SoLLs.INTEC.13: International Conference on Knowledge-Innovation-Excellence: Synergy in Language Research and Practice

User Needs Analysis in Learning Argumentative Writing via Mobile Platform

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Abstract

This research is carried out to conduct a needs analysis of the problems trainee teachers face in their Argumentative Writing. Argumentative writing is undeniably important to language users. This genre of writing is relevant as it helps learners become critical and reflective thinkers. However, it is most daunting as many 'learners enter higher education with underdeveloped ability to think critically.' In addition to weak content, another obstacle to writing among college learners is weak vocabulary. This study explores the needs for learning Argumentative Writing Skills for English as a Second Language. This research attempts to identify the needs of 'argumentative writing' learners when arriving at college, to explore the difficulties students experience with argumentation in academic writing and discuss the limitations of current instruction. Recommendations for improvements of instruction will also be made. Trainee teachers from the 27 teacher training institutes in Malaysia were involved. Stratified random sampling was employed to obtain data as the institutions are divided into 5 zones, Northern, Southern, Eastern, Central as well as Sabah and Sarawak. The data was collected using questionnaires and analysed using SPSS 20. The findings of the needs analysis showed that respondents are prepared physically, economically and psychologically for mobile learning.

Keywords: needs analysis; argumentative; writing skills; quantitative research; mobile learning

Essay writing is a required task for academic communication. Students have to do much of their writing for assignments and exams in colleges as well as universities. It is however, a stressful task for many L2 learners because they have difficulty in generating ideas to discuss the essay topic, or have inadequate time to organise

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their language and thoughts within the given period of time. It is also an extremely demanding and time-consuming task for some ESL lecturers because they may not be able to give the scaffolding necessary regardless if it is an in-class or take-home exercise.

English Language Academic (ELA) for the students from teacher training colleges is taught at Foundation level. The non-TESL optionists require a minimum of 13 credit hours. It is intended to achieve linguistic skills namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing as well as grammar. In semester two of the foundation programme, students are required to write expository and argumentative essays. Based on past experience, as an English Language lecturer, most students (about 90%) opt to write argumentative essays during the end of semester exams but only manage to pass as they tend to only attempt modestly.

Although, since October 2011, the Malaysian Teacher Education Institution (IPGM) decided that students in teacher training institutions (IPG) no longer need to take MUET examination as a prerequisite to graduate with a degree, the ELA programme integrates the English language structures and proficiency in the language which is of outmost importance.

In the process of teaching and learning regardless of the subjects, the use of materials which can be paper-based or computer-based is most important for effective teaching and learning. These two types of materials need to go through certain procedures to ensure that the materials are of good and satisfying quality. Collaborative planning in developing teaching materials is one of the ways to avoid doing work in isolation (Richards, 2005) as most instructors do. During the process of collaborative or shared planning, many things can be improved and this is beneficial for the materials developer to improve products. According to Oliva (2005), the process and products of teaching materials are important since the products are meant "…to be put into practice, tried out, revised, tried again, and revised again…" (Oliva 2005, p.467).

2. Related Work

Recent studies have proven that students were unable to express themselves in college writing due to poor vocabulary (Zhou 2009). Further, Noorizah (2006) has discovered that Malaysian students' barrier in the transition from high school to university was being 'spoon-fed'. Ryker & Ponnudurai (2011) found very insightful findings in their research on the effect of online reading on argumentative essay writing quality. Their study reveals that interactive online engagement with words and images caters to the needs of learners in Malaysia and leads to desirable outcomes. They also suggest eliciting data that is closer to "real world" argumentative writing. They agree with Kellogg and Whiteford (2009) that giving regular writing practice and meaningful feedback is vital. However, it tends to overburden the already time-strapped instructors who tend to juggle a whole lot of other duties such as practicum and in-service teachers' training besides going for countless courses and other programmes organized by the ministry or institutions of higher learning. Thus, this study suggests the development of a web-based resource to teach these very skills that are badly needed by the learners in our Malaysian context especially for the foundation level teacher-trainees.

Argumentative writing is undeniably important to language users. (Embong 2011). This is because it allows language users to influence people's opinion, to enlist people's support, to change people's behaviour and to ask for a direct action, when it is presented effectively. In Malaysian context, the teaching of argumentative writing is also important as this type of writing is included in KBSM. Nonetheless, many argumentative writing writers and students still lack the ability to write an effective argumentative essay. Thus, in the Malaysian higher learning institutions, although a lot of research has been conducted on web-based learning or e-learning (Md. Aminul Islam et al. 2010; Pramela Krish et al. 2011) as well as argumentative writing (Fatt 2007; Ting et. al 2011), to date there has not been an integrative research carried out regarding the use of a web-based resource to improve the writing of argumentative essays locally.