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RISTAL 6/2023

Research in Subject-matter Teaching and Learning

Citation:
Sobernheim, J. (2023). Oral argumentation and language-aware civic education – a theoretical proposal. RISTAL, *6*, 67–80.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.2478/ristal-2023-0004

ISSN 1863-0502

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sciendo

RISTAL 6 / 2023, 67-80.

Oral argumentation and language-aware civic education – a theoretical proposal

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Abstract

Oral argumentative competence is highly relevant for responsible [*mündige*] participation in social negotiation processes. Thus, promoting argumentative competence is central to civic education. However, there is a lack of theoretical concepts and empirical findings which can guide action in the civic education classroom. Since argumentative competence is a linguistic skill, the concept of language-aware civic education offers itself as a plausible framework. In this article, the two terms *oral argumentative competence* and *language-aware subject teaching* are clarified within the context of civic education. It is shown how subject-specific oral argumentative competence can be fostered through language-aware civic education.

Keywords

Language-aware civic education, oral argumentative competence, subject-specific language, patterns of action, controversy

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.2478/ristal-2023-0001

1 Introduction

Oral argumentative competence is a central communicative skill in both the public and private spheres. It supports general understanding, the development of knowledge and the articulation of one's own stance. Accordingly, this competence is listed as a learning objective in various curricula e.g. in the USA and in Europe (Felton, Garcia-Mila, Villaroel & Gilabert, 2015; Luginbühl & Müller-Feldmeth 2022, p. 1; Rapanta, Garcia-Mila & Gilabert, 2013). The advantages of subject-specific argumentative competence have been pointed out for disciplines such as geography (Wey, 2022) and mathematics (Prediger, Şahin-Gür & Zindel, 2019). In civic education as a school subject, developing argumentative competence is of particular importance. The overarching goal of civic education in general and argumentative competence in civic matters is the political maturity of learners and their future "self-determined and competent participation in (political) society" (Ziegler, 2020, p. 46, own translation).

Competence models of civic education from German-speaking countries explicitly identify – or at least mention – argumentative competence as part of an overall civic competence (e.g. Detjen et al., 2012; Kühberger, 2015).[1] For example, Detjen et al.'s model (2012) mentions it as a facet of the competence to act politically. Another distinction typically concerns the medium in which argumentation[2] takes place. Oral and written argumentation differ regarding framework conditions, production processes, completeness of an argumentation and approaches to the constitution of the subject matter. Accordingly, these facts point to the need to foster both written and oral argumentative competence (Mundwiler, Kreuz, Hauser, Eriksson and Luginbühl, 2017; Spiegel, 2011). Since competence models of civic education mainly regard argumentative competence as an oral competence, this article focuses on oral argumentative competence.

Existing literature on promoting oral argumentation in civic education includes a few theory oriented conceptions as well as a small number of empirical findings. The proposed approaches include action-oriented methods such as simulation games or debates on political issues in which participants can trial their argumentative actions (Achour, Jordan & Sieberkrob, 2017; Detjen et al., 2012; Gronostay, 2019; Rappenglück, 2017). However, existing research lacks a systematic theoretical concept to give existing suggestions for practice a theoretical base (see, e.g., Achour et al., 2017; Oleschko, 2012). This article proposes that language-aware subject teaching can be a suitable overall theoretical concept to fill this gap.

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1 With its focus on German-speaking regions (Germany, Austria and German-speaking Switzerland), and their curricula, this article naturally reflects specific notions of good citizenship that are informed by the prevailing political systems and the related opportunities for participation in these communities (Detjen et al., 2012).

2 The term argumentation in English can be used both for the act of arguing as well as a product of several arguments (Van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004, p. 1). In this article, the term is mainly used in the sense of the act of arguing except in section five.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.2478/ristal-2023-0001

While Leisen's (2013a, 2013b) development of language-aware subject teaching in the German-speaking regions primarily focused on the sciences and later mathematics teaching, publications on theory and practice can also be found today for the social sciences (Röttger, 2019, p. 93, 97). There is a consensus that subject learning and language learning cannot be considered separately and fostered accordingly. Thus, all teachers should teach in a language-aware way although difficulties in implementation still exist (Handro & Kilimann, 2020; Prediger et al., 2019). For example, Prediger et al. (2019, p. 113-114) found that mathematics teachers already recognise discourse practices as a relevant part of mathematics learning and state the need for a general expansion of teachers' language view. In history teaching, it is equally evident that teachers pay too little attention to the learners' linguistic abilities in the classroom. Language-aware teaching offers new opportunities to promote historical competences from the perspective of subject didactics (Handro & Kilimann, 2020). Empirically, especially research on teaching in mathematics is far advanced. In the social sciences, which include civic education, and history, teaching the subject concepts is also based on theoretical aspects, but only few empirical studies are available. In geography, the empirical focus has so far has been mainly on reasoning skills (Wey, 2022, p. 35). This holds considerable promise for oral argumentation in civic education from the perspective of language-aware subject teaching.

Therefore, this article begins by outlining the term of civic education (2). Following this, the focus is on oral argumentative competence within civic education (3). First, the relevant theory is summarized (3.1) and in a second step, subject-specific empirical findings are presented (3.2). Subsequently, the term language-aware civic education is clarified (4) before possibilities for fostering oral argumentative competence through language-aware civic education are shown (5). The article closes with recommendations for application based on empirical findings (6).

2 Civic education

As described in the introduction, the goal of civic education is the political maturity of learners. Thus, the term "the political" needs to be clarified more precisely. According to the German Society for Civic Education Didactics and Civic Youth and Adult Education (*Gesellschaft für Politikdidaktik und politische Jugend- und Erwachsenenbildung*) the political in civic education can be understood in broad terms as the "regulation of fundamental questions and problems of overall social coexistence" (Gesellschaft für Politikdidaktik und politische Jugend- und Erwachsenenbildung (GPJE) 2004, p. 10, own translation). Understood more narrowly, politics is a "collective, conflictual and democratic process for the production of binding decisions" (GPJE, 2004, p. 10, own translation). This process can be embedded in a corresponding political system, and it can play out on an international level as well as in the lifeworlds of individuals or groups of learners. The broad concept of politics is complemented by economic, legal and social questions (GPJE, 2004, p. 10-11).

Understanding political problems is connected to the knowledge of facts and subject-specific concepts and categories; it is also connected to the corresponding subject-

DOI: https://doi.org/10.2478/ristal-2023-0001

specific language (Gronostay, 2019). A central learning goal is to build conceptual knowledge that is language-based and retrievable in various situations. Such contextual retrieval entails that learners must update these subject concepts appropriate to specific situations and, as required, further differentiate and diversify these concepts. These subject concepts serve as a basis for learners to analyse and reflect on political facts and discourses and to develop the competences to judge and to act politically (Detjen et al., 2012; Kühberger, 2015). One systematic of such subject concepts is, for example, Sander's (2009) notions of power, law, the common good, system, the public sphere and scarcity. Another is Weißeno et al.'s (2010) notions of order, decision and the common good. These concepts, however, only become subject concepts within civic education when they are contextualized (Ziegler, 2020). Various experts point out that learners' pre-concepts should be linked to new knowledge in a manner that subject concepts combine deep subject-specific understanding while remaining flexible (Oleschko, 2012; Neuhof & Girnus, 2020; Weißeno et al., 2010).

3 Oral argumentative competence in civic education

3.1 Oral argumentation and oral argumentative competence

Oral argumentation is an interactively created activity (Luginbühl & Müller-Feldmeth 2022) and differs from written argumentation. Parallelism, simultaneity and cooperative creation, are central features of oral argumentation. In oral argumentation several interaction partners are co-present simultaneously "in a common space of speaking time" (Becker-Mrotzek, 2009, p. 70, own translation). Interlocutors' "constantly influence each other reciprocally through their verbal, para-verbal and non-verbal behaviour" (Mundwiler et al., 2017, p. 93, own translation). Accordingly, in oral arguments the arguers are engaged in parallel and simultaneous processes of planning, producing and reproducing argumentation (Becker-Mrotzek, 2009; Mundwiler et al., 2017). In written argumentation, in contrast, these processes are time-delayed (Becker-Mrotzek, 2009). Being spontaneously and cooperatively produced, individual utterances in oral arguments may appear less complex, incomplete, linguistically inadequately elaborated, or even unrecognizable as an argument (Becker-Mrotzek, 2009; Luginbühl & Müller-Feldmeth, 2022; Mundwiler et al., 2017). By contrast, written argumentation is ideally internally consistent and complexly elaborated regarding content, structure and language (Mundwiler et al., 2017; Spiegel 2011).

Oral argumentative competence is an interactive linguistic competence consisting of subcompetences. How these subcompetences are conceptualised depends on the research context as well as the corresponding argumentation and interaction practices. The basic distinction in oral interaction between the receptive linguistic subcompetence of listening and the productive linguistic subcompetence of speaking also applies to oral argumentation (Neugebauer & Nodari, 2016). Many studies have already discussed and tried to conceptualize the term oral argumentative competence (Luginbühl & Müller-Feldmeth 2022, p.3). Within the school context, the didactician Budke defines this competence as learners being able "to produce their own argumentations and to react appropriately to argumentations in interaction with others, and also that they have the

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associated motivational, volitional and social readiness to use these argumentation skills successfully and responsibly in variable situations" (Budke, 2013, p. 360, as cited in Budke & Meyer, 2015, p. 14, own translation). Noteworthy here is that for Budke, oral argumentative competence is not only expressed in interaction (listening, speaking), but also depends on an individual's "readiness" to use it. Accordingly, teaching such competence cannot limit itself to the abilities of speaking and listening, but must also promote reflection on the appropriateness of speaking and listening in any given situation.

This is somewhat echoed in another, complementary view: Developing argumentative competence in civic education entails two objectives:, arguing-to-learn and learning-to-argue (Rapanta et al., 2013). In the sense of arguing-to-learn, argumentation about political topics develops and deepens political factual knowledge. It also serves to form political judgments in democratic negotiation processes (Gronostay, 2019, p. 39). In the sense of learning-to-argue, classroom argumentation fosters the development of "communicative political agency as well as skills to deal with conflict democratically" (Gronostay, 2019, p. 39, own translation).

The purpose of oral argumentation in the educational context more broadly and in civic education in particular moves between persuasion or competition on the one hand and reaching consensus or exploration on the other hand (Luginbühl & Müller-Feldmeth, 2022; Felton, Garcia-Mila & Gilabert, 2009; Rapanta et al., 2013). In persuasive argumentation, interlocutors' aim is to convince their opponents of their own perspective. For this purpose, interlocutors defended their own position and reject or even suppress counterarguments or critical objections (Felton et al., 2009; Felton et al., 2015). In contrast, consensual argumentation aims to clarify, integrate and cooperatively examine causes and contradictions. In this case, argumentation serves to jointly gain knowledge, to make visible what is collectively deemed valid, and to build consensus (Felton et al., 2015; Kreuz, 2021).

Unsurprisingly, argumentative discussions sometimes intermingle these goals of collaboratively finding solutions or present controversial interpretations of divergent positions. Hence, Budke's proposed readiness is relevant for the purpose as well. In persuasive argumentation, interlocutors must be ready and capable to convince, while in consensual argumentation they must be ready and willing to learn. In addition, interlocutors must be ready to "correctly" identify and adapt to the purpose of a given situation.

As mentioned, oral argumentation is always embedded in an institutional, purpose-bound context (Becker-Mrotzek, 2009), and this context contributes to shaping the argumentation. When the context is subject-specific, oral arguments are influenced by the subject-specific perspective. On the one hand, the arguments are generic and come into play when taking and defending a position. On the other hand, they are subject-specific and bound to the facts and contexts of the discipline.

Argumentation in the subject-specific perspective of civic education concerns the political questions and/or the political contexts. Political issues are characterised by the

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fact that they involve different underlying subjective needs and values, dilemmas and conflicting goals. Often, interdisciplinary thinking is required. The negotiated problems are often complex and usually require controversial discussions. The question is then how to acknowledge and deal with the complex and challenging nature of politics in civic education? The Beutelsbach Consensus[3] provides guidance: "what is *controversial* in science, society and politics must also appear controversial in the classroom" (italics in original, Wehling, 2016, p. 24, own translation). In practice, when a political problem is explored, arguments must first be developed and tested for their validity. Often, however, arguments cannot be objectively described as "right" and "wrong". Rather, they are an expression of certain perspectives and positions whose validity is not only a function of rational inference and justifications. In fact, they also require acceptability by the social collective and interlocutors. Accordingly, an argumentation is "a verbal, social, and rational activity" (Van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004, p. 1). The quality of argumentation is thus connected to the quality of both the speech act and the interactional behaviour. Aspects of the quality of individual speech acts are relevance, situational appropriateness, acceptability, plausibility, familiarity with the object of discussion as well as transactivity – i.e. justifying one's own position, responding to criticism, and further developing owns' and others' ideas. The quality of interactional behaviour concerns gestures, facial expressions, voice delivery, perspective taking, and the willingness to listen to others (Gronostay, 2019; Luginbühl & Müller-Feldmeth, 2022).

In summary, becoming "ready" for oral argumentation is of central concern in civic education. This readiness includes several aspects, namely both active and passive participation, reflection and understanding of a given context and purpose as well as acknowledgment of the complexities and controversies of political issues.

3.2 Empirical findings

After discussing oral argumentative competence in civic education from a more theoretical perspective, it is necessary to also consult empirical findings on this matter. Several studies reconstructed the structure of discourses based on videographed teaching sequences of discourses in civic education (e.g. Gronostay, 2019; Sobernheim, 2020). The data analysis drew on the documentary method and used Przyborski's (2004) terminological inventory [*Begriffsinventar*] (Lötscher & Sperisen, 2016; Sobernheim, 2020) or resorted to the Toulmin model (Toulmin, 2003; Petrik, 2021). Gronostay (2019, p. 119) evaluated the transactivity of discourses, identifying four argumentative modes: presenting an argument, co-construction, opposition and integration. Their empirical results show that prior argumentation training improved the transactivity of the discussions in partial aspects. Combining Przyborski's inventory with analyses of oral argumentation in class councils, Lötscher & Sperisen (2016) have developed a four-phase model of argumentative discourse. These phases are: (1) problematising an issue; (2)

[3] In addition to attending to controversy, the Beutelsbach Consensus of 1976 also enjoins teachers to avoid indoctrination and to recognize learners as subjects in the teaching-learning process (Wehling 2016). It should be noted that the Beutelsbach Consensus is not value-neutral, but respects the values enshrined in the constitution of a democratic society, such as human rights or freedom of expression. Such value concepts are considered non-negotiable (Gronostay, 2019; Ziegler, 2020).

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positioning, which includes a discussion and a decision; (3) clarifying in order to concretize the decision; and (4) criteria to verify the implementation. For the different phases of such discourses, different linguistic patterns of action are necessary. Learners need to be made aware of and be prepared for these patterns so that they can use them in classroom discourse. For example, the positioning phase includes asserting and agreeing; while deciding includes weighing or classifying of advantages and disadvantages to consider different possibilities and their consequences in relation to the objectives (Detjen et al., 2012, p. 82). Petrik (2021, p. 197) in turn analysed his discourses based on the Toulmin model (Toulmin, 2003), distinguishing four different levels of argumentative competence, whereby taking perspectives was more pronounced in higher levels of argumentation.

Such discourses can take place in various social forms, from pairs to group work or discussions involving the whole class, with each social form involving different aims. While argumentation in the class council serves to negotiate rules for learners to follow within the class community, in other formats – such as pro-contra debates, fishbowl discussions and simulation games – learners may discuss political issues in the sense of experimental or simulation activities [*Probehandeln*] in which resulting decisions have no consequences for their real lifeworlds.
Discussions in which learners are assigned positions to defend also reduce the cognitive load associated with figuring out for themselves what their own position is, thereby leaving more space to develop substantive arguments and casting these in suitable language. Empirical investigations show that learners learned more content and their arguments were more advanced in the post-test in collaborative compared to competitive discussions (Felton et al., 2015). Similarly, empirical findings show that simulation of argumentation on its own does not automatically develop learners' argumentative competences in the sense of argument complexity (Sobernheim, 2020). Rather, teachers must consciously foster the learners' argumentative competences. For this purpose, it is advisable, for example, to explicitly develop knowledge regarding argumentation before and to reflect on this knowledge after the simulation (Rappenglück, 2017, p. 23-25). It has also been empirically demonstrated that short training sessions in argumentation lasting two 45-minutes sessions could increase the quality of the discussion in terms of more complex argumentation and the use of more sophisticated speech acts such as objection or integration (Gronostay, 2019).

Empirical evidence thus shows that in addition to the discussion setting, it is above all the explicit fostering that improves oral argumentative competence in civic education. But how can it be fostered in schools? How can, to borrow Budke's term once more, students be readied? This and the next chapters propose that language-aware civic education is a suitable approach.

4 Language-aware civic education

Language-aware subject teaching guides learners from everyday language via academic language to subject-specific language. Cummins's distinction between everyday and academic language (2008) that was initially introduced to draw attention to the language

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challenges of second language learners, is pertinent here. Everyday language, i.e. the basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) that children initially acquire in the home environment, is characterized by orality and used to cope with everyday communication situations (Cummins, 2008). In contrast, academic language and the corresponding cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) is formal, "needs high cognitive and linguistic demands" (Massing, 2020, p. 6) and is conceptually oriented towards writing (Becker-Mrotzek et al., 2021). Academic language contains both "subject-specific and cross-curricular elements" (Pineker-Fischer, 2017, p. 68, own translation). Subject-specific language, in turn, is purely subject-specific (Pineker-Fischer (2017). Subject-specific features of subject-specific language include subject vocabulary (Becker-Mrotzek et al., 2021) and the language necessary to cope with subject-specific communicative challenges (Neuhof & Girnus, 2020). While mastery of academic language is relevant for learners' academic success (Neugebauer & Nodari, 2016), subject-specific language impacts on their discourse. In language-aware subject teaching, language learning is intertwined with subject learning. The aim is thus to provide linguistic support for subject-specific learning so that, starting from everyday language competencies (BICS), learners are introduced to general academic language competencies (CALP) and then proceed to the corresponding subject-specific language (Becker-Mrotzek et al., 2021).

In the case of civic education, the development of subject-specific language is linked to concept learning. Therefore, fostering subject-specific language through language-aware civic education means that subject-specific concepts are elaborated several times and in different thematic contexts and that their meaning is (re-)constructed via discursive methods of action. The aim is for learners to flexible use these concepts for problem solving and political action. For a language-aware civic education, this requires introducing learners to technical terms and language and offering occasions for learners to apply, differentiate and deepen their understanding of these terms. Debates and discussions are an attractive possibility for this in that they both evoke social and rational language acts.

Neuhof & Girnus (2020) in particular point out that the construction of meanings within subject concepts facilitates language learning and education, and also involves experiences of difference for the learners. These experiences of difference arise from the discrepancy between learners' everyday life and the political. They also arise from individual values or interests that are renegotiated and legitimised in negotiation processes. By articulating their own arguments and reflecting on those of others, learners work out different perspectives of political reality and negotiate values. This should enable learners to relate themselves and their lifeworld experiences to other persons or groups as well as to the political sphere (Neuhof & Girnus, 2020).

Lastly, language-aware civic education should familiarize with the aspect of controversy in argumentation. A controversial discussion requires a problem-oriented open question that is recognizable as such for the learners. Ideally, different social and scientifically verifiable positions are tied to this question. In its orientation, the question is based on fundamental democratic principles such as human dignity, but can leave room for reflection on values and convictions that guide action (Drerup & Yacek, 2020, p. 22-23).

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Teachers should make this possible controversiality visible. This visibility of controversiality is made evident "by the multi-perspectival approach to subject matter" (Manzel, 2017, p. 41, own translation) and the inclusion of the relevant factual knowledge as well as in development of the competences to judge and to act politically. These competences entail learners' ability to take "controversial positions" (Manzel, 2017, p. 41, own translation), to negotiate and, based on this, to judge.

In short, language-aware civic education integrates concept learning while developing subject-specific language and considers how learners deal with differences and controversy.

5 Fostering oral argumentative competence through language-aware civic education

Mastering the subject-specific language is a requirement for further developing argumentative competence. How can teachers support students' transition from everyday to general academic language competencies to subject-specific language? In general, when introducing subject-specific language, teachers must address challenges specifically related to the subject-specific language in addition to challenges related to imparting the content. Challenges facing users of subject-specific language include the subject-specific structures related to language and professional texts, such as introduction to concepts and highly condensed sentences. It also includes the challenges related to morphology and syntax, for example subject-specific abbreviations and passive constructions (Leisen, 2013a). These challenges have to be taken into account when planning lessons. They require, for instance, addressing different learning types through presenting content in different forms; setting the linguistic and subject-specific requirements slightly above the current level of the learners; and aligning the topic with the knowledge that needs to be acquired. Furthermore, the tasks should be formulated in a manner that makes them clearly understandable and thus motivating, and they should be tailored to learners' different language skills. Action orientation and different methodological approaches support learners' language education and how they deal with language. Such support should be given as little as possible and as much as necessary (Leisen, 2013a; Neugebauer & Nodari, 2016).

With this in mind, how can language-aware civic education foster argumentative oral competence? Arguing as a linguistic action includes dealing with different roles, types of oral interaction and their diverse functions. Since argumentation is an interactive and in political education often an oral competence, several interaction partners join the same space of speaking time. As a consequence, learners have to take on and use both the role of the listener and the speaker with the necessary parallel receptive and productive competences. The argumentation can be persuasive with interlocutors seeking to convince each other. Or it can be consensual, with interlocutors seeking to reach agreement. Associated with the different roles and goals are different linguistic acts such as complementing and elaborating an argument, criticizing, formulating counterarguments, judging and evaluating, as opposed to inquiring, specifying or praising (see e.g. Gronostay, 2019, p. 105ff.). Acquiring such linguistic patterns of action

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in oral (as well as written) argumentation in an objective of learning-to-argue is part of language-aware civic education. These patterns of action – which are made up of "smaller forms of activity" (Ehlich & Rehbein 1979, p. 541, own translation) such as formulaic language and interactional patterns – are constitutive of school communication. Given their recurring nature and structuring role in learning, fostering these patterns of action is a teaching goal (Ehlich & Rehbein 1979).

On the one hand, there are methodological tools for language support subject-specific teaching and learning in communicative situations as, for example, the 40 methods-toolkit (Leisen, 2013b) and scaffolding (Gibbons 2015).
Concretely, the tools in the 40 methods-toolkit range from word lists for the development of technical terms, and frequently used sentence patterns, to negotiation methods in which problem solving is sought over several stages, from individual work to midterm assignments.
Scaffolding – which includes language-aware instructional interaction – supports learners in solving a new task and is dismantled in subsequent problem solving until it is no longer needed. Learners' oral argumentation competence can be enhanced by means of linguistic scaffolding that broadens the range of their linguistic patterns of action. This can be achieved for example by providing sentence openings (such as "I am of the opinion that ...") or sample texts with argumentation chains (Achour et al., 2017; Oleschko, 2012).

On the other hand, the linguistic action pattern of argumentation with learners can be analysed. Teachers can use analyses or reflections on a learner's discourses as well as the discourses of others to train this and other linguistic patterns of action that are pertinent to argumentation (see e.g. Gronostay, 2019). For this purpose, analysis categories adapted for teaching could be used, such as those developed e.g. by Gronostay (2019), Lötscher & Sperisen (2016), Petrik (2021) or Sobernheim (2020).

6 Conclusion

This article sought to mitigate the dearth of reflection on how to enhance argumentative competence in civic education. More specifically, it showed the extent to which language-aware civic education can enhance argumentative competence and offer subject-specific guidelines for action. Accordingly, the article first examined the notion of civic education, before the term oral argumentative competence in civic education was described in more detail. With the approach of language-aware civic education, methodological approaches for teaching could finally be shown, with which oral argumentative competence can be fostered.

Based on existing theories, the approaches and methods to foster oral argumentative competence in language-aware civic education hold considerable promise for teaching. Subject-specific teaching proposals that follow this path are available, albeit to a limited extent (see e.g. Achour et al., 2017). In order to implement language-aware civic education, theory must be supplemented by explanations and teaching proposals that are oriented towards practice (e.g. Achour et al., 2017; Oleschko, 2012). Accordingly, it is important to empirically test these implementation proposals with regard to

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argumentative competence. There remains a paucity of empirical findings from civic education (e.g. Gronostay, 2019; Sobernheim, 2020) or more generally on fostering argumentative competence in discourses (e.g. Felton et al. 2015). Accordingly, further empirical research is needed to assess the effectiveness of proposals such as those developed in this article to explicitly teach argumentative competence.

In the future it would make sense to understand the teaching of civic education as language-aware teaching. Language-aware teaching fosters subject-specific language and linguistic patterns and uses subject-specific teaching formats and corresponding content, promises to enhance learners' argumentative competence.

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