

Promoting Learners' Appropriate Conjunctions Use in Argumentative Essay Writing through a Text-Based Approach

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Abstract. This study hypothesised that adopting a Text-Based Approach (TBA), that is using a variety of text samples to highlight the argumentative essay conventions, would enable learner-writers to write more-efficient argumentative essays, and hence, achieve proficiency in argumentative writing. More particularly, this research suggested that the more EFL learners are aware of the appropriate use of linking words and phrases relevant to the argumentative essays, the coherent and cohesive their writing would be. Therefore, methodologically, the researchers opted for a mixed-methods approach. Relevantly, a quasi-experiment and case study strategies were chosen. To collect data, a test and an interview were held with the concerned participants. The targeted population was EFL learners at the Teachers' Training School of Constantine (ENSC). For the sample, a group of second year students was selected. In doing so, the researchers used the purposive sampling technique. The results indicated that integrating reading in the writing course through the adoption of TBA is efficient since it could strengthen the argumentative essay conventions. Additionally, interview results held with some writing teachers at the ENSC indicated that they are satisfied with the proposed approach to teach writing and, therefore, advocated its adoption in the instruction of writing for EFL learners.

Keywords: Argumentative essays, EFL learners, linking words and phrases, Text-Based Approach, writing proficiency

Résumé. Cette recherche vise à explorer l'efficacité de l'adoption de l'approche de genre à l'enseignement de l'écriture des textes argumentatifs dans l'amélioration de la performance écrite et le rendement universitaire chez les étudiants de deuxième année, département d'anglais, à l'école Normale Supérieure à Constantine (ENSC). Pour atteindre cet objectif, l'auteur de cette recherche a effectué une expérience pendant deux mois successifs sur deux groupes (groupe contrôle et expérimental) au début du deuxième semestre de l'année universitaire 2016-2017. Quarante-huit (48) essais ont été recueillis après avoir effectué un test au début et un autre à la fin de la phase expérimentale. Aussi, cinq (05) interviews ont été mené avec certains enseignants de l'expression écrite à l'ENSC afin d'atteindre leur point de vues et étendre leur acceptation de l'approche proposée. Les résultats obtenus montrent que l'adoption de l'approche de genre dans l'enseignement de l'écriture argumentative a conduit à une amélioration considérable surtout en ce qui concerne l'utilisation des connecteurs logiques selon Halliday et Hasan (1976) Taxonomie chez les participants du groupe expérimental. Aussi, les résultats ont confirmé que les enseignants interrogés sont en faveur pour l'adoption de cette approche.

Mots-clés: l'amélioration de la performance écrite, l'approche de genre, le texte argumentatif, les connecteurs logiques.

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1. Study Background

Historically speaking, studies in the field of Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) have paid paramount attention to the teaching of the writing approaches, which first emerged in the First Language (L1) context, as to find out better ways to ease such problematic writing matters. Most of these ‘traditional’ approaches had their own shortcomings because they considered writing as a separate skill that was taught in isolation. In this vein, Kucer and Harste (as cited in Flippo & Caverly, 2000) assert that centuries ago reading and writing were viewed as two separate processes with little in common.

Nevertheless, scholars as Rubin and Hansen, Linnehan, and Shanahan (as cited in Flippo et al., 2000) state that research during the last twenty years has examined the relationship between reading and writing. Accordingly, recent TESL studies have marked a shift in perspectives whereby they have stressed the crucial tie that relates the writing skill to the reading one. Accordingly, writing and reading are deemed as mutually supportive in the sense that each skill feeds the other one. In such a way, reading forms the starting point for composing since it provides an authentic input for the writing task.

Integrating reading texts in the writing course exposes students to multiple text types and models. Such samples are meant to be analysed to build writing schemata through a close analysis of content, structure, and the development of different types of written texts. Likewise, the text-centered approach determines the way different types of written texts are conventionally structured and presented to the academic community (Escribano, 1999, p. 61). This, in turn, informs learner- writers about “text appropriateness”, especially if they are to read unfamiliar genres they have not encountered before.

Moreover, the integration of reading-to-write tasks can raise learners’ motivation and render the composing activity more interesting and purposeful since these learners will no longer consider the writing task as a routine or chore. In addition, they would develop healthy reading and writing habits. That is why, in here lies the conspicuous role of reading that of fostering and scaffolding the writing process through leading learner-writers from the recognition phase to the production one.

In the context of argumentative essay writing, learner- writers are expected to read model-texts as to make use of appropriate discourse features relevant to that genre, such as terminology, style, forwarding a point of view, refuting a claim...and so forth. In fact, using reading texts influences written performance by providing samples that feed learners writing skill. That is to say, reading keeps learners in touch with other minds, so that they have a chance to experience the ways in which writers have organised information, selected words and structured arguments.

1.1. A Selected Review of the Literature

In this section, the researchers will report a selected review of relevant literature to this research theme. This aims to figure out a comprehensive theoretical framework on which this investigation could rest. Moreover, the present literature review will serve as a background on which the present researchers will ground their study in order to justify some choices.

1.2. Approaches to Teaching Writing

Within the sphere of this sub-section, a description of the myriads of approaches to writing is seen to be of a paramount importance. This mainly concerns these approaches:

1.2.1. *The Product Approach*

Focus on language accuracy led to the emergence of the so-called “Product-Based Approach” to teaching writing which has been widely spread during the mid-1940’s until the mid-1960’s. This product-oriented approach comprises a range of orientations and pedagogies among which are: the controlled-to-free approach, and the guided composition (Silva, 1990, p.12). In essence, the pedagogy’s premise of this approach rests on the imitation of model texts used in the composition class. In such manner, writing under the ‘Product Approach’ has been deemed as a drill to reinforce L2 accuracy, i.e., grammar mastery.

1.2.2. The Process Approach

By the late 1960s and the early 1970s, there has been a radical shift in ESL/EFL writing instruction paradigm, which has been influenced by “process movement’ in teaching writing to native English speakers. The movement is said to be informed by a chain of revolutionary theories in cognitive psychology. Hyland (2003) defines ‘the Process Approach’ as the process in which emphasis shifts from the nature of the final product, to the range of processes went through in order to create the final product. In addition, he goes on to argue that the focus of the writing activity is not the written product itself, rather is the writer who exerts physical, cognitive, and affective efforts.

1.2.3. The Text-based Approach

The revolutionising perspective of EAP adherers has paved the way for the rise of a new approach that stresses the generic structure and textual features of texts as a sociocultural communicative media (Silva, 1990). This approach has come to be known as the Text-Based Approach (TBA), as its name suggests, the approach’s ultimate goal is to prepare students to write according to different genres and in different text types using sample texts. According to Hyland (2003), sample texts or excerpts are used as models that “help teachers to increase students’ awareness of how texts are organized and how purposes are realized as they work toward the independent creation of the genre” (p.88). This process of ‘consciousness raising’ helps FL learners both to produce texts and reflect on writing by focus on how texts work as discourse rather than on its content.

1.3. The Necessity of Argumentative Writing Skill in the Academic Context

In the context of ESL/EFL, Hirvela (2015) concludes that argument plays a major role in promoting writing in other disciplines owing to the tight connection between argument and the ability to write in other content areas. Likewise, argument is considered as a tool in disciplinary-based writing instruction like in: science, history, economics, philosophy and so on. On these grounds, we deduce that when students attempt to exhibit knowledge in these disciplines, they should develop arguments in the form of claims, evidence, and reasoning. As such, students must be taught the different model of arguments development, which vary according to the nature of the academic disciplines.

1.4. The Use of Conjunctions in the Argumentative Essay Genre

Most studies on academic writing reveal that ‘cohesive devices’ are highly used in academic writing compared to other written and spoken genres. In addition, connectors or conjunctions help students establish clear cohesion between ideas expressed in adjacent sentences and, hence, mark explicitly the flow and distribution of information in writing (Hinkel, 2004). In this vein, Nation (2009) points out that knowledge about conjunctive relations is necessary for students to write in particular genres, like the argumentative essay.

This study makes use of Halliday and Hassan (1976) typology of conjunctive relations, which includes subcategories of each type of conjunction to distinguish between the four cohesive relations: additive, adversative, causal and temporal relations (pp, 242-43).

2. The Rationale behind Implementing a Text-based Approach

In what is coming, the researchers will yield a rationale behind the implementation of the TBA. This can give insights on some choices in this study.

2.1. Objectives

Using a TBA in EFL writing classes has different teaching objectives among which are:

- Learn from writers' crafts and techniques of argumentation.
- Gain insights about the academic writing style.
- Make use of different reading techniques and strategies.
- Examine the correct use of mechanics in sample essays.
- Activate students' critical skills in reading and writing.
- Raise students' motivation by reading and responding to sample essays.
- Interact with the FL culture using authentic sample essays.
- Develop literacy skills (reading and writing) simultaneously.
- Process comprehensible input (knowledge) for future writing.

2.1. Assessment Criteria Rubric

After the implementation of a TBA comes the phases in which students' essays are assessed in order to check any improvement made in their writing performance/output. Likewise, assessment of students' argumentative essays rests on the use of 'an analytic scale' wherein it focuses mainly on five writing criteria: statement of purpose/focus, organisation, elaboration of evidence, language and vocabulary, and finally conventions. There are four levels of scoring: Excellent, above average, average and below-average essays.

3. The Study

In this section, an elucidation of the study in this investigation will be presented. This mainly concerns the raised question and their subsequent hypothesis.

3.1. Research Questions, Aim and Hypothesis

Different research questions were formulated in order to guide and outline the current investigation. The research questions are as follows:

- RQ1:** To what extent does the integration of sample texts in the writing classroom assist second year EFL students at ENSC to improve their argumentative essay writing?
- RQ2:** In what ways does the explicit analysis of sample texts raise students' awareness about the appropriate use of link words and phrases (conjunctions) relevant to argumentative essay writing?
- RQ3:** Is there a statistically significant improvement in students' written essays before and after the instruction (integration of reading-samples)?
- RQ4:** What attitude do teachers of writing at ENSC reflect in regard of the researched writing approach (TBA)?

As the aim of the current study is to examine the effects of the use of a TBA on students' written production, we hypothesise that:

If writing teachers adopt a TBA to teaching writing, learners will use conjunctions more appropriately.

Following the present study, in this section of this paper, the selected research methodology, population, and sample will be identified and presented.

3.2.1. Research Design

To carry out this study, we opted for a mixed-research design wherein two research instruments have been chosen: a quasi-experiment and an interview. There are two main reasons that lie behind the choice of these two research instruments. In the first place, the nature of the researched subject (written expression) necessitates the implementation of quantitative investigation, namely the quasi-experiment, which allows for the analysis of numerical data about students' written performances before and after the adoption of aTBA. This research instrument does fit the context and the purpose of the current study for it assists to identify the impact of integrating reading samples in the writing classroom and to gauge any improvement made in students' composition. In the second place, the interview increases the chances to gain in-depth information about writing teachers' perceptions of the researched writing approach.

First, a pre-test/post-test quasi-experimental design is used for as to test the validity of the research hypothesis. Two groups were randomly chosen: an experimental and a control group from a larger population of second year English students at the ENSC for the academic year 2016/2017. In the pre-test, the students were asked to write argumentative essays according to the current teaching writing approach (namely the process approach), followed at the English Department as a preliminary step to gather data, to be compared later on to the post-test to check improvement. The students in the experimental group received a two-month treatment in the form of an instructional unit inclusive of a number of sample texts highlighting genre conventions of the argumentative essay. Then, an interview was conducted with the teachers in charge of the written expression course as to gain insights about their attitudes towards the current written expression programme and the underlying teaching method.

3.2.2. Population and Research Sample

The data for the study is to be collected from teachers of writing and second year majors of English at the ENSC. The choice of this population was motivated by the fact that English majors at the ENSC are generally exposed to argumentative writing for the first time when reaching their second year of university education as it is stated in second year writing syllabus. Likewise, English sophomores are liable to face different writing problems due to their short experience in academic writing; therefore, they are in need of efficient methods and strategies to overcome their writing deficiencies and guarantee academic success.

3.2.3. Data Collection Procedure

Two teachers of writing took part in the current treatment. The teacher researcher was in charge of the formal instruction of the treatment courses with the experimental group (EG), and another randomly chosen teacher has been assigned the instruction of the control group (CG). The reason behind selecting two teachers of writing is two-folded. In the first place, this choice would eliminate any transfer of teaching strategies and techniques from one approach to the other because it is not easy for the same teacher to teach the writing of the same essay

genre using two apparently distinctive methods. In the second place, this would minimise the bias and, meanwhile, increase the reliability and validity of the present investigation.

3.2.4. Analysis Procedure

To analyse the pretest and posttest findings, the researcher used the t-test, for it is the most commonly used statistical test in research. The t-test is chiefly used to prove that the difference in the results of the CG and EG is not due to chance but rather to the independent variable, i.e., the treatment. That is, it aims to confirm the hypothesis of the study, namely if there is a statistically significant difference in the means of the two groups. An independent sample t-test and a paired sample t-test were opted for to calculate the change in scores in the experimental and control groups. The paired samples t-test was applied to gauge the pretest and posttest results relevant to the same group; whereas, the independent sample t-test was applied to determine the difference in scores between the two groups.

4. Results and Discussion

In what follows, the researchers will discuss the results obtained in this investigation.

4.1. Types of Conjunctions Used in Students' Pre-test and Post-test Essays

4.1.1. Types of Conjunctions Used in the Pre-test

After collecting students' argumentative essays of the pretest and posttest, the researcher paid special attention to counting the number of conjunctions/ connectors used and classifying them according to Halliday and Hasan's (1976) taxonomy to which the students in the EG were introduced during the treatment phase. As such, analysing conjunctions use is crucial because it represents one of the premises upon which this study rests.

Table (1): Percentage of the Types of Conjunctions Used in the Pretest

	N° of Essays	Total N° of Conjunctions	Additive	Causal	Adversative	Temporal
CG	20	378	239 (66,38%)	56 (15,55%)	45 (12,50%)	38 (10,55%)
EG	20	347	214 (59,44%)	58 (16,11%)	50 (13,88%)	25 (6,94%)

We note that the total number of conjunctions used in the CG exceeds that in the EG by 31 conjunctions. Concerning the type of conjunctions used, we notice that 'additive conjunctions' are the most widely used in both groups with a percentage of 66,38% in the CG and 59,44% in the EG (such as: and, in addition to, moreover, for example). In the second place is the 'causal conjunctions' with a medium percentage of 15.55 % in the CG and a fairly larger one 16.11% in the EG (such as: as a result, consequently, thus). 'Adversative conjunctions' rank third in place with 12.5% to 13.88% in the CG and EG respectively (but, however, on the contrary). Then, the 'temporal conjunctions' is the least used type of conjunctions with a small percentage that equals 10.55% in the CG and a more dropping one 6.94% in the other group (such as: finally, next, at last).

4.1.2. Types of Conjunctions Used in the Post-test

Table (2): Percentage of the Types of Conjunctions Used in the Posttest

	N° of Essays	Total N° of Conjunctions	Additive	Causal	Adversative	Temporal
CG	20	410	232 (64.44%)	63 (17.50%)	67 (18.61%)	48 (13.33%)
EG	20	450	246 (68.33%)	73 (20.27%)	74 (20.55%)	57 (15.83%)

We note that the types of conjunctions invested in the posttest by the CG occupy, remarkably, the same ranking (as in the pretest) in terms of usage ratio with an overuse of ‘additive conjunctions’. Concerning the EG, the number of conjunctions used in the posttest have increased compared to the pretest, especially the use of temporal and additive conjunctions. Contrary to the CG, the EG has reflected an appropriate use of conjunctions which can be attributed to the treatment wherein students have gained knowledge about conjunctive relations and highlighted those conjunctions relevant to the argumentative essay genre. This appropriate use of conjunctions enhances the quality of the EG posttest essays, and is evidently, linked to the integration and analysis of sample texts during the treatment phase. Consequently, this research hypothesis, which states that explicit analysis of sample texts raises students’ awareness about the appropriate use of link words and phrases (conjunctions) relevant to argumentative essay writing is confirmed.

4.2. The Quasi-experimental Results

4.2.1. Research Design

To demonstrate whether this improvement is (or not) significant, we resorted to the T-test as shown in the following stated table.

Table (3): Paired Sample Differences Test of the CG Results

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Meant	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	upper			
Pair1								
Posttest pretest	2,35000	1,95408	,43695	1,43546	3,26454	5.378	19	,000

‘Table 3’ displays the paired samples differences and its t value. It shows that the difference of the pretest and posttest means is 2.35 with paired differences standard deviation of 1,95; whereas, the t value of this pair equals 5.37 with 19 degrees of freedom. The two tailed p value relevant to the t test is 0.000 (p = 0, 000), which is less than the alpha value 0.05. Since $p = 0,000 \leq \alpha = 0, 05$, the null hypothesis which states that the improvement in students’ results is due to chance is; therefore, rejected.

4.2.2. The Experimental Group Pre-test vs. Post-test Results

Table (4): Paired Sample Test of the EG Results

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Meant	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	upper			
Pair1 Posttest pretest	3,75000	2,04875	,45811	2,791116	4,70884	8,186	19	,000

'Table4' represents EG paired sample test statistics. According to the SPSS spreadsheet table, the difference between the group pretest and posttest means is 3.75; whereas, the standard deviation of the means difference is 2,04. The t value associated with this pair is 8.18 with 19 degrees of freedom. The two-tailed p value of this pair equals 0.000. Since $p=0.000 \leq \alpha =0,05$, the null hypothesis is rejected and an existing relationship between students' writing performance improvement and the treatment (teaching argumentative essay writing through a TBA) is confirmed.

4.2.3. The Control Group vs. Experimental Group Post-test Results

'Table5' includes the t-test statistical data of the CG and EG posttest results.

Table (5): Independent Sample of the CG and EG Results

	N	Mean	Correlation	P value of the t test
Pair 3				
posttest CG	20	11.85	0,061	-3,293
Posttest EG	20	14.35		

We note that there exists a weak positive correlation $r= 0,06$ between CG and EG posttest. This is believed logical due to the remarkable difference in the means of the two groups. Moreover, the p value of this pair independent sample equals -3.29 which is less than the value of alpha $p=-3.29 \leq \alpha =0.05$. Therefore, these results provide sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis in favor of the alternative or experimental hypothesis, which states that the improvement in EG students' scores is due to the treatment (independent variable) and not to chance. That is, the development of students' writing proficiency is closely related to the researcher's intervention and use of a TBA for a period of two months. The following histograms will visually illustrate the difference in the two groups' posttest results, meanwhile, indicate the distributional parameter of the two correlated variables.

4.3. The Interview Results

All of the interviewed teachers have advocated the implementation of the TBA, particularly, in teaching argumentative essays because argumentation differs according to cultures and patterns. Argument writing includes speeches, editorials, reviews, proposals, letters, advertisements, and any sharing of a discrete opinion; thus, sample texts would convey conventions relevant to all these argumentation forms. Moreover, some teachers seemed to have already relied on the integration of reading passages in their writing courses because

they believe 'there is no teaching without reading'. In fact, the analysis of reading samples provides the 'input' around which learning centers.

4. Conclusion

This study has shed light on the interrelatedness of reading and writing, and investigated the potential effects of integrating reading samples and activities in the writing classroom. This was believed crucial because, generally, students who received explicit instruction about language conventions in writing courses were more liable to produce better essays and reflect higher levels of motivation in the course. In order to achieve the aim underlying the present research, we have first provided a theoretical framework wherein we traced back and brought to light relevant works and literature to our study. The literature review focused on two main issues, namely, argumentative writing and integrating reading in the writing course through the adoption of a TBA. The huge body of previous studies made it clear that most of the approaches followed in teaching writing have due weaknesses and overlooked certain aspects of academic writing. However, it indicated that until now only the TBA seemed more advantageous, complementary and comprehensive of all aspects of the writing act, which took the teaching of academic writing to a new territory. More importantly, the literature review highlighted the significant role of the use of link words and phrases (connectors) in arguing and refuting claims in improving students' written performance and integrating reading in the writing course through the adoption of a TBA.

The field investigation has provided a practical support to the issues covered in the theoretical framework and answered the research guiding questions. The fieldwork involved the implementation of a quasi-experiment and an interview conducted with writing teachers at the ENSC. Two groups of second year EFL students at the ENSC were randomly selected (a CG and an EG) to take part in the quasi-experiment. Both groups had a pretest in the outset of the experiment and a posttest at the end of it. Only the EG has received a treatment of eight weeks to scaffold their writing of argumentative essays following a TBA, whereas the CG students received no treatment and were instructed following the ordinary approach found in writing common core at the ENSC. Results of 'the t-test paired samples' showed that there was a noticeable improvement in the EG written output based on the difference in its pretest and posttest means. Moreover, the 't-test independent sample' showed that the improvement made in the EG written performance was not due to chance; rather, to the treatment. On these grounds, the research hypothesis, which calls for the effectiveness of a TBA to teaching argumentative essay writing, is confirmed. Considering the findings of the interview conducted with EFL writing teachers, all the respondents have exhibited a favorable view regarding the proposed teaching writing approach and expressed their satisfaction towards its implementation at the ENSC English Department.

To conclude, future studies may well investigate the reading-writing connection from other angles and address different concerns than the present research. They can make use of a larger sample and other research tools. Such studies may even involve more than two variables like in the area of 'Contrastive Rhetoric' wherein the effect of reading in students' mother tongue (Arabic) would be investigated. This, in turn, may target researchers' interest to explore L1 transfer issues in relation to academic writing.

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