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To What Extent Can Argumentative Essay Writing help develop Leaners' Critical Thinking

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ABSTRACT :

The purpose of this study is to investigate to what extent does elements of critical thinking affect on EFL Learners argumentative essay writing. The researcher used the descriptive analytical method. The data of the study was collected by the use of questionnaire addresses fifty university teachers who represented sample of the study both males and females. The data obtained was analyzed by using (SPSS). The main finding of the research: Firstly; Most of the respondents encourage knowing purpose can enhance EFL learners argumentative essay writing. Secondly; An extremely large percentage of teachers recommended that analyzing information, facts and observation can enhance EFL Learners argumentative essay writing. Thirdly; A majority of university teachers encouraged that predicting the conclusion before writing can enrich EFL Learners argumentative essay writing.

***Key Words**: Argument, Purpose, Prediction*

المستخلص:

يهدف هذا البحث الى دراسة الى مدى عناصر التفكير الناقد تؤثر فى كتابة المقال الجدلى للطلاب الذين تعتبر لهم اللغه الانجليزية كلغة أجنبيه. أستخدم الباحث منهج البحث الوصفى التحليلى. تم جمع المعلومات البحث عن طريق استبيان والذى صمم لجمع المعلومات من مدرسى الجامعات وهم خمسون يمثلون عينة الدراسة وتشمل الجنسين الذكور والاناث. أستخدم الباحث برنامج الحزمه الاحصائيه للعلوم الاجتماعية لتحليل بيانات هذا البحث والمعروف اختصارا ب SPSS . تشير اهم النتائج الى ان : اولا: معظم مدرسى الجامعات يتفقون على ان معرفة العرض يمكن ان تطور كتابة المقال الجدلى لدى الطلاب الذين تعتبر لهم اللغه الانجليزية كلغة اجنبية. ثانيا: كثير جدا من مدرسي الجامعات يوصون بأن تحليل المعلومات والحقائق والملاحظات بأمكانها ان تحسن كتابة المقال الجدلى لدى طلابهم الذين تعتبر لهم الانجليزية لغه اجنبية. ثالثا: غالبية أساتذة الجامعات يشجعون على أن توقع النتائج قبل البدء فى الكتابة يمكن ان تثرى كتابة المقال الجدلى لدى الطلاب الذين تعتبر لهم اللغة الانجليزية كلغة اجنبية.

***المصطلحات المفتاحية:** الجدل, الغرض, التوقع*

INTRODUCTION :

A major part of a formal education, in recent years, is essays. University students are taught structured essay formats to improve their writing skills, and admission essays are often used by universities in selecting applications. Essays are used to judge the mastery and comprehension of material in both secondary and tertiary education, so students are asked to explain, comment on, or assess a topic of study in the form of an essay. Usually academic essays are more formal than literary ones. They may allow the presentation of the writer's own views, this is done in a logical and factual manner with the use of the first person often discouraged. (Glenn, 2004).

Education should aim to support the development of independent thinkers who are discerning problem solvers, and can use a range of cognitive skills and strategies, including critical thinking, to solve problems (McGregor, 2007). Summer (1940) defines critical thinking as the examination and test of propositions of any kind which are offered for acceptance, in order to find out whether they correspond to reality or not. Unrau (1997) defines critical thinking under the influence of Ennis‟ works as "a process of reasoned reflection on the meaning of claims about what to believe or what to do"

Definition of Critical Thinking:

Critical thinking, as opposed to rote memorization, involves active and skillful demonstration of higher-order thinking skills (analysis, synthesis, and evaluation) among learners. Engaging students in discussions that demand demonstrations of these thinking skills will provide them the opportunity to grow in their understanding of a new knowledge by breaking it into parts to explore understandings and relationships (analysis), by putting together its general rule or by explaining its proper process (synthesis), by justifying a decision or course of action (evaluation), by generating new ideas, products, or ways of viewing things (creation), and by becoming aware of their thinking processes (metacognition). Through extensive and intensive exploration of the new knowledge, students will not simply accept propositions as valid and sound without critically deliberating and evaluating it. Critical thinking, .quite crucially, is the predisposition to evaluate *any* accepted rules or procedures. (Brown, 1998, p.7). Sumner (1940) posits that critical faculty, being a product of education and training that guarantees mental habit and power, is the only defense against delusion, deception, superstition, and misapprehension of .our earthly circumstances and ourselves.. Brown (1998) argues that instructing students to follow a certain mode of thinking is not prescriptive; rather, it encourages students .to discover and take their own path. through an understanding of where they are coming from and constant dialogue (with themselves and / or with others) to grow in their understanding of a new knowledge. Critical faculty simply means that the students demonstrate the ability to take charge of their own

minds, which involves self-discipline, selfexamination, and self-improvement. Elder and Paul (1998) believe that if students can take charge of their own minds, they can take charge of their own lives; they can improve them, bring them under their command and direction. As citizens, they can, before voting, take time to familiarize themselves with the relevant issues and positions, think about the long-term implications of what is being proposed, and pay close attention to how politicians manipulate by flattery or vague and empty promises.scrutinize their reasons critically to see if they are rationally justified. (p.3).Teaching critical thinking or higher-order thinking skills improves the quality of students. mode of thinking about any subject, content, or problem by skillfully analyzing, assessing, and reconstructing it. Its aim is towards a self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective way of thinking among students. Thus, the demand to teach critical thinking skills or higher-order thinking skills reaches an insurmountable height (see Black, 2005; Brown, 1998; Elder and Paul, 1998; Gonzales, 1999; van Gelder, 2005).The 'argumentative essay' is the most common genre that undergraduate students have to write (Wu, 2006: 330), particularly in the arts, humanities and social sciences (Hewings, 2010). Although the nature of the essay varies considerably across and even within disciplines, the development of an argument is regarded as a key feature of successful writing by academics across disciplines (Lea & Street, 1998). Nesi and Gardner (2006) found in their survey of assessed writing in 20disciplines that a commonly recognized value of the essay is its 'ability to display critical thinking and development of an argument within the context of the curriculum' (p. 108). However, many students struggle with argumentation: they are either unaware that they are expected to develop an argument in their essays, or have difficulty in doing so (Bacha, 2010; Davies, 2008), often because they have acquired starkly different concepts of argument at secondary school (Andrews,1995). At university, they receive little help, as argumentation is not explicitly taught in most undergraduate programmes in the UK (Mitchell & Riddle, 2000). General advice on academic writing is usually provided in writing guidelines presented in course handbooks, and through tutors' feedback on student essays; however, these methods have limitations. Lea and Street (1998) found that students have difficulty in applying general writing guidelines to their particular writing contexts. Tutors'feedback comments are often of the categorical type, such as the imperative 'Argument!' written in the margins of student essays (Lea & Street, 1998; Mutch, 2003). Tutors tend to use this comment vaguely when they feel that the writer has somehow breached the writing conventions expected in the discipline, to indicate 'different deficiencies from reasoning, to referencing to structure and style' (Mitchell & Riddle, 2000: p. 17). It has been claimed that the vague use of the term reflects tutors' own uncertainty over the concept of argument (Lea &

Street, 1998; Mitchell & Riddle, 2000). It may also reflect a broader uncertainty over the requirements of the essay, of which tutors tend to have only 'tacit' knowledge (Jacobs, 2005: 477). Much has been written on the rhetorical and linguistic structure of arguments, and on academic writing in general, while less attention has been paid to the teaching and learning of argumentation.

Concepts of argument

The term 'argument' is used in different ways in academic discourse, ranging from the philosophical construct of premises and conclusions (Toulmin, 1958) to diverse writing practices (Mitchell et al., 2008). It can refer to individual claims or the whole text. In reference to individual claims, argument means that a proposition is supported by grounds and warrants. As Davies points out, this type of argument requires the ability to make inferences, and can be taught through syllogisms such as 'if Socrates is a man and all men are mortal, then Socrates is mortal' (2008: p. 328). In reference to the whole text, 'argument' is defined by Andrews (1995: p. 3) as 'a process of argumentation, a connected series of statements intended to establish a position and implying response to another (or more than one) position'. Toulmin, Reike, and Janik (1984: p. 14) define argument similarly as 'the sequence of interlinked claims and reasons that, between them, establish content and force of the position for which a particular speaker is arguing'. According to these definitions, the core component of argumentation is clearly the development of a position, which can also be regarded as equivalent to the development of an argument. Another component is the presentation of the position through the logical arrangement of the propositions that build this position, which is mentioned in Andrew's definition as the 'connected series of statements', and in Toulmin et al's as the 'sequence of interlinked claims and reasons'. However, there is a third component which students have to learn in order to write argumentative essays, which is 'to analyse and evaluate content knowledge' (Wu, 2006: 330). This component concerns the selection of relevant information from sources, and its use in the development of the position. The definition is useful from a pedagogic perspective because it describes the abilities writers need to develop in order to be successful in writing argumentative essays (Wu, 2006). As will be shown later, the definition is also helpful for identifying students' learning needs, as well as shortcomings in the teaching of argumentative writing. Research has shown that many academic teachers and students have fuzzy concepts of argumentation, which may be linked to a fuzzy understanding of what the genre 'essay' entails. As Johns (2008) points out, essay is difficult to define as a genre, because it is used as an umbrella term for various types of discipline-specific writing, and the characteristics of structure, register and argumentation vary greatly across disciplines. It is therefore obvious that the specific requirements of the essay in a given discipline should be explained to students by disciplinary experts. At the same time, the essay has low prestige

being a student genre, not one that disciplinary experts have to write. Their understanding of the exact nature of the essay in their discipline may therefore be implicit and vague. Furthermore, what is accepted as a well-formed and valid argument in an essay depends on the discipline's value system and epistemology, and there is great variation across disciplines (Andrews, 2010; Samraj, 2004). To explore students' and tutors' conceptualisations, Mitchell et al. (2008) interviewed first-year students and tutors in three disciplines. The students had partial understandings of argument, for instance 'a for-and-against structure sandwiched between introduction and conclusion' (p. 235). Tutors were equally uncertain about the concept. When asked how they taught students to argue, they used critique, critical analysis and even opinion as interchangeable terms of explanation. In Lea & Street's (1998) study, academic tutors across a range of disciplines recognised argument as the key element of successful writing, but had difficulty to explain the nature of a well-developed argument. In their feedback to students, they referred to 'what feels like familiar descriptive categories such as "structure and argument", "clarity" and "analysis"' (p.163). Mitchell and Riddle (2000: p.17) notice that academics also have weak understanding of related abilities such as 'analysis' and 'evaluation'. Equally vague is tutors' interchangeable use of the term 'argument' in the plural form (e.g. 'you did not back up some of your arguments'), and in the singular form (e.g. 'you failed to provide a coherent argument'). This obscures the fact that it is the development of a position, reflected in 'the large-scale structuration of the essay' (Andrews, 1995: p. 139), rather than the 146 U. Wingate / Journal of English for Academic Purposes 11 (2012) 145–154 evidence for individual claims, that determines the quality of an essay. This conceptual uncertainty leads to unhelpful advice and inadequate teaching of argumentation. As Swales (1990: p. 84) argues, students need appropriate content and formal schemata in order to make 'allowable contributions' to a genre. The formal schemata concern the rhetorical elements of the genre, such as structure, style, and register, and are needed for the appropriate presentation of the writer's position

(Component 3 of the definition). As these schemata were formed by previously encountered texts, Students new to university will have schemata of previously encountered texts, i.e. essays they had to write at school, which may need to adjusted for the genres required at university.

Learning argumentation

School essays are often confined to relatively simple argumentative structures (Andrews, 1995). A typical essay in humanities subjects requires that the writer states a claim on a controversial issue and supports this claim by evidence in order to convince the audience (Wood, 2001). This genre often takes the format of the 'five paragraph' essay which consists of the introduction of the topic, the statement of a claim, three supporting paragraphs

for the claim and a concluding paragraph
(Bacha, 2010). In contrast to school writing which tends to invite the statement of the author's personal opinion, academic writing requires the presentation of a considered opinion, based on the careful analysis of various and conflicting sources (Andrews,1995). Furthermore, writing at university is seldom about making one claim, and therefore requires structures that can support more complex ideas. Therefore, students new to university have to adjust previously learnt formal schemata such as structure and register.

The three components of developing an argument, used as the definition in this paper, pose considerable difficulties for the novice writer. Analysing and evaluating content knowledge presupposes a certain level of subject knowledge which would enable students to distinguish relevant from irrelevant information in the literature. Due to their lack of subject knowledge, however, many students struggle to identify conflicting points of view in the literature (Andrews, 1995). The second element, establishing a position, requires expressing a 'voice' and a 'stance' (Street, 2009) in an academic debate conducted by experts, and achieving a 'workable balance between self and sources' (Groom, 2000: p. 65). 'Voice' and 'stance' are among the 'hidden features' of academic writing described by Street (2009), which have much impact on the success of writing, but are rarely made explicit to students. The difficulties these requirements pose for the novice writer have been widely discussed (e.g. Ivanic,1998; Lillis, 2001). Groom (2000) describes three patterns of difficulty. The first, called 'solipsistic voice', means that students express their own experiences and opinions without reference to the literature. The second, the 'unaverred voice' refers to students who offer 'a patchwork of summaries of other authors views' (p. 67) without making own claims. The reason for this rather typical pattern is students' lack of confidence in taking a stance in relation to published authors. Essays that present the unaverred voice are usually accused of lacking criticality. The third pattern is the 'unattributed
voice'; here students make propositions sound as if they were their own idea when in fact they were taken from another source. The third component of developing an argument, the presentation of the writer's position in a coherent manner, involves the 'arrangement and re-arrangement' of propositions at the macro level (Andrews, 1995; p.29) so that the development of the position is reflected in a logical text structure. According to Andrews, this component is not addressed in most study guides and textbooks. It requires an adjustment of the formal schema of structure which is difficult for students who have so far only learnt to support one claim in a simple formulaic structure.

Teaching argumentation

The importance of making argumentation 'the focus of deliberate educational practices' has been repeatedly stressed (e.g. Davies, 2008: p. 327; Mitchell & Riddle, 2000); however, this is not part of the teaching provision in undergraduate programmes at British universities, where argument is in some cases taught generically on Critical Thinking courses. Nevertheless, as Mitchell and Riddle (2000: p. 27) assert, argument cannot be modelled and transferred from one context to another, because the genre 'argumentative essay' and therefore the nature of argumentation are highly discipline-specific, and should therefore be taught by 'mainstream teaching staff' (Mitchell & Riddle, 2000: p.18). By contrast, Davies (2008) proposes the teaching of argument through syllogisms and claims that the skill of logical inference-making can be learnt outside the discipline. This approach is based on the Toulmin model which describes argument by the units of claim, grounds,
warrant and backing (Toulmin et al., 1984). Mitchell and Riddle (2000) used the Toulmin approach for teaching argument in various disciplines, after having simplified its terminology from 'claim, grounds and warrant' to 'then, since, because'.

The Toulmin model is also followed in some study guides (e.g. Fairbairn & Winch, 1996); however, it seems that it renders itself more easily to the analysis and construction of single claims and is less helpful at the macro level. Although Mitchell and Riddle (2000) claim that the model can be applied to longer texts, there is no evidence of how this would work. Therefore, it seems that if the Toulmin model is used in the teaching of argumentation, it needs to be combined with methods that address the large-scale structure or macro level of the essay. Indeed, most authors who advocate the Toulmin model also recommend additional procedures to address the macro level. Mitchell & Riddle suggest a four-stage procedure concerned with the overall text organisation; similarly, Bacha (2010) used the Toulmin model in combination with organisational plans adapted from Reid (1988). Davies (2008) also proposes a six-step procedure for planning and developing the whole essay, and only in step 5 is the syllogistic argument form used 'to guide the connection between premises and conclusions'. Furthermore, it tells students that they must develop an argument when 'what struggling students are looking for is something that will show them what these things mean, how they work, and what they look like in and as text' (Groom, 2000: p. 70; italics in original text). Feedback comments are a 'key factor in learning to write' (Hyland & Hyland, 2006: 206), and could be a particularly effective method of giving individual and specific guidance for the improvement of argumentation. However, this opportunity is often missed because feedback is expressed in a way that students do not understand (Walker, 2009), or in the form of 'categorical modality' (Lea & Street, 1998: p. 169), i.e. in imperatives and with exclamation marks.

Essay Writing

"Essay writing is at the heart of most academic study" (Warburton, 2007, p.11). He thinks that *talking* about what you know is not enough; hence, you need to be able to make a clear and well-argued case in writings, based on appropriate research. He also believes that skills are built on good habits that are patterns of behavior that you don't need to think about, usually because you have practiced them many times before. And once you have got into a good habit, life gets easier. He mentions that if someone has a reasonable grasp of her/his subject and the will-power to practice writing, s/he can make significant improvements very quickly. "If you want to improve, then you need to *write*, not just read about writing." (p.3)

What is 'Argument' in an Argumentative Essay:

Bowell and Kemp (2002) define arguments as "to attempt to persuade by giving good reasons is to give an argument" (p.2). They further mention that critical thinkers primarily should be interested in arguments and whether they succeed in providing us with good reasons for acting or believing. They mention that it is surprising to think of an „argument" as a term for giving someone a reason to do or believe something.

Some Elements Of Critical Thinking:

1.Effect of Knowledge of Purpose and Objective:

A **Purpose** is always specific. It's difficult to know what we've achieved if the goal is vague. When a goal is precise, then mapping the way to it is easier. Make sure that the Purpose is focused and clearly stated. The Purpose should be measurable so that we can know if it has been reached or not. If we do not achieve a specific Purpose, then we have not achieved the goal, what we intended to do. Either the goal is reached…or it is not. From http://critical thinking .org .com

Analysis Information, data and facts

Information All reasoning is based on data, information and evidence.

- Restrict your claims to those supported by the data you have.
- Search for information that opposes your position as well as information that supports it.
- Make sure that all information used is clear, accurate and relevant.
- Make sure you have gathered sufficient information.

Foundation for Critical Thinking; Paul and Elder.2003.

Using Clear Concepts:

Concepts All reasoning is expressed through, and shaped by, concepts and ideas.

- Identify key concepts and explain them clearly.
- Consider alternative concepts or alternative definitions of concepts.

 Make sure you are using concepts with precision.

From Foundation for Critical Thinking; Paul and Elder.2003.

Awareness of implications and consequences

All reasoning leads somewhere or has implication and concequences.

 Trace the implications and consequences that follow from your reasoning.

 Search for negative as well as positive implications.

 Consider all possible consequences.

From Foundation for Critical Thinking; Paul and Elder.2003.

Main Objective of this Study:

To highlight the role of writing in improving critical thinking elements.

Main Hypothesis of this study:

Writing argumentative Essay can enhance EFL Learners critical thinking elements.

Material and Methods:

The target population of this study was university teachers during the year 2014-2015. The researcher thinks that the sample of the study is suitable because the great numbers of university teachers' in Khartoum state. To carry out the study the researcher chose some random samples of University Teachers' in Khartoum State. Fifty copies of questionnaire were distributed to the sample of this study they were valid.

Instrument of the Study

The researcher used a questionnaire to collect the data of this study. The researcher thinks that the questionnaire is a good tool through which the relevant information can be collected easily. The questionnaire was designed in simple and clear language to avoid ambiguity and misunderstanding which are sometimes misleading to the respondents. A pilot study was conducted with 30 volunteer English language teachers to establish its internal consistency and reliability. After analyzing the data resulting from the pilot study, several items were removed from the instrument.

Results:

This study investigated to what extent does writing argumentative essay affect on developing English as a foreign language learners' critical thinking elements. The instrument which the researcher used to collect the data was questionnaire for university teachers' at Khartoum state. The questionnaire consisted of two sections and eighteen statements. The data obtained was analyzed by SPSS and tabulated by researcher.

Table(1) Gender of Subject:

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	37	74.0	74.0	74.0
	Female	13	26.0	26.0	100.0
	Total	50	100.0	100.0	

The table above (1) illustrates the gender of the subjects. The total number of the subjects were 50 English language teachers; 37 of them were male represents (74 %) and 26 of the subjects were female teachers which represents (26%).

Table(2) knowledge of purposes and objectives

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	N	1	2.0	2.0	2.0
	A	20	40.0	40.0	42.0
	SA	29	58.0	58.0	100.0
	Total	50	100.0	100.0	

Almost of the sample (58%) are strongly agree and agree that effect of knowledge of purpose and objectives can develop EFL Learners critical thinking skills.

Table (3) Analysis Information, data and facts

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	N	3	6.0	6.0	6.0
	A	20	40.0	40.0	46.0
	SA	27	54.0	54.0	100.0
	Total	50	100.0	100.0	

An extremely large percent of the respondents (94%) are strongly agree and agree that analyzing facts, observations and information surely enriches critical thinking skills among EFL learners critical.

Table (4) Predicting conclusions

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	DS	5	10.0	10.0	10.0
	N	6	12.0	12.0	22.0
	A	20	40.0	40.0	62.0
	SA	19	38.0	38.0	100.0
	Total	50	100.0	100.0	

A majority of subjects(40%) agreed upon predicting conclusions before writing argumentative essay can develop EFL Learners critical thinking skills.

Table (5) Using clear concepts:

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	DS	1	2.0	2.0	2.0
	N	6	12.0	12.0	14.0
	A	23	46.0	46.0	60.0
	SA	20	40.0	40.0	100.0
	Total	50	100.0	100.0	

A considerable percent of the respondents (40%) agree that effect of using clear concepts when writing argumentative essay can upgrade EFL learners critical thinking skills.

Discussion:

This study investigated to what extent does writing argumentative essay affect on developing English as a foreign learners' critical thinking elements. The findings of the study revealed that most of English teachers' agreed that knowledge of purpose and objectives as an element of critical thinking effect on positively on EFL Learners argumentative essay writing. Most of respondents agreed that analysis of information, data and facts can surely enhance EFL writing argumentatively. A majority of teachers believe predicting the conclusion before writing as an element of critical thinking can enrich EFL learners argumentative essay writing. Large amount of teachers thinks that using clear concepts as an element of critical thinking enhances English as a foreign language learners argumentative writing.

Conclusion:

This study find out whether critical thinking elements can enrich EFL Learners' critical thinking or not As hypothesized: writing argumentative essay can enhance EFL learners critical thinking elements. The results of this study showed that surely writing argumentative essay can enhance EFL critical thinking elements.

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