The Effect of Analytic Text-Based Writing Strategies on ESL Argumentative Writing Among Malaysian Form-Six Students in Sabah, Malaysia: A Proposal

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Abstract
Producing effective and quality academic writing such as argumentative writing requires more than the regular writing ability, but rather analytical writing which would increase argumentation skills, and analytical thinking and promote higher cognitive skills. This study is conducted in response to a problem that exists within the Malaysian education setting where students have difficulties in presenting and expanding ideas of viewpoints convincingly, lack of knowledge of the subject matter, and insufficient linguistic competence. Therefore, this paper aims to investigate the effect of analytic text-based writing strategies on the students’ argumentative performance by proposing a conceptual framework that integrates the approach of text-based instruction and the writing model by Hyland (2003) that emphasizes the genre approach of teaching writing. This study will employ a mixed-method research approach and a quasi-experimental research design with a purposeful sampling where two groups of Form-Six students will be involved in the study. The experimental group will be assigned to carry out a 12-week intervention program and the control group with regular classroom practices. Pre-test and post-test will be conducted on both groups before and after the intervention. These features of analytic text-based writing which largely focuses on reading and writing skills would be expected to bring a great improvement in the writing performance among Malaysian ESL learners in Sabah.

Keywords: Analytic Text-Based Writing, Argumentative Writing, Malaysian ESL learners in Sabah.

INTRODUCTION
Writing is a core skill that should be mastered by all students at all levels in the education system. It is a fundamental skill (Graham, 2019). Writers use this skill for many reasons; to learn new ideas, persuade others, record information, express feelings, entertain others, heal psychological wounds, and explore the meaning of events and situations (Graham, 2018). For students, having strong writing skills may improve their chances to succeed in their educational and employable requirements. Whereas, the writing process itself brings substantial knowledge to students as it does not only improve communication skills but sharpens creativity and imagination levels, widens the knowledge base, and increases the level of confidence (Rae, 2020). Higher level and complex writings such as academic writing bring more skills and provide wider opportunities to students. Writing academically will help them analyse, convey understanding, think critically, and focus on technique and style (Azizi Ahmad, 2020). When students write, they need to read previous writings, form their own understanding and analyse the ideas or viewpoints presented by the writers. These help students to think critically and objectively and to look at any issue from
different perspectives and this promotes intellectual maturity.

However, the complex features of argumentative essay writing make it one of the most challenging tasks for students to accomplish. Substantial research has documented second learners’ difficulty in learning this form of writing (Peloghitis, 2017) as it requires sophisticated cognitive and linguistic abilities (Taylor et al., 2018). The complexity of this type of writing causes ESL learners to face difficulties in producing high-quality writing (Ozfiden & Mitchrell, 2020; Dang, Chau & Tra, 2020; Zhangwei et al. 2017). Students encounter problems in terms of organization/structures, thesis statement, content development, providing concrete evidence, writing counterclaims and refutation paragraphs as well as vocabulary and grammar-related problems.

ESL students in Malaysia are facing the same problem. Students revealed that they found it difficult in elaborating ideas and organizing ideas in the proper order (M. Fadly Farhy Abbas & Herdi Herdi (2018). A similar issue revolves around Form Six students who sit for Malaysian University English Test (MUET) as a compulsory test. Based on the latest report of the third session of the examination, released by the Malaysian Examination Council (MEC) in 2019, only 89.56% of the candidates were considered modest to limited users. Based on the report, the students had difficulties in presenting and expanding ideas or viewpoints convincingly, lack of knowledge on the given topic, misconceptions, and lack of language proficiency.

The reasons for Malaysian ESL students’ difficulties in writing tasks, besides cognitive difficulties, they have insufficient linguistic competence in English, hence facing problems to comprehend, conceive and compose ideas (Ghumamuddin, 2021). Additionally, from previous studies, the problem occurred as students still seem to be receiving inadequate writing instruction (Hashim, et al., 2018). Effective writing instruction is vital to guide students to develop their writing skills, especially in argumentative writing where students need to write proficiently and convincingly.

Analytic text-based writing has been claimed to be effective in enhancing students’ writing (Matsumura et. al.,2019; Campbell & Filimon, 2018). It’s a cognitively demanding task that requires the integration of reading and writing skills. The task provides opportunities for students to process up to three stimulus texts and then use the information to construct an argument and provide supporting evidence from the source text using their own words. The process of completing the task would help students to write good quality argumentative essays with convincing arguments, concrete evidence and elaboration, and the use of standard English conventions.

The Standard-Based English Language Curriculum (SBELC) in Malaysia has emphasized the engagement of students in responding, analyzing, and evaluating a variety of literary text types as well as understanding a variety of texts by using a range of appropriate strategies to construct meaning. However, the SBELC does not provide any directives on teaching strategies related to how using reading text from different sources can help improve students’ writing performance. There are also a few studies carried out on how analytic text-based writing improves argumentative writing and could probably be found in the Malaysian context. Therefore, this study attempts to reduce the gap by conducting research with the implementation of the analytic text-based essay writing strategies in order to improve the linguistic competence and the quality of argumentative writing among ESL students and they will be able to produce high-quality writing that reaches the expected level.

There are two research questions that become the focus of this study.

1. RQ1: What is the effect of analytic text-based writing strategies instruction on the ESL argumentative writing among Form-Six students at a public school in Papar, Sabah?
2. RQ2: How does the analytic text-based strategies instruction function with the ESL argumentative writing among Form 6 students at a public school in Papar, Sabah?

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Argumentative Writing and Analytic Text-Based Writing

For students, to demonstrate proficiency in argumentative reading and writing they need to master all the argumentative writing skills; making a case to sustain a claim, identifying evidence from various sources that connect the claim logically, using warrants that support the link between the claim and the supporting evidence and backing the warrants with support (Hillock, 2011, as cited in Campbell & Filimon, 2018). In order to realize that purpose, a need for explicit writing instructions to guide students in the process. Students need to master analytic text-based writing.

Basically, researchers apply analytic text-based writing when they write reviews of articles, professionals do it to synthesize information for their report whereas students engage with it when they write research reports, book reviews, write summaries, and argumentative essays. Analytic text-based writing provides opportunities for students to process a lot of information, develop responses pertaining to that information and present it clearly in a form of writing. The cognitive demand of text-based writing tasks, predicted various features of students’ writing performance, including students’ ability to reason analytically about texts, provide evidence to support their claims, and organize their writing (Matsumura et al., 2015). These features of analytic text-based writing especially with high quality (more cognitively demanding) tasks are very much relevant for guiding and improving students’ writing, particularly argumentative essay writing which requires complex cognitive and linguistic skills (Nippold & Ward-Lonergan, 2010).
2.2 Teaching Approaches

Nunan (2008:88) in Komariyah (2015), defines writing as an intellectual activity of finding ideas and thinking about the way to present and arrange them into a clear and meaningful statement and paragraph. It means that writing is the activity of composing a text to communicate thoughts and ideas in a readable form. Brown (2000) further elaborates, that writing is the result of thinking, drafting, and revising procedures that require specialized skills. Such procedures and skills in producing good quality writing need effective and explicit ways of realizing it.

Hyland (2008) in Imsa-arid (2020) suggested three main writing approaches for effective writing. The first is called the product approach which focuses on language structures and the products of writing. Second is the process approach which concentrates on the process of preparing and creating texts rather than the products. The third approach focuses more on the communicative purposes of the genre and the opinions of the reader called the genre approach. These three approaches provide different benefits depending on the lesson objectives, the needs of the students, and their level of proficiency in L2. Hyland (2008) states that no approaches can replace one another but rather complement each other to make a complete whole (Imsa-arid, 2020).

This study will adapt the genre-approach model by Hyland (2003) to implement analytical text-based writing in order to enhance students’ writing performance, especially their argumentative writing. Based on Firkin, Foray, and Sengupta (2007) in Dirgeyas (2016) there are three important stages in the process of teaching and learning through the genre approach. The stages include building context, modeling and deconstructing text, independent construction, and linking related texts. The first stage, reveals the genre purposes and the setting. A teacher asks questions to activate students’ background knowledge. The second stage is analyzing samples of the genre to identify its features in terms of the key features and the variations. A teacher introduces the model of the genre for students to familiarize themselves and to get a better understanding of the text type chosen. The third stage guides students to focus on particular functions of the text. A teacher encourages students to construct the text related to the social function. The next stage is the individual independent writing by students. Lastly, relating the new knowledge to other genres and contexts to understand how genres are designed to achieve particular social purposes. The procedure will be illustrated in the following diagram which illustrates the three stages of the teaching-learning cycle.

Figure 1: The Hyland’s Model of Genre Teaching and Learning Cycle (2003)

2.3 Review of the Related Studies

Much research in relation to text-based writing had been conducted in response to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) that present the generation K-12 designed to prepare them for success in the future. The CCSS emphasizes students read different reading sources, especially complex tests that provide facts and background knowledge. Students are challenged to respond to stimulus text that can develop their critical thinking, problem-solving and analytical skills that are important for success in school, career, and life. The Malaysian Standard-Based English Language Curriculum (SBELC) correlates with the objective of the CCSS to emphasize the engagement of students in responding, analyzing, and evaluating a variety of literary text types as well as the need for educators to have various teaching strategies such as evidence-based learning activities.

A study by Campbell (2018) explored the use of paragraph frames to scaffold the text-based argumentative writing of low-proficiency students. The results revealed the students showed significant improvement in two domains: (1) purpose, focus, and organization, and (2) evidence and elaboration. The study indicates that explicit paragraph frame instruction with teacher scaffolding can improve the writing performance of low-achieving students. The degree of the effectiveness of the writing strategy can be increased with the use of suitable reading texts for students to analyze and as a prompt to engage deeper in the content of the text.

Matsumura et al. (2015) conducted a study to explore the role the quality of writing tasks plays in students’ mastery of analytic text-based writing. Based on the results, the researchers claimed that the cognitive demand of text-based writing assignments helped to produce various features of students’ writing performance and including students’ ability to reason analytically about texts, use evidence to support their ideas, and organize their writing. Therefore, in order to help students to develop their level of thinking, cognitively demanding tasks should be considered an essential part of writing instruction to meet the standard level of writing.
Wang et al. (2018) carried out a study to explore the aspect of what high-quality students’ responses should look like in this genre. The results showed that the students’ writing which teachers considered as high-quality analytic text-based writing rarely projected the kinds of thinking and evidence demanded in the new standard that is to foster students’ ability to analyze and interpret text, marshal effective text evidence, and explain their reasoning. The researchers suggest teachers to look at broader criteria of how students’ responses in writing should be evaluated rather than based on the limited scope they have set for such assessment. Having a real understanding of what is regarded as quality writing could help teachers implement the kinds of evidence-based practices for writing instruction necessary to prepare students to meet the writing demands of the expected writing standards.

A study by Campbell and Filimon (2017), examined the effects of strategy-focused writing instruction on argumentative essay writing skills of students in a linguistically diverse classroom. The results revealed that the students had difficulty in (1) presenting opposing claims, (2) using different transitional strategies to show relationships, (3) using the logical progression of ideas from the beginning to the end with a satisfying introduction and conclusion or (4) maintaining and establishing appropriate style and tone. However, they made significant gains in two aspects; the Evidence and Elaboration and Conventions of Standard English. In conclusion, the overall results suggest that students’ overall writing performance can improve when receiving strategy-focused writing instruction.

Applying analytic-text-based writing to enhance students’ writing quality has proven its effectiveness in some aspects of students’ writing performance (Campbell & Fillmon, 2017; Campbell, 2018). The studies showed students with low proficiency in English gained improvement in producing evidence, elaboration, and the convention of standard English. The students also improved in other aspects such as the purpose, focus, and organization as well as in maintaining appropriate style and tone. The effectiveness of text-based writing which has a close relation with genre-approach to writing is expected to have a similar outcome for the current study.

Nevertheless, based on the previous studies, some considerations need to be paid attention to. Educators should choose suitable and high-quality reading texts that engage students in deeper analysing of the text (Campbell & Filimon, 2017; Dombek, 2016) and provide cognitive demanding tasks to develop students’ level of thinking (Matsumura, 2015). The assessments that teachers use for evaluating students’ writing have to be more comprehensible that could reflect real criteria of quality writing (Wang, 2018). Based on previous researchers, educators need to develop grammar instructional approaches that recognize language variations and students’ existing knowledge about language to reinforce the reading and writing skills of students who speak a dialect other than English. This idea is very much applicable as the current study is to be conducted among students from different social backgrounds who speak different languages based on their ethnicity. Additionally, Dombek (2016) also emphasized engaging students with multiple text-based writing activities for the same purpose.

Based on the reviewed literature and for the purpose of achieving the high expectations of improving students’ writing quality, it is necessary to reinforce the use of analytic text-based writing strategies for the intended purpose. The concept of realizing the purpose can be shown in figure 2.2 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ANALYTIC TEXT-BASED WRITING STRATEGIES</td>
<td>ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING PERFORMANCE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2: The relationship between Independent and Dependent Variables

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Approach and Design

This study will employ a mixed-method research approach and a quasi-experimental research design. This research will be carried out at SMK Takis, a suburban school located in Papar, Sabah, Malaysia. The Participants are 57 Form-Six Students aged 19 with average socioeconomic background. Based on the students’ performance class assignments, most of them are classified as limited and modest users of English.

The sampling technique for this study is purposive. Based on Jain and Chetty (2020) Based on this technique, the sample is selected based on the perception or knowledge, or judgment of the researcher about the required sample set. Thus, for this study, the researcher will apply this sampling technique as the researcher has direct access to two groups of students who are from different classes. One class consisting of 30 students will be the experimental group and another 30 students will be the control group.

Two types of instruments will be used to collect data to examine the impact of the interventions on argumentative writing. The writing test (pre-test and post-test) are taken from the standardized MUET (Malaysian University English) questions developed by the MEC (Malaysian Education Council). The writing question requires students to write a topic that is taken from the MUET syllabus for at least 250 words within 50 minutes. The writing will be graded using band descriptors provided by the MEC and the grading is based on the CEFR aggregate score. Another instrument for collecting data is semi-structured interviews. The questions will be checked and approved by a panel of experts in the field. This interview will be carried out with a focus group that consists of different levels of proficiency of students; good, average, and poor. The transcripts from the interview will be transcribed using thematic coding.
3.2 Intervention

Table 1: Research Intervention Period

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Control Group</th>
<th>Experimental Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; Week</td>
<td>Pre-test</td>
<td>Pre-test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 2 – Week 11</td>
<td>Regular Class Activities</td>
<td>Intervention (Analytic Text-Based Writing Strategies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 periods a week (40 min each period)</td>
<td>80 X 12 = 960 min</td>
<td>16 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; week</td>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>Post-test, Interview</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For all participants, English lessons are 40 minutes long for 8 periods a week. On 8 periods a week, the control group (n=30) receives regular English instruction with practices using MUET reference book consisting of listening, speaking, reading and writing activities and other additional activities for 3 months. The treatment condition (n=30) will be implemented 2 periods a week that is 40 minutes for each period for 12 weeks long. The overall duration for the treatment group to undergo the intervention is 16 hours in order to complete the whole process.

At the beginning, a pre-test will be administered and a post-test at the end of the study to examine the impact of the 12-week intervention. The purpose of the pre-test is to ensure the comparability of the two groups prior to the treatment, whereas the post-test allows the researchers to determine the effects of the treatment on the outcome variable (Rogers & Revesz, 2019). The following weeks after the pre-test, the control group will do regular class activities and the treatment group will undergo analytic text-based strategies for 10 weeks. On the 12<sup>th</sup> week, the post-test will be administered and data will be analysed for the results and further discussions of the implications.

3.3 Data Analysis

This study is designed to investigate the effects of analytic text-based writing strategies on argumentative writing quality among F6 students. A quasi-experimental approach will be carried out for the purpose; to compare the result between the treatment group which will undergo a text-based writing program and the control group which will receive regular classroom activities. In order to determine the effectiveness of the text-based writing program, the data will be analysed using a mixed paired T-test to find out whether there are any significant differences between the means of the groups after the interventions. As complementary to the validity and reliability of the data collected, standardized semi-structured interviews with a focus group consisting of good, average, and poor students will reveal the reflections and views of the participants on their own learning experience using the text-based writing strategies.

4 CONCLUSION

As previously mentioned, analytic text-based writing provides opportunities for students to process a lot of information, develop responses pertaining to that information and present it clearly in a form of writing. The cognitive demand of text-based writing tasks, predicted various features of students’ writing performance, including students’ ability to reason analytically about texts, provide evidence to support their claims, and organize their writing (Matsumura et al., 2015). These interesting features of analytic text-based writing which largely focuses on reading and writing skills would be expected to bring great change or improvement in the writing performance among Malaysian ESL learners in Sabah.

5 REFERENCES


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