then do

research to look for alternative ideas. I may use others' ideas in addition to mine as support for my arguments. – Ali

I do research on the choice of my words or check if I understood the topic or not... I search for the key words in English. At first, I thought gap year was illogical, but after I did research on that I really found it useful. – Ceyda

The learners did not blindly rely on the Internet, though. They were quite critical about information presented in online sources. They said that they first filtered unrelated information out while searching for supporting ideas for their arguments as stated by Yağız:

There are so many irrelevant things on the Internet. I first detect them and choose the ones that are relevant to my ideas and that support my arguments. – Yağız

L2 learners made abundant use of the Internet to generate ideas and find evidence for their arguments. However, they were quite critical and selective in the use of online resources. After they did their research, they filtered the relevant information and used it to generate more creative and better supported ideas.

### ***Learners' Opinions on the Feedback Cycle***

Generally, students reported that they benefitted from each phase of the feedback cycle including their research, drafting and feedback. Unfortunately, these students do not have many chances to receive such detailed feedback as what was provided throughout this case study. Therefore, these highly motivated learners regarded this study as a great opportunity to improve their writing before their exams. Although they showed interest in all phases of the feedback cycle, they especially found IFCs useful and explanatory. WCF helped them understand the points that needed improvement, and they improved their writing in this phase, as well. Nonetheless, they all favored IFCs over WCF. They explained that it was during IFCs that they understood feedback more fully and thoroughly. They were given a chance to brainstorm ideas and discuss feedback with the teacher. This allowed for a negotiation of feedback and ensured the comprehensibility of feedback as expressed by Ceyda's comments below.

Discussing the feedback face to face is more beneficial because I couldn't understand what was wrong when you gave me written feedback. I revised it as much as I could but they were also wrong. After you wanted me to elaborate on my

arguments, I felt I didn't know what to add. However, after we talked on Zoom, we found three more ideas together.– Ceyda

Ceyda had felt desperate about the WCF she had received before the IFC. Text analyses showed that she had many more arguments and pieces of evidence in her second draft. However, it appeared that she really struggled to figure out how she should integrate the feedback into her writing. Misinterpretation of feedback led to misalignments of uptake, and Ceyda had a hard time thinking critically about the new ways of argumentation. She said it was not until the IFCs that she could understand what to do. Ali also felt the same need for one-to-one teacher scaffolding to develop his reasoning as presented below. He had difficulty extending his arguments through WCF on his own.

Talking face-to-face on Zoom is more useful for coherence, organization, and ideas. It is especially better when your (teacher) ideas are combined with mine. Sometimes, I can't think of any examples on my own. – Ali

These excerpts indicated that WCF could only prove effective when it was thoroughly understood by the recipients and combined with teacher scaffolding during the IFCs. When the students were asked to evaluate their drafts and the process critically, they regarded their last drafts, which were written after the IFCs, as the best one. More importantly, they did not describe their drafts as “different” but “improved”. They believed that they expanded and built upon what they wrote from the first to the last draft.

When you send me written feedback, it was very helpful. However, my last draft is much better since we revised it by getting your opinion and brainstorming with you. – Yağız

I think my last draft will be much better in terms of grammar and arguments. My drafts are not different but I built upon them and made them better. – Ceyda

Students held positive opinions about feedback. However, they regarded WCF, on its own, as only mildly helpful. When they received scaffolding on how to think critically by brainstorming, questioning and modelling with the teacher, this created the change according to learners. IFCs allowed for the negotiation of WCF and ensured its comprehensibility and uptake. So, students stated that they benefitted most from IFCs, and they would integrate the critical thinking skills they developed into future writing practices, which will hopefully pave the way for transcendence of these skills.

## Discussion

The results of the present tutorial case study indicated that Turkish L2 learners had difficulty generating arguments and thinking critically. There were very few cases of clear arguments, evidence, refutation and supporting ideas in their first drafts. These results are mostly in line with Alagozlu's (2007) findings that there were many unsupported claims and a lack of argumentation and evidence in Turkish students' essays. Alagozlu (2007) attributes this difficulty to cultural and societal factors and emphasized the desperate need for scaffolding these learners in the development of critical thinking skills. Similarly, we have found that when focused feedback was combined with appropriate individual scaffolding, students improved their critical thinking skills considerably in writing. When the amount of interaction and the quality of scaffolding are maximized via IFCs, students performed even better by increasing the quantity and quality of arguments, evidence and support.

At first, the students did not make abundant use of arguments and strong evidence even though they had been provided with the rubric and assessment criteria. It is highly likely that they acknowledged the importance of argumentation, but did not know how to propose strong arguments and evidence to support them. Only after the feedback was negotiated and discussed elaboratively in IFCs, could students fully satisfy the criteria in the rubric.

According to Metha and Al-Mahrooqi (2014), critical thinking is a teachable skill and thus it should be a part of the L2 writing curriculum. Barnawi (2011) also put emphasis on individual draft workshops to foster these important academic and/or life skills. We have similar findings in this regard. The students could improve their thinking and writing skills thanks to the corrective feedback provided in the two modalities. The power of corrective feedback to promote critical thinking skills and argumentation in our study may be attributed to the dual modality of this feedback. Learners received both written and oral feedback through individual conferences. In a similar vein, many researchers (Deane & Song, 2014; Mithers & Soden, 2000) also proclaimed that reasoning and argumentation skills must be explicitly taught to L2 writers. Cargas et al. (2017) stated that both teachers and students perceived explicit teaching of critical thinking skills as a useful way of learning how to reason. As such, the current case study also provides support for the importance of the training L2 learners need so as to develop critical thinking skills. We argue that students should be provided with the evaluation criteria, get exposed to multiple modes of feedback and be allowed to reflect upon the process of critical thinking through discussions on their drafts.

According to Atkinson (1997), critical thinking skills cannot feasibly be integrated into the language learning curriculum in non-western contexts where they are not firmly established and practiced in society. In contrast, researchers such as Stapleton (2001, 2002) assert that the stigmatized labels of non-western collectivist cultures as deficient non-critical thinkers are partly due to the lack of “shared assumptions” between the students and teachers. Students in our study faced difficulties in developing arguments and evidence, and in comprehending and incorporating WCF in the initial phases of the feedback cycle. If they were assessed only after these phases, they would be regarded as deficient critical thinkers as suggested by Atkinson (1997). Nonetheless, through the IFCs, these students were scaffolded into the ways to incorporate WCF and improve their argumentation skills via modeling, brainstorming and questioning strategies. The current literature (Mithers & Soden, 2000; Nejmaoui, 2019; Stapleton & Wu, 2015) also supports that learners can internalize critical thinking skills and put them into practice only when sufficient scaffolding is provided. Our study shows that individual feedback conferences combined with focused written corrective feedback might be a useful way of scaffolding learners to become better critical thinkers and writers by challenging the prejudiced assumptions of non-western collectivist cultures.

### **Pedagogical Implications and Conclusions**

Critical thinking skills have been shown to open up tremendous opportunities for L2 learners for their future educational and professional lives (Liaw, 2007; Tsui, 2002). However, most Turkish L2 student writers have significant difficulty producing critical arguments (Alagozlu, 2007; Liaw, 2007; Mckinley, 2013). Therefore, these crucial skills must be taught explicitly to learners to better prepare them for the future (Mithers & Soden, 2000). There are some pedagogical implications that could be drawn from the current study to inform instructional practices that support the enhancement of critical thinking skills for a better L2 writing performance. These implications can be categorized at the macro level of the educational system and at the micro level of classroom context.

At the macro-level, educational systems should incorporate critical thinking and other 21<sup>st</sup> century higher order thinking skills in the curricula and course design, which has been a neglected side of the Turkish education system. Teachers should be supported with necessary training and resources to help their learners become independent, critical and creative thinkers.

Furthermore, course materials should be re-evaluated and adapted, if necessary, in order to help teachers raise awareness about these crucial skills.

At the micro-level, on the other hand, students should be explicitly taught how to think in language classrooms. They should be taught how to compare, contrast and synthesize new ideas in writing. This could be achieved through draft workshops, multimodal corrective feedback and hands-on activities. It is also important for learners to reflect on their own or peers' writing to be able to become more critical thinkers. In this regard, L2 writing teachers should give the learners sufficient time to reflect and think because becoming critical thinkers requires time, energy and in-depth evaluation. Moreover, teachers can encourage learners to brainstorm and discuss their ideas in a safe learning environment where everyone's opinion is valued. Classroom discussions and group work may also help them create this atmosphere.

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