DEVELOPING ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING SKILLS OF LEARNERS USING AN ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING CHECKLIST (AWC) BASED ON THE CLASSICAL MODEL OF ARGUMENT

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Abstract

Academic writing skills can help learners succeed in their studies, as in many academic contexts, writing is a key component of coursework and exams. However, literature show that some Malaysian university students may still be unfamiliar with the conventions of academic writing in English, especially in ways to structure an essay and to express complex ideas and arguments in writing. To support a classroom that requires academic writing proficiency, an academic writing checklist (AWC) was first developed based on the Classical Model of Argument. Next, in a quasi-experimental study, two groups of academic English learners were involved in testing the effectiveness of the AWC. Findings from paired t-test analysis done on *Jupyterlab* using *Python* codes, showed that the experimental group which wrote a second draft of their essay using the AWC scored better compared to the control group. It can be inferred that a checklist or a structured framework can help students ensure that they have covered all the necessary elements of their essay as well as the necessary components of each section. It is hoped that teachers and other stakeholders can be motivated to develop personalized tools to make academic writing a less daunting task for tertiary learners.

Keywords: Academic writing; argumentative essay writing; Python; writing checklist

Abstrak

Kemahiran penulisan akademik boleh membantu pelajar berjaya dalam pelajaran mereka. Dalam konteks akademik, penulisan ialah komponen utama dalam kerja kursus dan peperiksaan. Walau bagaimanapun, kajian menunjukkan bahawa sesetengah pelajar universiti di Malaysia masih tidak biasa dengan penulisan akademik dalam Bahasa Inggeris, terutamanya dalam cara menyusun esei dan untuk menyatakan idea dan hujah yang kompleks secara bertulis. Oleh yang demikian, sebuah senarai semak penulisan akademik (AWC) dibangunkan dalam kajian ini berdasarkan *Classical Model of Argument* sebagai satu alat sokongan belajar. Seterusnya, dua kumpulan pelajar akademik Bahasa Inggeris terlibat dalam menguji keberkesanan AWC. Dapatan daripada analisis paired *t-test* yang dilakukan menggunakan kod *Python*, menunjukkan bahawa kumpulan eksperimen yang menulis draf kedua esei mereka menggunakan AWC mendapat markah yang lebih baik berbanding kumpulan kawalan. Ia boleh disimpulkan bahawa senarai semak atau rangka kerja berstruktur boleh membantu pelajar memastikan bahawa mereka telah merangkumi semua elemen yang diperlukan dalam esei mereka serta komponen yang diperlukan setiap bahagian.

Kata kunci: Penulisan akademik; penulisan karangan argumentatif; Python; senarai semak penulisan

1.0 INTRODUCTION

As informed by Lu (2021), English for academic purposes is a highly eclectic and pragmatic discipline; linguistics, applied linguistics and educational topics are often integrated to be considered from the perspective of academic English. Recently, there has been an increasing focus on developing academic language proficiency across disciplines, in order to support students' academic achievement for ESL learning and other subjects taught in English. This includes developing students' ability to use language in academic contexts, such as writing research papers, participating in academic discussions, and understanding academic texts on various topics (Neumann & McDonough, 2015).

On that note, academic writing is considered to be very important for tertiary students, as it is a critical skill for success in higher education and beyond (Boynton, 2018). Lu (2021) affirms that academic writing is a highly complex socio-cognitive process which essentially connects textual interactions to interpersonal interactions in a student. Written language use is not only an essential means of communication in higher education, it is also a prerequisite for professionals in any research discipline (Boynton, 2018). Students must be able to express

their ideas clearly, logically, and persuasively in written form to succeed in their coursework and to effectively communicate their research findings. ESL scholars, Hyland & Hyland (2006) also agree that academic writing literacy is central to constructing knowledge, educating students and negotiating a professional academic career.

Argumentative writing is part of the academic writing practice which requires students to be factual, logical, statistical and critical in forming, supporting or refuting claims (Meral et al. 2022). A writing classroom should enable learners to build effective social and cognitive bridges with scaffolding and close guidance. It was found by Lin et al. (2020) that students' argumentative writing directly influences the development and quality of their argumentation skills, which, according to Mendez et al. (2020), in turn improves students' conceptual understanding of the world, advances their epistemic understanding of an argument, and can also be applied in their future careers. Argumentative writing requires the writer to construct logical arguments based on evidence and reasoning. This involves critical thinking skills such as identifying and avoiding fallacies, recognizing the complexity of an issue, and making sound judgments based on evidence. These are all important life skills that students need to learn to thrive beyond the classroom.

In the Malaysian teaching-learning context, some instructional issues have emerged on the topic of academic writing and argumentative writing skills. Hayisama et al. (2019) have observed that Malaysian university students' argumentative essays could be more argumentative and interactive in nature. Gopee et al. (2013) also noted that certain Malaysian students struggle as academic writers as they do not receive instructional support on appropriate and effective academic writing. These claims can be supported with research findings of Lin et al. (2020) which showed that there are gaps between what researchers suggest as effective approaches to teaching argumentative writing and how argumentative writing is currently taught in classrooms. It can be inferred from literature that students who struggle with academic argumentative essay writing, seem to portray lack of knowledge of argumentative essay structure. Argumentative essays have a specific structure with an introduction, body paragraphs, and a conclusion. Beginner and intermediate level learners may not have been adequately familiarized with this structure, may have difficulty organizing their ideas in a logical and coherent way.

Klebanov et al. (2018) suggest that structure-based approaches hold promise for argumentative writing. In response, this study aims to develop an argumentative essay writing checklist to be used in an academic English classroom, to allow students write better

argumentative essays. In its essence, the current study investigates the effectiveness of teaching the classical model of argument in improving the argumentative writing skills of tertiary level students. If and once proven successful, the writing checklist can be confidently utilised by instructors teaching in similar contexts.

2.0 THE CLASSICAL MODEL OF ARGUMENT

Overall, the current state of research on teaching argumentation skills to tertiary learners suggests that it is an important area of inquiry and that there is a need for further research to identify effective instructional strategies and to better understand the contextual factors that affect students' argumentation skill development (Lin et al. 2020; Lu, 2021).

It has been theorized by Agusnawati (2019) and Lan et al. (2011) that a guided structure can be a helpful tool for students to improve their essay writing skills by providing a clear framework for organization, focus, clarity and confidence. It fact, it can also act as a source for feedback while allows teachers and peers to provide more targeted and specific feedback on students' writing (Aziz & Khatimah, 2019).

One of the most commonly used frameworks for argumentative essay writing is the Classical Model of Argument. The classical model of argument is a framework for constructing persuasive arguments that has been used in Western rhetoric since ancient times (Rogers, 2012). It is based on the principles of logos (appeals to reason), ethos (appeals to credibility), and pathos (appeals to emotion). The classical model consists of five basic parts as shown in Figure 1.

Introduction	sets the stage for the argument by introducing the topic
• establishes the speaker's credibility (ethos) • Includes a statement of problem/ thesis statement	
Narration	provides background information about the topic
• establishes context for argument • may include a summary of relevant facts/historical events	
Confirmation	main body of argument
• presents evidence and logical reasoning • may include statistics, expert testimony, anecdotes etc.	
Refutation	addresses counterarguments
• anticipate counterarguments and objections	
Conclusion	summarizes the main points of argument
• restates thesis • may include a call to action • may include a final appeal to the audience's emotions (pathos)	

Figure 1. Components of argumentative academic writing following the Classical Model
of Argument

Based on this structure, the classical model of argument can be a valuable tool for tertiary learners in academic writing. It provides a clear structure for organizing arguments, emphasizes evidence-based reasoning, incorporates counterarguments, builds credibility, and appeals to both reason and emotion (Walková & Bradford, 2022).

However, it is also important to acknowledge that there is a limitation associated to the use of the classical model of argument for absolute beginners. The classical model can be complex and overwhelming for learners who are beginners when it comes to writing. These students may need more scaffolded support in understanding the different components of argumentative academic writing and how they fit together.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Purpose, Question and Hypothesis

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of teaching the classical model of argument in improving the argumentative writing skills of university-level students. To achieve this objective, this study set out to answer the following research question: What is the effect of utilising a writing checklist developed based on the classical model of argument

on tertiary level students' argumentative writing skills? To substantiate claims made from this study, a null and alternative research hypothesis was also developed as presented below:

Table 1. Hypotheses of the current study

Null Hypothesis	Alternative Hypothesis
H_0: The argumentative essay writing checklist developed based on the classical model of argument does not help beginner level ESL learners improve their argumentative writing skills for academic English.	H_1: The argumentative essay writing checklist developed based on the classical model of argument helps beginner level ESL learners improve their argumentative writing skills for academic English.

If the results of the paired t-test are found to be statistically significant, then the null hypothesis is rejected to conclude that there is an effect of utilizing the writing checklist on the argumentative writing skills of students.

3.2 Description of sample and sampling

Firstly, an essay writing checklist was developed for this study based on current literature on the classical argumentative model of writing. Next, three ESL experts were involved in validating the writing checklist for its design and approving the use of the checklist in actual classroom context. All three experts fulfilled the following criteria: (I) currently teaching an English subject at the tertiary level which includes writing tasks for the students, (II) have the experience of teaching ESL writing for more than 7 years, and (III) willingness to participate in the study. The validated checklist has been attached in Appendix A.

Secondly, upon validation, the writing checklist was tested using the quasi-experimental method in two academic English writing classes at a private university in Malaysia. There were 15 students in the control group and 15 students in the experimental group. All students granted consent to use their essays for the purpose of this research, on the condition that their names will not be revealed. Hence, for both procedures, this research followed the non-probability convenience-based sampling. This sampling method favoured the cost, time and budget constraints faced in the current study.

3.3 Ensuring Reliability of the Study

The current study establishes reliability by ensuring test stability. According to Grimshaw et al. (2000), this involves maintaining consistent conditions and environments for both the control and experimental groups during the pre-test and post-test assessments. Both groups were enrolled in the same course and given the same assignment; which means they received the same instruction and had the same background knowledge and skills relevant to the essay topics. Furthermore, giving the same time for completion of draft 1 and final draft of essays ensures consistency in the working conditions for both groups. Secondly, test stability was also established from the tutor's end using a consistent evaluation. Both pre-test and post-test essays were evaluated by the same tutor using a rubric that has been practiced at the institution for a long time. This consistent evaluation helps to minimize the variability that might arise from different assessors and criteria.

3.4 Data collection methods and analysis procedures

Both groups of students were taught the Classical Model of Argument in Week 5 of the academic English course by the same tutor. As hands-on practice, they were given a choice of two argumentative essay topics to write an essay for about 250 words in the classroom. The topics were: '*Should a safety committee be set up to make the neighbourhood a safer place?*', and '*Should there be more regulation in letting tourists come into our country?*'. Next in Week 7, both groups were asked to write a second draft of the same essay, and only the experimental group was given the writing checklist to work with. Their essays were collected in Google Classroom, in Microsoft Word Document format. All essays were marked by the same tutor to ensure consistency in marking style; and students were graded for content, language and organization of their essays.

This quasi-experimental study followed the quantitative research method to analyse the effectiveness of the writing checklist developed, using a paired t-test. The scores of essays at Week 5 and 7 were analysed using *Python* codes on *Jupyterlab.*

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Firstly, a Shapiro-Wilk test was conducted using Python codes to ensure normality in the pre-test and post-test data. The codes used to run the analysis and the results are shown in Figure 2.

```
[5]:  from scipy import stats
      import matplotlib.pyplot as plt

[11]: CG_Week5 = [44,47,45,47,47,52,40,53,40,48,53,51,52,54,39]
      CG_Week7 = [45,47,47,48,47,55,42,55,42,49,54,50,52,57,37]
      EG_Week5 = [47,60,45,46,53,45,39,50,40,54,47,45,42,50,60]
      EG_Week7 = [60,60,55,60,57,50,47,52,47,54,50,54,56,57,61]

[12]: # Perform Shapiro-Wilk test for pre-test data
      pretest_cg_stat, pretest_cg_pvalue = stats.shapiro(CG_Week5)
      pretest_eg_stat, pretest_eg_pvalue = stats.shapiro(EG_Week5)

[17]: # Perform Shapiro-Wilk test for post-test data
      posttest_cg_stat, posttest_cg_pvalue = stats.shapiro(CG_Week7)
      posttest_eg_stat, posttest_eg_pvalue = stats.shapiro(EG_Week7)

[19]: # Print the Shapiro-Wilk test results
      print("Pre-Test - Control Group: Shapiro-Wilk p-value =", pretest_cg_pvalue)
      print("Pre-Test - Experimental Group: Shapiro-Wilk p-value =", pretest_eg_pvalue)
      print("Post-Test - Control Group: Shapiro-Wilk p-value =", posttest_cg_pvalue)
      print("Post-Test - Experimental Group: Shapiro-Wilk p-value =", posttest_eg_pvalue)

      Pre-Test - Control Group: Shapiro-Wilk p-value = 0.14413395524024963
      Pre-Test - Experimental Group: Shapiro-Wilk p-value = 0.31589803099632263
      Post-Test - Control Group: Shapiro-Wilk p-value = 0.7859445214271545
      Post-Test - Experimental Group: Shapiro-Wilk p-value = 0.2754756212234497
```

Figure 2. Python codes to perform Shapiro-Wilk normality test

In the control group (CG_Week5) for the pre-test, the Shapiro-Wilk test resulted in a p-value of 0.14. Since this p-value is greater than the commonly used significance level of 0.05, it was suggested that there was not enough evidence to conclude that the data significantly deviated from normality. Therefore, based on this test, it was assumed that the data in the control group for the pre-test was approximately normally distributed. Similarly, for the experimental group (EG_Week5) in the pre-test, the Shapiro-Wilk test resulted in a p-value of 0.32. Again, this p-value is greater than 0.05, indicating that there was no significant evidence to suggest departure from normality. Therefore, based on this test, the data in the experimental group for the pre-test was also found to be approximately normally distributed.

As for the control group (CG_Week7) for the post-test, the Shapiro-Wilk test yielded a p-value of 0.79. Once again, this p-value is greater than 0.05, indicating no significant evidence of departure from normality; therefore, the data in the control group for the post-test is approximately normally distributed. Lastly, for the experimental group (EG_Week7) in the post-test, the Shapiro-Wilk test resulted in a p-value of 0.28. Like the previous cases, this p-value is greater than 0.05, suggesting no significant evidence of departure from normality;

hence, the data in the experimental group for the post-test was approximately normally distributed.

Secondly, the pre-test and post-test scores of essays marks were also analysed using *Python* codes on *Jupyterlab*. The rubric that was used to mark the essays was based on the standard rubric given at the private university where the students were enrolled at the time of the study. The total mark for an argumentative essay was fixed at a maximum of 70 marks (40 for Language, 20 for Content and 10 for Organization). The codes used to perform the paired t-test for control group was: stats.ttest_rel(CG_Week5,CG_Week7) and for experimental group was: stats.ttest_rel(EG_Week5,EG_Week7). Table 2 presents the paired t-test analysis conducted on the overall essay scores of the essays written by control group and experimental group students in Week 5 and Week 7 respectively.

Table 2. Presentation of the students' argumentative writing skills

Week 5 Data		Descriptive Analysis			Week 7 Data		Descriptive Analysis		
Student	Overall Score (x/70)	Mean	Mode	Std.	Student	Overall Score (x/70)	Mean	Mode	Std.
Control Group									
1	44	45.467	47.000	5.069	1	45	48.467	48.000	5.592
2	47				2	47			
3	45				3	47			
4	47				4	48			
5	47				5	47			
6	52				6	55			
7	40				7	42			
8	53				8	55			
9	40				9	42			
10	48				10	49			
11	53				11	54			
12	51				12	50			
13	52				13	52			
14	54				14	57			
15	39				15	37			
Test statistic value: -2.7386127875258306									
Two-sided p value: 0.015998624625657744									

Experimental Group									
16	47	48.200	47.000	6.383	**16**	60	54.667	55.000	4.685
17	60				**17**	60			
18	45				**18**	55			
19	46				**19**	60			
20	53				**20**	57			
21	45				**21**	50			
22	39				**22**	47			
23	50				**23**	52			
24	40				**24**	47			
25	54				**25**	54			
26	47				**26**	50			
27	45				**27**	54			
28	42				**28**	56			
29	50				**29**	57			
30	60				**30**	61			
Test statistic value: -5.145120686731161									
Two-sided p value: 0.0001488212334457435									

The p value for the control group was 0.016, which is less than 0.05. This means that there is a 0.016% chance of obtaining a test statistic at least as extreme as -2.74 if the null hypothesis is true. On the other hand, the p-value for the experimental group was 0.00015, which is far less than 0.05. This means that there is a 0.015% chance of obtaining a test statistic at least as extreme as -5.15 if the null hypothesis is true. Therefore, based on the results, the null hypothesis is rejected. With enough evidence, has been found that there is a statistically significant difference in the mean argumentative writing skills between the experimental group and the control group. Specifically, the experimental group, which received the writing checklist, showed more significant improvement in their argumentative writing skills compared to the control group. This conclusion can also be supported by the descriptive statistics results. While the mean and mode of the control group essay marks were seen to be higher in the post-test than the pre-test, the mean and mode of the experimental group showed a more significant increase; this indicates that the argumentative writing checklist helped to push the average marks margin of the class.

In conclusion, the results of the paired t-test and descriptive statistics in the current study suggest that the writing checklist is effective in improving the argumentative writing skills of ESL learners. It is important to note that a p-value of less than 0.05 does not necessarily mean that the difference between the two groups tested in this study is large. The size of the difference can be assessed by looking at the effect size. An effect size of 0.8 or higher is considered to be large, while an effect size of 0.5 or higher is considered to be moderate. In the current case, the effect size is 1.47, which is considered to be large. This means that the difference in the mean argumentative writing skills between the experimental group and the control group is large. This shows that, while students can generally produce a better second draft of an already-written essay, the outcome can be enhanced greatly by using an essay writing checklist. Put in context, English learners can write better argumentative essays if they are given a guideline or framework as a learning support tool, in this case, the writing checklist developed based on the classical model of argument.

It can be deduced that the classical model of argumentative writing is a good guide for university level learners to write quality argumentative essays. By following a step-by-step process in a clear structure, students from the experimental group were able to avoid making common and repeated mistakes and also avoid making irrelevant points. They were also made sure to consider all sides of the issue and to provide evidence to support their claims, as opposed to the control group students who did not repair much of their arguments for the second draft. The findings of the current study support the findings of Klebanov et.al (2016) which stressed that argumentation structures, argument content and the overall quality of an argumentative essay can be positively influenced by the use of structure-based approaches. This is especially true for novice learners who need close guidance and constant attention from teachers, and in instances of classroom constraints where teachers cannot afford to attend to all students equally.

5.0 CONCLUSION

This study set out to investigate the effectiveness of an argumentative essay writing checklist on English learners at a Malaysian tertiary institution setting. Findings from this quasi-experimental study show that the experimental group which wrote a second draft essay using the argumentative essay writing checklist scored better compared the control group which wrote a second draft essay unguided. This study has responded positively towards the suggestions made by Klebanov et. al (2016) that the quality of argumentative writing and

argumentative skills of English learners of all levels can be improved using structure-based approaches, rubrics and guided tools.

However, it is to be noted that the premise of the current study was tested using a small sample, for which the findings cannot be generalized to the whole Malaysian population of tertiary level learners. Researchers are encouraged to replicate this study using a larger sample and in a different context. In the future, researchers could also incorporate digital technologies in developing teaching-learning materials for learners such as online writing platforms, digital feedback tools, and artificial intelligence. Results should be communicated effectively to teachers in order to popularize the use of evidence-backed and theory-driven approaches and materials. To further engage beginner level learners or young learners, instructors can also make games out of reliable materials, to support the development of argumentative writing skills.

6.0 ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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Appendix A: Essay Writing Checklist based on the Classical Model of Argument

Essay Writing Checklist for Beginner Level ESL Learners
Instruction: *This is a self-assessment for your essay writing task. Select an appropriate response for the given questions.*
Name: _____   Class: _____

	Item	YES	NO	If your answer is no, what are you going to do next?
Pre-Writing				
1.	Do I understand the topic?			
2.	Do I have at least 2 points to write about this topic?			
3.	Is there any question I need to ask my teacher about this topic?			
4.	Do I have other ways to find out the information I need to write about this topic? (e.g.: internet, books, friends)			
5.	Have I prepared an outline or a mind map to write an essay on this topic?			
Writing				
1.	Does my introduction have good **opening statements**?			
2.	Do I have a **thesis statement** in my introduction?			
3.	Is my **topic sentence** for point 1 clear?			
4.	Is my **point 1** well-elaborated?			
5.	Did I include examples/evidences to support point 1?			
6.	Is my **topic sentence** for point 2 clear?			
7.	Have I elaborated point 2 well?			
8.	Did I include examples/evidences to support point 2?			
9.	Is there an **alternative/opposing** argument to my point 1 and point 2?			
10.	Is my alternative/opposing argument well-developed?			
11.	Did I include examples/evidences to support the alternative/opposing argument?			
12.	Did I write a good **concluding sentence** for conclusion?			
13.	Did I include my **opinion or thoughts** in the conclusion?			
Post-writing				
1.	Have I checked this essay for **grammar errors**?			
2.	Have I checked this essay for **spelling and punctuation**?			
3.	Am I happy with this essay?			
4.	Do I need to write a better version of this essay before submitting?			

<<< End of Checklist. All the best! >>>