Writing Academic Argument Paragraph
A Challenge for EFL Students

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Abstract:

This study investigates the students' argument paragraph writing and aims to spot the difficulties they face and help them improve their competencies in writing argument paragraphs. The study adopted a mixed-method approach to collecting data from the students. A group of 34 first-year students were asked to write an argument paragraph as a consolidation task; the papers were carefully examined and corrected. Besides, a short structured questionnaire was delivered to the students to obtain insights about their writing difficulties. The results of the study showed that a good number of them still had difficulties with writing argument paragraphs. Among the problems they faced was the adaptation with the academic context. They failed to adjust their writing to the bounds of formality, coherence, and objectivity. The findings showed that grammar was another hindrance for the students. They still had problems with sentence structure and use of articles and punctuation marks. Some of them had problems with the paragraph format. The study suggests reviewing these aspects to help students develop their writing skills.

Keywords : Argumentation - Argument paragraph - Academic writing - English as a foreign language - Accuracy.

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الكتابة الأكاديمية للفقرة الحجاجية: تحدّي لطلبة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

ملخص :

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف الصعوبات التي تواجه طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية عند كتابة الفقرة الحجاجية، بغرض مساعدتهم على تحسين كفاءة الكتابة لديهم. اعتمدت هذه الدراسة منهجا يمزج بين عدة طرق لأجل جمع البيانات من الطلاب. طُلب من عيّنة مكونة من 34 طالبا في السنة الأولى ليسانس كتابة فقرة حجاجية كتمرين تدعيمي، ومن ثم تم فحص وتصحيح أوراق الإجابة بعناية. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تم توزيع استبيان قصير على الطلبة للتعرف على مكامن الصعوبة التي تواجههم عند الكتابة. وأظهرت نتائج الدراسة أن عددا لا بأس به من الطلبة يواجهون صعوبات أثناء كتابة هذا النوع من الفقرات. ومن بين أبرز هذه الصعوبات، التكيف مع النمط الأكاديمي في كتابة الفقرات. فقد أظهر الطلاب عجزا في تبني الأطر الشكلية والموضوعية والتماسك عند الكتابة. كما ظهر جليا أن النحو والقواعد يمثلان عائقا أمام الطلاب. إضافة إلى أن الطلاب لا يزالون يعانون من مشاكل في تركيب الجملة واستخدام حروف الجر وعلامات التنقيط. كما أن البعض منهم واجهوا صعوبات في تنسيق الفقرة. واقترحت الدراسة مراجعة هذه الجوانب لمساعدة الطلبة على تخطي هذه الصعوبات وكذا تطوير مهاراتهم الكتابية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاستدلال -الفقرة الحجاجية -الكتابة الأكاديمية -الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية -الدقة.

Ecriture d'un paragraphe d'argumentation académique : Challenge pour les étudiants en Anglais comme langue étrangère.

Résumé :

Cette étude examine la rédaction des paragraphes d'argumentation rédigés par des étudiants en langue anglaise. L'étude vise à repérer les difficultés auxquelles ils sont confrontés pour les aider à améliorer leurs compétences dans la rédaction de ce type de paragraphes. Pour collecter les données des étudiants, une approche mixte a été adoptée. Un groupe de 34 étudiants de première année a été invité à rédiger un paragraphe d'argumentation à titre de tâche de consolidation ; les paragraphes ont été soigneusement examinés et corrigés. Par ailleurs, un court questionnaire structuré leur a été remis pour recensé les difficultés rencontrées lors de la rédaction. Les résultats ont montré, que la difficulté à rédiger des contenus argumentaires est significative. Parmi les problèmes cernés, l'adaptation au contexte académique. En effet, un manque d'ajustement aux limites de la formalité, de la cohérence et de l'objectivité est observé. Les résultats ont aussi révélé des insuffisances au niveau de la grammaire sur le plan structurel des phrases, l'utilisation des articles et des signes de ponctuation, de même que pour le format des paragraphes. L'étude propose de revoir ces aspects afin d'aider les étudiants à développer leurs compétences rédactionnelles.

Mots clés : Argumentation - Paragraphe argumentatif - Rédaction académique - Anglais Langue étrangère – Exactitude.

Introduction

Writing argument paragraphs represents a big difficulty for first year university students at the Department of English, University of Ghardaia, Algeria. As the process of writing, in general, requires much intellectual effort and time, it is apparent that the students still have difficulties in writing accurate argument paragraphs. Writing academic argument paragraphs represents a challenge for them. This often stems from a combination of linguistic, structural, and cognitive factors. An accurate well-structured argument paragraph is essential for conveying points of view or arguments clearly and persuasively, and such paragraphs are often found in essays, reports, and other forms of academic writing. The significance of the current study lies in finding ways to help first year students cope with academic writing, in general, and specifically writing argument paragraphs. It is apparent that the problem of writing is common among students of English due to some reasons among which is the lack of time allotted to writing sessions along with the shortage of practice sessions.

1. Background

A) Argumentation

Collins Dictionary defines an argument as a statement or set of statements that you use in order to try to convince people that your opinion about something is correct. Feng-Checkett and Checkett (2006: 261-262) define argumentation as formal persuasion that "uses evidence from secondary sources (information often found in the library) that are cited by using a formal documentation process". Robitaille and Connelly (2007: 181) consider argumentation a purpose, not a pattern, as "all the rhetorical patterns can be used to help persuade a reader".

B) Argument Paragraph

With regard to and argument paragraph, Folse, Muchmore-Vokoun, and Solomon (2010) claim that a paragraph that focuses on a controversial issue is an opinion paragraph, also termed as a persuasive paragraph. An argument paragraph is a unit of written text that presents a specific point of view or argument on a particular topic or issue. It may be a portion of a larger piece of writing, such as an essay or article. It is an essential building block of coherent and well-structured arguments in written communication. An argument paragraph typically follows a clear and logical structure, with an introduction that presents the argument, body sentences that provide evidence and analysis, and a conclusion that summarizes the key points and reinforces the argument. Writing well-argued paragraphs requires strong reasoning, tangible evidence, and considering opposing views.

C) Purpose

Argument paragraphs are commonly used in persuasive writing, essays, debates, and discussions to express and defend a particular perspective or viewpoint on an issue. Nadell, Langan, and Comodromos (2007) argue that the purpose of an argument

paragraph is to persuade the audience to agree with the writer's opinion about a controversial issue. The primary purpose of an argument paragraph is to persuade or convince the reader of the validity and merit of the presented argument. It does this by providing evidence, facts, examples, reasoning, and analysis to support the main point.

D) Structure

Likewise any ordinary paragraph, the argument paragraph consists of three main parts: a topic sentence, body sentences, and a concluding sentence.

E) Topic sentence

According to Reid (1982), the topic sentence is the most important and most general sentence in the paragraph because it creates the focus for the rest of the sentences. It introduces the topic and contains a controlling idea that the following sentences in the paragraph will explain, clarify, and illustrate. Feng- Checkett and Checkett (2006) state that the topic is the subject of the paragraph and the controlling idea tells what the writer will be developing about the topic; it contains the writer's attitudes toward the topic. The topic sentence in an argument paragraph should state the writer's opinion, viewpoint, belief, feeling, attitude, or position toward an issue. According to Kane (1988: 90), a good topic sentence is concise and emphatic. It should stress the keywords in the topic, and it should consist of the topic and the leading idea. What will follow in the paragraph should be related to the idea mentioned in the topic sentence; this relation is called coherence.

F) Supporting sentences

The sentences that follow the topic sentence develop, illustrate, explain, clarify, or support the idea stated in it. They contain specific details that help the reader understand more clearly what the writer means in the topic sentence. Feng- Checkett and Checkett (2006) state that the supporting sentences must be consistent with the controlling idea. They exhibit variety and make the topic sentence convincing and interesting to the reader. The number of supporting sentences varies, and most paragraphs contain a minimum of three. Robitaille and Connelly (2007: 66) state that "effective supporting sentences are organized logically in order for the paragraph to achieve coherence". The list of support in the paragraph should be parallel.

I) Concluding sentence

The conclusion is the last sentence in the paragraph. It signals the end of the paragraph, and it often reminds the reader of the main idea of the paragraph. Robitaille and Connelly (2007: 71) argue that it either sums up the paragraph by reminding the reader of the main idea or interprets the significance of the supporting ideas. The concluding sentence should not start a new argument; instead, it summarizes the key points made in the paragraph and reinforces the main idea of the argument. It should

leave a strong impression on the reader.

G) The Elements of an Argument Paragraph

Reid (1982) argues that argumentation is a rhetorical form of writing that persuades. She lists three goals of argumentation:

1. to present a viewpoint to the reader
2. to explain, clarify, and illustrate that viewpoint
3. to persuade the reader that the viewpoint is valid

Reid (1982: 100) claims that the writer's opinion is not enough alone. It should be equipped with proof and evidence. Writers should offer the reader experience, discussion, or exposure to secondary sources from research. Opinions "must be supported by facts, examples, statistics, personal experience, or authoritative sources". Reid (1982) adds that the arguments should be organized according to their importance and strength, and they should be supported by material to prove that each argument is strong, viable, and correct.

K) Unity and Coherence

Feng-Checkett and Checkett (2006: 140-145) consider paragraph unity as the information in the paragraph forms one unit and is well related to the topic. Robitaille and Connelly (2007: 63) if the supporting sentences do not relate to the topic sentence, then the reader can become distracted and confused. The elements of the paragraph should stick together ensuring using the following tools:

- logical order of events, including time, space, and ideas
- transitional expressions, including coordinating, subordinating, and adverbial conjunctions
- key concept repetition to keep the focus of the writing clear to the reader
- substituting pronouns for nouns, and
- parallelism

L) Evidence

Kirszner and Mandell (2009: 132) state that "if your evidence is solid and your logic is sound, you will present a convincing argument". There are two kinds of evidence: facts and examples. A fact is a statement or piece of information that is verifiable and can be confirmed to be true or false through empirical evidence or objective data. Facts are objective and not subject to interpretation or opinion; they are based on observable reality and statistics. In academic and scientific contexts, the verification of facts is essential to establish the credibility and accuracy of information. On the other hand, an example is a specific instance or illustration that serves to clarify or demonstrate a general statement, concept, or idea. Examples are used in writing to make abstract or complex information more concrete and understandable. They help provide evidence and context for the general claims being discussed. In argumentation, using relevant and effective examples can enhance the reader's comprehension and support the writers' arguments and viewpoints.

M) Reason and Logic

Arguments are built upon premises or statements that serve as the foundation for the argument. They can be factual information, general principles, or assumptions. Reason and logic are used to prove why the opinion is valid. They are the cornerstones of effective argumentation, and they enable the writer to construct persuasive and well-supported arguments that can influence opinion and lead to a deeper understanding of complex issues. Reason is used to ensure that these premises are relevant, accurate, and reliable. Logic is used to make inferences or draw conclusions based on the premises. These inferences are logical consequences of the statements, and they are structured in a way that follows a clear and valid line of reasoning.

N) Counterargument

Depending on the context and requirements, the argument paragraph writer might admit the existence of an argument different from his/hers, called the counterargument, to address potential objections or opposing viewpoints. In doing so, the writer has provided both sides of the issue, defending his/her argument and refuting the counterargument. Reid (1982: 101-102) says if the writer does not show an awareness of the counterargument, this can be seen as 'one-sided propaganda'. The writer, then, can refute the counterargument either by disproving it or by conceding its truth showing that it is not as strong or valid as his/her argument. The refutation can be by correcting the opponent's facts and/or proving their irrelevance and insufficiency. Acknowledging and refuting counterarguments can strengthen the writer's overall argument.

2. Methodology

The current study is based on conducting an analytical mixed-method collecting data from two different sources examining the students' writing task papers and delivering a short structured questionnaire to the students about the difficulties they face while writing argument paragraphs. Combining different sources of information ensures the validity to the results of the study (Seidman, 2006).

A) Participants

The respondents of the study are a group of 34 first year students from the Department of English Language, University of Ghardaia. The choice of the respondents is based on the fact that writing academic argument paragraphs makes a learning unit for first year students at the Department of English. The second semester Written Expression syllabus consists of studying three types of paragraphs: comparison-contrast, definition, and argument.

B) Data Collection

This paper adopts a triangulated analytical framework of study combining two different instruments of data gathering. The first tool used to collect data from the respondents is a document representing a writing task about argument paragraph asking the students to write a paragraph about their points of view on the possibility of online courses to substitute in-class sessions: "Do you think that online courses can substitute in-class sessions?"

The second instrument is a short structured questionnaire containing five questions that tend to have some ideas about the students' own perceptions about the argument paragraph writing tasks. Both instruments were gathered and analysed, and the results are shown below.

3. Results

A) Task Papers Form

The first apparent issue concerns some students who still cannot distinguish between a paragraph and an essay format. Five of them (15%) wrote a whole essay trying to answer the question above. Thirteen of the other students (38%) have difficulty formulating a structured paragraph. Their writing lacks organization, consistency, and cohesion. Six of them (18%) go astray from the topic of the task, talking about things that have no relation to the question mentioned. The rest (47%) could formulate acceptable paragraphs with obvious disparities in the level of consistency and the organization of ideas and thoughts.

B) Content

A careful scrutiny of the students' task papers showed a lack of mastery of the linguistic elements. The apparent weaknesses were in the use of appropriate vocabulary, spelling, and formal expression. Besides, grammar seemed to cause a problem for many of them. The very common mistakes appeared in the sentence structure, verb tense appropriate use, punctuation marks, and articles.

C) Questionnaire Analysis

After finishing the task, the students were given a short questionnaire containing five structured questions to answer.

1. The first question of the questionnaire was: "How often do you practice writing outside the classroom?"

The purpose behind asking this question was to see the frequency to which the students use English outside the classroom in order to decide whether to assign more writing homework. Only one (3%) of them practices writing very often. Five of them (15%) said they often write outside the classroom. Thirteen (38%) of them said that they occasionally write, and a big number (15) which represents about 44% of them

said they never practice writing outside the classroom. (homework assignment)

2. The second question was: "How do you find writing argument paragraphs?"

The majority (88%) of them found writing argument paragraphs a hard task; while 12% of them said it was easy for them to write argument paragraphs.

3. The third request was about ordering descriptive, argumentative, and narrative paragraph writing from the easiest to the most difficult. These three types of paragraphs together are the elements of the writing syllabus for the second semester of the first year.

63% of them considered argument paragraph writing the most difficult. Narrative paragraph came second in rank (28%), and descriptive paragraph ranked third (9%).

4. The next question was : "What aspect(s) of the language do you find difficult in writing argument paragraphs: grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, or all of them?

This question sought to know the students' views about the difficulties they found when writing paragraphs. A good number of them (63%) believed that they found difficulties with all the elements listed. Grammar was a major problem for the students (20%) ; vocabulary came second in the degree of difficulty (11%), not too far from the appropriate use of punctuation marks (8%).

5. The last question was : "Do you think the time allotted to writing sessions is enough ?"

All the respondents considered the time allocated to writing not enough to develop their writing skills.

4. Discussion

It is obvious from reviewing the students' task papers that they lack the necessary vocabulary. Another issue that appears throughout the paper check is the failure to use appropriate punctuation marks.

The students demonstrated a nuanced understanding of the topic. It seems that is not easy for the students to get rid of the informal style of writing. Formality and informality in students' writing refer to the level of language, tone, and style that students use when communicating their ideas in written assignments. Kane (1988: 83) states that "objective, impersonal exposition involves a negative presentation of the writer". Formal writing is typically expected in academic writing, and it is characterized by a structured and professional tone, adherence to grammar rules, and the use of advanced vocabulary. It is commonly used in academic settings, business communication, and official documents. "It seems to me", "I think", or "to my mind" are expressions to avoid in the academic context. The writer should be transparent so

that the reader does not feel his/her presence in the text.

Informal writing, on the other hand, is more relaxed and conversational in nature. It allows for the use of contractions, colloquial language, and a more personal tone. Informal writing is often used in personal emails, text messages, and social media posts. In academic settings, a formal tone is generally required. This demonstrates professionalism, research proficiency, and the ability to convey complex ideas effectively. In formal writing, students are expected to:
• use complete sentences, well-structured paragraphs, and proper grammar,
• avoid contractions (e.g., "can't" instead of "cannot") and colloquialisms,
• use precise and appropriate vocabulary,
• maintain an objective and unbiased tone and avoid the use of personal pronouns 'I' and 'we',
• cite sources and provide evidence to support their arguments, and
• organize their writing logically, with clear introductions, body paragraphs, and conclusions.

Shifting students' attention from general to academic writing should have much consideration. Students seem to be less accustomed to academic writing. They used to write for general purposes. It is commonly approved that the academic writing process is not easy, and it requires much practice and critical thinking. Students should learn to adapt their writing style to the context and purpose of their communication. Academic writing usually requires a more formal approach to convey information objectively and professionally. Ultimately, students should follow the guidelines provided by their instructors or the requirements of the specific assignment to determine the appropriate level of formality for their writing.

Some students still have difficulty to distinguish between the paragraph and essay structures. There should be consolidated tasks to raise the students' awareness about the paragraph format.

Students have difficulty maintaining coherence and cohesion throughout the paragraph. They should learn to use appropriate linking words and phrases (e.g., "however", "on the other hand", "moreover") to connect ideas within the paragraph. They should also consider the importance of using parallel structure and maintaining a consistent point of view.

Limited vocabulary and inadequate language use can hinder the clarity and sophistication of the argument. Students should be encouraged to expand their vocabulary by introducing them to academic terminology related to their field of study. Provide resources for synonyms, transitional phrases, and academic language structures. Students should expand their vocabulary by introducing them to academic terminology related to their field of study. Provide resources for synonyms, transitional phrases, and academic language structures Students may struggle with varied sentence structures, resulting in monotonous writing. They should learn to use a mix of sentence types (simple, compound, complex) to create a more engaging and

dynamic argument. Provide examples of how sentence variety can enhance the flow of the paragraph.

The significance of thorough proofreading and editing should be emphasized. Students should learn to revise their work for clarity, coherence, grammar, and punctuation, and be encouraged to seek peer or teacher feedback before submitting their final drafts.

More exercises that encourage students to analyse and evaluate arguments from various perspectives should be incorporated. They should be encouraged to engage with scholarly sources and think critically about the strengths and weaknesses of different viewpoints.

Lack of practice and constructive feedback can hinder improvement. Therefore, students should be provided with regular opportunities to practice writing argument paragraphs. Detailed feedback should be offered that highlights both strengths and areas for improvement. Collaborative learning can be promoted via peer review sessions.

Students should be encouraged to focus on a single idea and avoid vague and ambiguous language. Organizing ideas coherently within a paragraph can be challenging. Students should pay much attention to the importance of a topic sentence that introduces the main point of the paragraph.

Punctuation and capitalization are other problems that seem to hinder the students from writing well. More exercises about using punctuation marks and capital letters should be assigned to the students to promote their abilities in writing appropriately.

The last issue to be addressed is the shortage of time allotted to writing sessions. Written expression at the Department of English, University of Ghardaia, is given one session only. It has the same share of time as the other subjects. However, due to the importance of writing at the academic stage, it should be given much consideration to help students develop the skill of writing by attributing much more time to this subject.

5. Conclusion

The present paper attempted to investigate the difficulties that face first year students to writing coherent argument paragraphs. Writing academic argument paragraphs can present several challenges for students. These challenges often stem from a combination of linguistic, structural, and cognitive factors. Addressing these challenges through targeted instruction, practice, and feedback can help students overcome the hurdles of writing academic argument paragraphs and develop stronger writing skills. Writing for academic purposes is an inclusive process. Writers should be aware of syntactical, lexical, and cohesive aspects; along with the aspects of formality, conciseness, and objectivity.

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