Teaching the academic argument in a university EFL environment

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Abstract

An educational challenge that many university EFL students face is the production of written academic arguments as part of their required essays. Although the importance of argumentative writing in education is uncontested, and research shows that EFL students find difficulties in producing such texts, it is not adequately dealt with for the L1 Arabic writer. In this paper, an explicit instructional approach in teaching the academic argument in required essays in an advanced EAP course is described. The approach is based on the thesis-support element of argumentation and organizational plans operationalized through a teaching/learning cycle. The instruction of the academic argument in the essay is scaffolded through five steps of the cycle: building the context, modeling and deconstructing texts, constructing texts jointly, constructing texts independently and linking related texts. Qualitative analysis of a few student sample essays indicated improved argumentative structure and transfer of acquired argumentative writing skills to new topics. Although the improvements can not be generalized, it is considered a successful attempt in providing needed explicit instruction for L1 Arabic students in an EFL environment and which also could be used with students in any EFL context. Reflections and developments for future improvement of the instructional approach are made.
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Keywords: University EFL writing; EAP writing; EFL writing instruction; Academic argument; Argumentative instruction; Lebanon

1. Introduction

In many EFL contexts, students have difficulty producing academic arguments in their required essays. Some research claims that a main contributing factor for this difficulty is the different rhetorical systems between students' L1 and the target language and which causes negative transfer (Connor, 1987; Connor & Kaplan, 1987; Kaplan, 1966). Recently, research has shown that despite this cultural/rhetorical parameter, with relevant instruction, EFL students can overcome these difficulties (Connor 2001; Grabe & Kaplan, 1989, 1996; Kaplan, 1987, 2001). Teachers in EFL contexts worldwide continue the search for appropriate teaching/learning methodologies in attempts to cater for any relevant lack of appropriate material and suitable required course textbooks in attempts to develop the EFL students' writing. In the search for instructional materials and methodology in teaching the academic argument, this paper proposes a teaching/learning approach through course required essays for L1 Arabic speakers of English at university level, an under-researched area.

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2. Review of related literature

Lui's (2005) comparative study of American and Chinese rhetorical structures tells us that the main difference between instruction of the argumentative rhetorical structure is that in the American group the opposition is anticipated, while in the Chinese group analogies are highlighted. He gives a very detailed historical view of how this is tied to the traditional rhetorical written patterns of the Chinese and recommends that consideration of the language's rhetorical system should be accounted for in any instructional approach. With a similar objective of improving EFL students' academic arguments, Yeh's (1998) study carried out on 116 non-native middle school students in the US indicated that a combination of explicit instruction with a 'bridge' and a 'pyramid' heuristic (guide) gave significant gains in the experimental students' writing and transferability of their knowledge to different topics over the control group. Yeh (1998) claims that students bear a cost if they are not guided in writing argumentative essays. Although the study was carried out on pre-university students, it suggests that explicit instruction in textbooks is lacking for the foreign learner.

Although there is agreement that the academic argument basically includes a writer's opinion (or claim) and support (evidence), the argumentative macro-structure, has been described in a variety of ways (Yeh, 1998). Research indicates differences between the rhetorical structures in English and other languages such as Japanese and Arabic (Hirose, 2003; Liebman, 1992) which impacts classroom instruction. Wood (2001) states that argumentation involves a claim (the arguer's position on a controversial issue) supported by reasons and evidence to make it convincing to an audience. Nine forms of argument are listed, among which debate and academic inquiry are included, each of which have different organizational structures.

Among L1 Arabic speaking students, Western-style argumentation, written in English, is particularly challenging (Al-Abed Al Haq & Ahmed, 1994; Kamel, 2000; Swales, 1984). The claim in L1 Arabic argumentative texts is usually towards the end of the text, if at all given, and often there is no refutation of counter arguments which makes the texts more descriptive and anecdotal (Al-Abed Al Haq & Ahmed, 1994; Al Jubouri, 1995; El-Seidi 2000, Hamdan, 1988; Swales 1984). A further rhetorical feature of Arabic written texts is shown in Kaplan's (1966) 'doodles', the digression of ideas which often times are not fully developed and/or supported.

Given this, Kamel (2000) states that it is thus difficult for L1 Arabic speakers to grasp the argumentative organization in the target language and, similar to other researchers, states that '…the comprehension of texts such as argumentation depends on training rather than language proficiency' (p. 224). Some research further claims that the L1 Arabic learner needs guidance based on argumentative principles which could then be adapted and/or transferred to students' academic study and real life contexts (Connor, 1987; Connor & Lauer, 1985; El-Seidi, 2000; Kamel, 2000).

In search of appropriate instruction, Yeh (1998) debates the usefulness of explicit over implicit teaching methods and finds that the former gives better results in terms of student writing development. Some further research in explicit instructional methods has indicated that high rated argumentative essays contain clearer author stands and theses, good refutation of counterarguments and use of lexical markers, all implying better organization of the academic argument in the essay than that of the low rated essays (Noble, 2006; Wu 2006). Further, a study by Horowitz (1986) indicated significantly better performance by a group that was given reading and writing instruction with text-structure patterns than a group that received only reading instruction. Leitao's (2003) study on how children aged 8-12 and college students in their first year are taught to write arguments through an argumentative sequence of introduction, viewpoint, supporting element, counterargument and reply (I,V,S,C, R) further showed how the students through explicit instruction could identify and incorporate counterarguments, found difficult and undervalued, into their texts.

However, Yeh (1998) cautions that the use of such organization plans (often referred to as heuristics) may give students the impression that the argumentative organization is set; whereas, there is flexibility in the organization depending upon the reader and the context. In fact, he goes on to tell us that there is no one set argumentative text type, and thus no one organization plan or type, and raises the concern as to '…how students may be taught to be flexible in adopting principles of argumentation to these differences' (p. 53). He presents one view claiming that in teaching argumentative writing

> …the learning can be accelerated if novice writers are taught heuristics
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> that provide guidance regarding the expectations of readers with respect to
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> argumentative text, in addition to immersion in debate and exposure to a range
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> of contexts and opportunities for peer feedback'(Farr, 1993 in Yeh, 1998).