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The Limitations of Conducting Collaborative Argumentation when Teaching Argumentative Essays in Malaysian Secondary Schools

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Abstract

The writing of argumentative essays promotes higher-order thinking skills amongst students regardless of their level of studying only when it involves collaborative argumentation. Hence, argumentation researchers recommend that teachers use group argumentation to teach argumentative essays since Vygotsky's sociocultural theory believed that group argumentation improves students' writing skills. The study's objective is to explore the use of group argumentation during the teaching of argumentative essays in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms in Malaysia. Hence, the involvement of practitioners is significant so that the full extent of the problem is known rather than being interpreted solely by researchers. This qualitative study was conducted on nine ESL teachers through convenience sampling. Data was collected through online interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings demonstrated that ESL teachers did not practice group argumentation when teaching argumentative essays. They resorted to the whole-class discussion instead. Five factors contribute to the negligence of group argumentation in ESL classrooms, that is, time, pressure to deliver

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curriculum, students' attitude, students' speaking skills, and the use of the first language (L1). The findings indicated that it is necessary to promote the teaching of argumentative essay writing using group argumentation as one of the teaching approaches in secondary schools to ensure students reap the benefits of collaborative learning to improve their argumentation skills.

Keywords: Argumentative essay, higher-order thinking skills, secondary school, ESL teachers.

1. INTRODUCTION

Argumentation as a research topic is receiving increasing recognition worldwide in the education field. It is a skill that needs to be taught to secondary school students to prepare them for the 21st century. It is a universal truth that one can never eradicate the need to argue and persuade other people concerning important issues and contested values. It is a skill that we unconsciously deal with in every single facet of our lives.

In Malaysian secondary schools, the argumentative essay is one of the writing genres included in the English language syllabus. Despite the fact that writing an argumentative essay is typically considered challenging by students and teachers since it requires more cognitive effort than narrative writing, experts maintain that argumentation is a talent that teachers and students should not overlook (Alagoz, 2013; Crowell & Kuhn, 2014; Crowhurst, 1990; Gárate & Melero, 2005; Goldstein et al., 2009; Hsu et al., 2015; Jonassen & Cho, 2011; Reznitskaya et al., 2007). However, according to Knudson (1992), students do not master the writing of argumentative essays due to the lack of explicit teaching of argumentation skills in the curriculum. This is supported by Gárate and Melero (2005), who agreed that the teaching of argumentative writing is given less attention, and teachers often face significant challenges when attempting to conduct argumentation practices within their classrooms (Clark et al., 2007). Other difficulties reported amongst L1 learners are the inability to recognize and apply persuasive, argumentative text structures (Reznitskaya et al., 2007), inability to expand their argument due to limited ideas (Felton & Herko, 2004), and also the lack of support for reasons, poor organization, and immature language (Crowhurst, 1990).

Therefore, the objective of this study is to explore the main hindrances faced to conduct collaborative argumentation by ESL teachers when they teach argumentative essays in schools considering the conjecture of this study where it is believed that before the writing of argumentative essays, students must argue collaboratively in small groups. The foundation of this conjecture is built from Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. Vygotsky asserts that "collective thinking (intermental activity) shapes the development of individual thinking (intramental activity)" (Mercer & Littleton, 2007, p. 83). When group argumentation occurs collaboratively, deep thinking on the part of the students develops and is then internalized individually. In fact, "getting students to work with their peers would help them become less anxious while undergoing the learning process" (Omar & Kussin, 2017, p. 8). Based on that account, the research questions for this study are:

- What is the common approach used by teachers to teach argumentative essays?
- What are the limitations of conducting collaborative argumentation in writing class when teaching argumentative essays?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Most argumentation studies (Alagoz, 2013; Anderson et al., 2001; Crowell & Kuhn, 2014; Reznitskaya et al., 2001) were inspired by the notion proposed by Vygotsky to teach argumentation skills. They believe that argumentation is a process that involves higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) which are executed through social interaction and dialogues. Therefore, these social interactions and dialogues should be integrated into students' learning. Their approaches are fundamentally centered on argumentation activities conducted collaboratively to develop individual argumentation skills.

Vygotsky proposed that there is a close relationship between the use of language as a cultural tool (in social interaction) and the use of language as a psychological tool (for organizing our own, individual thinking). He also suggested that our involvement in joint activities may generate understanding which we then 'internalize' as individual knowledge and capabilities. (Mercer, 2000 p. 155).

Following Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, it is widely accepted that social interaction is a primary means for promoting improved individual's general argumentation skills. The pedagogical frameworks that follow Vygotsky are Collaborative Reasoning (Anderson et al., 1997, 1998, 2001; Reznitskaya et al., 2001) and Collaborative Argumentation (Chinn & Clark, 2013; Jonassen & Kim, 2010). Both involve facilitating discussions among multiple participants, not whole-class discussions. The learning strategies deviate from typical classroom activities as they focus on prompting students for reasons, challenging students with countering ideas and using critical thinking vocabulary. Waggoner et al. (1995) state that Collaborative Reasoning encourages increased participation from the students to talk about an issue. Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004) define Collaborative Argumentation as a dialogue where at least two participants exchange statements, questions, or replies. It is where participants make claims and support them with reasons. When there is a clash between each other's ideas, the dialogue will solve the disagreement (Chinn & Clark, 2013). This affords more interaction with peers, especially when they find that their peers have ideas that differ from their own. This difference in ideas may make them so curious that they wish to find out which ideas are more defensible.

However, the size of group argumentation usually varies. Some researchers conduct it through dyadic interaction (Crowell & Kuhn, 2014; Evagorou & Osborne, 2013), groups of three (Wegerif & Mercer, 1997) or five to nine students in a group (Chinn et al., 2001; Dong et al., 2008; Reznitskaya et al., 2001, 2007). The purpose of each group argumentation is similar; to foster egalitarian dialogue amongst the students. In those approaches, the role of teacher and student is asymmetrical because the teacher surrenders his/her authority to provide input to the discussion. His/her role is devoted merely to promote collaboration and thinking skills to the students (Zhang & Stahl, 2011). In this kind of open participation discussion, students control everything regarding discussing and talking without interference from the teacher.

Crowell and Kuhn (2014) also concur that in contemplation of developing individual written argumentation, teachers must primarily develop group argumentation. It means that when students participate in more group argumentations, their argumentation skills will develop. Reznitskaya et al. (2001) strongly believe that group argumentation exposes individuals to alternative perspectives, which eventually will stimulate them to challenge the ideas. Such competencies later will be used by an individual in different contexts with no external support.

While most researchers agree that argumentation is best conducted collaboratively, Clark et al. (2003), in their study, notice that the major obstacle to conducting Collaborative Reasoning discussions is time. Teachers in their study are majorly concerned with meeting the curriculum demands, which require students to perform well during end-of-the-year tests rather than promoting collaborative learning.

Thus far, the study conducted by Foong and Daniel (2013) is the only inquiry made to provide evidence that group argumentation is valuable in the Malaysian context, namely, to improve secondary school argumentation skills when writing argumentative essays for the Science subject. 14-year-old students who participated in scientific argumentation instructional support (SAIS) managed to improve their written argumentation. The argumentation skill acquired during the discussion of genetically modified foods was successfully transferred to their argumentative essays on deforestation. Overall, secondary school students in Malaysia who participated in group argumentation tend to perform better than those who participate in individual argumentation. Heng et al. (2014) find that they write better arguments for their scientific essays. Even though it only improves students' mastery of simple argumentation elements, this study provides empirical evidence that Malaysian students gain benefits from group argumentation. The positive transfer also is observed by Kathpalia and See (2016) when most students show improvement in terms of structure and quality of their argumentation. The impact is observed when analyzing their blogs after participating in-class debates. The study by Chandella (2011) approves that discussion improves the writing outcome of the female university students as they wrote better reasons in their post-discussion essays.

3. METHODS

The design of the study is multiple case studies involving experiences of different practitioners across different settings: nine ESL teachers from eight different states in Malaysia.

3.1 Participants

There were nine teachers who participated in this study. They have had at least four years of teaching experience with Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) formal training. All of them were teaching upper secondary level students (aged 15 to 17 years old), where writing argumentative essays is one of the writing genres taught. Only Teacher 6 taught in an urban school, while others were teachers in suburban areas. They were from eight different states of Malaysia. Students' level of

English language proficiency was determined by the teachers based on their current performance in school examinations. Table 1 shows their demographic data.

Table 1. Demographic data of ESL teachers

Teacher's name	Gender	State	Years of teaching experience	Highest qualification	Students' level of English proficiency
Teacher 1	Female	Terengganu	8	Master of Education in TESL	Low
Teacher 2	Male	Pahang	10	Bachelor of Education in TESL	Low
Teacher 3	Female	Melaka	10	Master of Education in TESL	Low
Teacher 4	Female	Terengganu	4	Master of Education in TESL	Low
Teacher 5	Female	Kelantan	4	Bachelor of Education in TESL	Low
Teacher 6	Female	Kuala Lumpur	7	Bachelor of Education in TESL	Intermediate
Teacher 7	Male	Sabah	6	Bachelor of Education in TESL	Intermediate
Teacher 8	Female	Kelantan	8	Master of Education in TESL	Low
Teacher 9	Female	Johor	4	Master of Education in TESL	Low

3.2 Data Collection Tool

Data was collected using email interactions. Questions were sent to the participants' emails, and our interactions were mainly conducted via email exchanges. Only one teacher preferred to communicate using Facebook Messenger as he hardly used his email. All names were pseudonymized, and the names of their schools were not revealed to protect their anonymity and confidentiality. In the interaction questions, we focused on finding out the primary approach to teach argumentative essays in their classroom. Secondly, we also asked whether or not these teachers conducted group argumentation to teach argumentative essays. Then, we asked them the reasons that motivated or demotivated them to conduct group argumentation.

1. How do you usually teach argumentative essays?
2. Do you conduct group argumentation? What motivates (or demotivates) you to conduct group argumentation?

3.3 Data Analysis Technique

In order to analyze the data, a thematic analysis was applied where major thematic ideas in the teachers' responses were extracted reflexively. Basically, this type of analysis involves the act of identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes within the data collected. In this study, there were five main themes identified inductively from the email interviews. All themes that appeared were not counted based on quantifiable measures but anything that captured something vital in relation to the overall research question of this study. Researchers applied the theoretical or deductive approach in order to code the interview data for both research questions. By utilizing a semantic approach, the five themes were identified within the explicit meanings of

the data. The researchers did not have the intention to investigate beyond the research questions, hence latent thematic analysis was avoided.

After all of the interviews were collected and organized, the researchers began to familiarize themselves with the data and generated initial codes. Coding was done manually, and theory-driven as researchers approached the data with specific questions in mind. After the data have been initially coded and collated, some codes were combined to form an overarching theme. This was done by using visual representation such as a mind map to sort different codes into themes. Towards the end of the process, five main themes appeared to answer the second research question.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 The Primary Approach Used by Teachers to Teach Argumentative Essays

All teachers (excluding Teacher 2 and Teacher 6) claimed that the primary teaching approach commonly implemented in their class was a whole-class discussion. For instance, Teacher 2 used sample essays to guide the students to write, while Teacher 6 provided students with journals and stories to get content ideas. Both types of activities did not involve small group argumentations. The other teachers declared that they were conducting a whole class discussion. Based on their descriptions, the discussions were primarily conducted in two conventional ways.

Firstly, they segmented the whiteboard into two columns and placed it in front of the students. The heading for one column was ‘disagree,’ and the other was ‘agree.’ The students were then invited to give reasons why they disagree or agree, and the teachers wrote the answers on the board. Secondly, the teachers divided the whole class randomly into two stands: agree and disagree. The students had to provide reasons for the stand that was set for them. The activity was then followed by an individual writing activity where the students used all the key points they had generated. The students selected a stand and copied all the key points related to it. If they worked in a group that generated reasons for disagreement, they would copy all the reasons for disagreement. This procedure was proof that none of the teachers was acquainted with group argumentation to teach argumentative essays.

4.2 Barriers to Conducting Small Group Argumentations in Class

With regards to constraints, the teachers were found discouraged to conduct group argumentation in their classrooms for several reasons; one apparent reason was time. All teachers, excluding Teacher 1 and Teacher 3, stated that they did not have the opportunity to conduct group argumentation due to the restricted time allocated for English lessons and the large class size. Conducting group argumentation in class was unmanageable because it was usually time-consuming, especially in a class with too many students; like Teacher 2’s statement (S is for statement):

S1 Double period is only 70 minutes. So, I prefer to elicit their ideas individually. I don’t ask them to debate or argue with each other as I’m having roughly 56 students in a class. (Teacher 2)

Besides that, Teacher 4, Teacher 7, and Teacher 8 added that they could not accomplish such activity because there were too many topics in the syllabus to be covered before the MCE (Malaysian Certificate of Education, or known as *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM)). Hence, they could not afford to allocate a lot of time specifically to teach argumentative essays.

- S2 It is a race against time to complete all the components of the English Language syllabus within an academic year, and we teachers simply can't afford to spend too much time on any one particular type of essay. (Teacher 7)

Another issue that discouraged them from conducting group argumentation was students' attitudes. Other than Teacher 2 and Teacher 7, all teachers disregarded group argumentation because of students' attitudes. All teachers doubted that their students would participate enthusiastically during the argumentation activity. As Teacher 7 affirmed, it would be difficult to encourage students to speak and argue with others.

The teachers had this feeling that their students would be unresponsive. Thus, the goal of encouraging them to argue collaboratively would not be achieved. Students' low level of English language ability commonly in speaking was also one of the factors that hindered them from conducting group activity. Teacher 1 clarified that her students lacked the English language vocabulary used for arguing. Another concern was the language used during the discussion. Teacher 3, Teacher 4, Teacher 5, and Teacher 9 affirmed that their students used their L1 during the discussion as they could not speak English well. When students could not use the target language to communicate, it would impede the flow of group argumentation. Overall, all teachers agreed that the constraints summarized in Figure 1 are the factors that demotivated them from conducting group argumentation with their students.

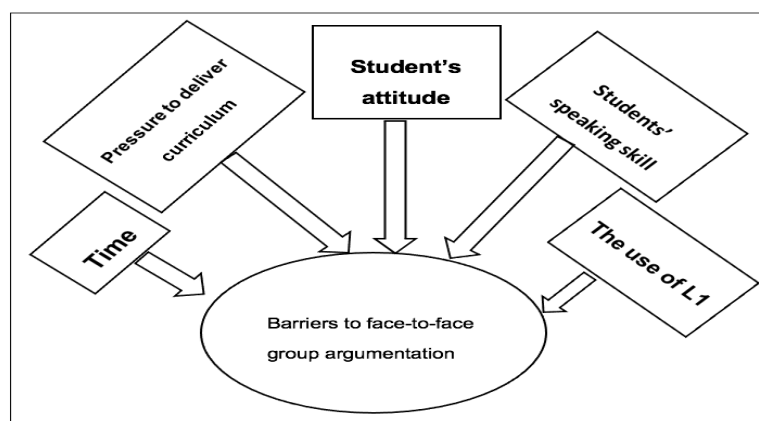


Figure 1. Teachers' views of barriers to group argumentation.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Evidence of the Whole-Class Discussion was Conducted Rather Than Small Group Argumentation

Findings from the interaction analysis showed that group argumentation is meager. Instead of carrying out small group argumentation, most teachers taught

argumentative essays by conducting a whole class discussion about their primary activity. In a 40 to a 70-minute lesson, they conducted a whole class discussion and individual writing; therefore, it was clear that none of them ever conducted small group argumentations. It is because most teachers randomly divided the students into the 'disagree' and 'agree' groups. Approximately every teacher had at least 30 students in their class. When they are divided into two groups, each group will consist of at least 15 students. It had clearly generated whole-class discussion in the classroom, not small group argumentations. Thus, the opportunity to discuss opposing ideas in small groups was scarce. It is because, according to argumentation researchers, the ideal numbers of students for group argumentations are two (Crowell & Kuhn, 2014; Evagorou & Osborne, 2013; Kuhn, 2009; Teasley, 1995), three (Wegerif & Mercer, 1997) or five to nine students in a group (Chinn et al., 2001; Dong et al., 2008; Reznitskaya et al., 2001, 2007).

Therefore, group argumentation is one of the approaches that ESL teachers should consider improving their students' written argumentation, as recommended by Crowell and Kuhn (2014). Students participate in more group argumentations; their persuasive argumentation skills will develop. All the fundamental studies linked small group argumentation with the success of individual' written argumentation according to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. Based on this theory, the whole-class discussion does not contribute towards the development of students' intermental activity, which later will develop their intramental activity.

5.2 Barriers that Discouraged Teachers from Conducting Small Group Argumentations

The findings showed that five barriers hindered all the teachers from allowing the students to work in small groups, namely time, pressure to deliver curriculum, students' attitude, students' speaking skills, and the use of L1 amongst students. The results were aligned with Clark et al. (2003), wherein their study noticed that the major obstacle to conducting Collaborative Reasoning discussions is time. Teachers in their study were majorly concerned with meeting the curriculum demands, which require students to perform well during the end-of-the-year tests rather than promoting collaborative learning. This shows that when it comes to implementing group argumentation, not only ESL teachers faced difficulties, but also teachers who taught English as their L1. Each teacher mentioned that approximately they have at least 30 students in their class. For instance, Teacher 2 has 56 students in her class. The number of students they have may amplify all the barriers they mentioned to conduct group argumentations. Regardless of their students' level of English proficiency and their years of teaching experiences, all teachers faced similar challenges when conducting small group argumentation, which made them resort to whole-class discussion.

5.3 Implication of the Study

Argumentation researchers substantially emphasize the significance of face-to-face group argumentation in the classroom to improve persuasive argumentation skills. However, the findings from this study tell us that face-to-face group argumentation is impractical to be conducted in most ESL classrooms in Malaysia due to limited time

allocated for the English lessons, students' low second language ability, and unconstructive students' attitudes towards learning approaches such as group argumentation. These common problems usually discourage teachers from conducting small group activities in class. Hence, most of the teachers we approached resort to the whole-class discussion when teaching argumentative essays. Most argumentation researchers oppose this approach. Consequently, there is a pressing need for practitioners to develop an intervention that goes beyond the whole class argumentation in pursuance of enhancing students' argumentation skills (Edelson, 2006).

6. CONCLUSION

Students' learning experience in secondary schools has a significant impact on their writing performance. This study is significant as it responds to the account made by researchers who insist that argumentation is a skill that should not be neglected by teachers and students therefore appropriate approach should be implemented by ESL teachers in school. We believe by exposing secondary school students to the group argumentation skill, it will help them to discuss better and voice their opinions freely. At the same time, ESL teachers need to surrender their authority to provide input to the discussion. This study is a starting point to accomplish Tan and Miller's (2007) recommendation to transform the teaching of writing in Malaysian secondary schools and remodel the teaching and learning of English in Malaysia.

However, this study has its limitations. It was conducted amongst ESL teachers teaching at the upper secondary level. The students have to sit for a national examination level before entering tertiary level by the end of the year. The findings might be contrasting if we interviewed ESL teachers teaching at the lower secondary level where students are not prepared for the national examination by the end of the year of schooling. Hence, for future research, researchers in the Malaysian context can do a comparison study between teachers teaching at upper secondary and lower secondary levels to distinguish any differences in terms of the barriers to conduct small group argumentation. Furthermore, another suggestion for future research is, since face-to-face group argumentations seem unfeasible to be conducted in most classroom settings in Malaysian secondary school classrooms due to some factors, the researchers would like to suggest teachers develop an intervention that promotes group argumentation using online tools as an alternative. Students spend most of their time using online tools outside school hours; hence online group argumentation can be another alternative to conducting small group argumentation.

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