

Investigating Undergraduate Students' Experiences with Argumentative Writing in a Post-War Kosovo

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Abstract

This action research study reports on Kosovan, English as a Foreign Language, undergraduate students' perceptions of the usefulness and effectiveness of class activities that promote the panning for gold approach (Browne and Keeley 2004) in the process of argumentative writing. The data obtained from a questionnaire, essay evaluation and a focus group, reveal that students show interest in the approach though they do not feel at ease when required to take a decision that calls for systematic evaluation of their thinking in a quest for new answers. It is apparent from the study that, in order for students to think critically and write argumentatively, the panning for gold approach and the principle of inquiry should be integrated across the curriculum or, in a better case scenario, should be an integrated part of daily life. The results have implications for syllabus and classroom practices.

1. Introduction

A teacher's decisions about classroom activities can be of pivotal influence on the learning process. However, the chosen activities are not always found to be useful and interesting for learners. What is more, teachers repeatedly fail to ask the learners' opinion on the matter, and in cases when they do so, they find that there is a discrepancy between teachers' and learners' perceptions of classroom aims and events (see Barkhuizen 1998, Block 1994 and Kumaravadivelu 1991). Despite teachers' awareness that learners' needs ought to be accommodated, 'very many teachers seem to find it difficult to accept their learners as people with a positive contribution to make to the instructional process' (Allwright 1984: 167). This does not imply that teachers should not challenge learners by employing a range of activities not previously experienced by them, but teachers should be open to the idea of negotiation.

By using a range of activities on techniques of writing and on fostering critical thinking, the local teacher-researcher of this study, who has had a Western educational experience, aspired to help students learn how to write argumentatively. In introducing the principle of 'inquiry' (Dew 1997) and the 'panning for gold approach' (Browne and Keeley 2004) in a post-conflict setting that has inherited teacher-centeredness and rote-learning approaches, the study aimed at investigating students' perceptions on the usefulness of instruction activities in learning how to write argumentative essays. Moreover, by analyzing students' end-of-course essays, the outcomes of a semester-long class instruction are evaluated.

2. Background

2.1 The importance of students' perceptions in the teaching processes

Most educationalists would accept that classroom practices are influenced by the decision-making powers attributed to teachers (Richards and Lockhart 1996 and Wallace 2005). Though traditional teachers might not be open to the idea of changing the power structure, Nunan asserts that teachers should encourage learners to 'reflect upon their learning experiences and articulate those they prefer, and those they feel suit them as learners' (1988: 6).

Both teachers and learners bring to learning and language teaching beliefs, goals, preferences and decisions (Kumaravadivelu 1991 and Richards and Lockhart 1996: 52). However, research shows there is a mismatch of perceptions between teachers and their students. For example, Block found that 'teachers and learners operate according to quite different systems for describing and attributing purpose to tasks' (1994: 473). Barkhuizen on the other hand was surprised to find that students rated highly the mechanical aspects of language study (1998: 96), whereas Zimmerman (1997) learned from students' viewpoints on how to best learn words.

In other research, Rao (2002) discovered that Chinese students were having difficulties with communicative activities in the classroom as they were accustomed to a traditional teaching model. In order to make teaching and learning more effective he suggests a blended approach. In other words, teachers should adjust tasks and activities to the local context (see Leki 2001 and You 2004), and in order to have better results they need to consult learners. With the intention of extending such findings, this study provides information about learners' subjective needs from another socio-cultural and political context and related to the teaching of argumentative writing.

2.2 Characteristics of the panning for gold approach

In order to construct effective arguments students need to provide good reasoning that supports their conclusions. They need to engage in an active thinking process that encourages dialogue between the writer and the reader and opens possibilities for new knowledge to be acquired. Some scholars would argue that this approach is Western-specific and as such cannot be transferred to L2 contexts (Atkinson and Ramanathan 1995, Atkinson 1997, Ramanathan and Atkinson 1999, and Ramanathan and Kaplan 1996a and 1996b); therefore, teachers should refrain from using unconventional activities in order not to cause discomfort with students. The process can be painful as it requires abandoning subconsciously absorbed beliefs in the light of new evidence but ultimately rewarding (Paul 2003: ii). A critical thinker, as defined for the purpose of this study, should suspend judgment, inquire, clarify, and analyze an issue from multiple perspectives in order to discover new answers.

Bearing in mind that the way we perceive the world is deeply embedded in our culture, it is not surprising that students fail to grasp the complexity of an issue and identify alternative perspectives to it (see Chaffee 2006 and Colombo, Cullen and Lisle 2007). Consequently, they construct relatively poor arguments and feel confused when faced with tasks that challenge their conventional way of thinking. Therefore, the teacher needs to turn students away from predictable routines and create a learning environment that will intellectually challenge their habits of thought. In order to teach students 'how to think' and not 'what to think' (Paul and Willsen 1993: 16) the principle of inquiry for new evidence (Dew 1997) could be introduced in the classroom. Similarly, teachers could make good use of the panning for gold approach in the classroom by encouraging students to actively search for better answers. In contrast to the 'sponge' approach, which encourages memorization of reasoning and not its evaluation, the panning for gold approach encourages students to take the best available decision by using questions as a tool for determining what information should be selected and what should be rejected (Browne and Kelley 2004: 4). In relation to argumentative essays, students should become aware that the process of arguing is one of truth-seeking and clarification and that they should be open, at least at some point or at some stage of writing, to change their stand on an issue in response to evidence (Browne and Kelley 2004 and Ramage and Bean 1995: 22).

3. The Study

The aim of the study was to discover learners' perceptions in using the panning for gold approach in a process of acquiring writing skills.

3.1 Background on the course

The English for Academic Purposes 1 (EAP-1) course is a mandatory course for all undergraduate students in the English Department of the University of Prishtina, Kosovo. The aim of the course is to enable students to communicate more effectively in an academic context, with a particular focus on argumentative writing. Consequently, a process-oriented approach is taken, thus encouraging students to use pre-writing strategies, drafting, revision and editing (Flower and Hayes 1981).

A 60-hour course was conducted using three types of activities: collective, group and individual class activities with a number of specific activities per type such as debates, case study, riddles, analyzing perceptions, analyzing the verdict, role-playing, defending an assigned position on a controversial topic, guided writing, peer feedback, referring to sources, and analysing essays.

3.2 Background on the participants

The study was conducted with second year undergraduate students majoring in English Language and Literature, aged 20–21. They were enrolled in a three-year B.A. program and were homogenous in their educational and cultural background and had no previous experience in writing argumentatively. Prior to university they had studied English for eight years at school; their previous education was characterized by limited resources, over-crowding, adherence to authority, rote-learning and socio-political pressure to conform (see OCCD 2001 and Sommers and Buckland 2004).

3.3 Data collection and procedure

Case study data was collected through a questionnaire, analysis of an essay and a focus group.

3.3.1 Questionnaire

One week before the end of the course, the questionnaire was distributed to the 85 students present in the EAP-1 class (see Appendix 1). The aim of the study was explained in the questionnaire; the teacher/researcher elaborated it further orally and answered questions. Students were informed that the study was anonymous and to be completed on a voluntary basis. At the end of the class one of the students collected the questionnaires in a closed envelope.

The researcher was interested to see how students perceived the applied strategy in relation to writing, how beneficial it was during the course and if they would suggest any changes to the implemented methodology. Consequently, through five open-ended questions the researcher aimed at learning what were: (a) the three most useful class activities; (b) the three least useful ones; (c) the main writing difficulties; (d) class activities that helped them overcome barriers in writing; and finally (e) to learn about students' attitudes towards the approach.

As recommended by Seale and Filmer (1998), the researcher used open-ended questions in order to allow respondents 'to answer on their own terms, enabling the researcher to discover unexpected things about the way people see a topic' (as cited in Gilbert 2005: 94).

3.3.2 Essay assignment

On the last day of the course students were given a short essay assignment. After a semester on how to write effectively, this task aimed at evaluating students' thesis governed writing using a simple analytical scale (Bean 2001: 259). Having in mind examination-oriented practice at the English Department, the teacher evaluated the end product despite the process-oriented approach applied during the course, in order to gain evidence about students' performance, i.e., to see if there was a relation between what students say about the approach and its effectiveness on their performance. The students were assigned the topic 'Should teachers be blamed for students' failure in exams?' and were given 40 minutes to produce at least 250 words of text. This type of assignment had been modeled and practiced during the course.

The essay was evaluated using a Simple Analytical Scale (General Description Method) (Bean 2004: 259), as shown in Table 1. Fifty-one students were present and wrote the essay.

Table 1: Scoring Guide for Essays

<p>Quality of ideas (_____ points) Range and depth of argument; logic of argument; quality of research or original thought; appropriate sense of complexity of the topic; appropriate awareness of opposing views.</p> <p>Organization and Development (_____ points) Effective title; clarity of thesis statement; logical and clear arrangement of ideas; effective use of transitions; unity and coherence of paragraphs; good development of ideas through supporting details and evidence.</p> <p>Clarity and style (_____ points) Ease of readability; appropriate voice, tone and style of assignment; clarity of sentence structure; gracefulness of sentence structure; appropriate variety and maturity of sentence structure.</p> <p>Sentence Structure and Mechanics (_____ points) Grammatically correct sentences; absence of comma splices; run-ons; fragments; absence of usage and grammatical errors; accurate spelling; careful proofreading; attractive and appropriate manuscript form.</p>
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The maximum number of points available using this grading criterion is 100. As the panning for gold approach focuses on developing students' skills to think actively, formulate and justify their ideas, suspend judgment, think of alternative solutions and so forth, and considering that in an exam setting there is a limited time for revision, more weight was given to the macro level (60 points), and less weight to the micro level (40 points).

3.3.3 Focus group

In order to gain a more in-depth understanding of the survey results, the teacher/researcher conducted a focus group with six participants. The discussion took place in the researcher's office and lasted an hour and forty minutes. It was conducted in English, although occasionally students switched to their native language (Albanian). The discussion was recorded and brief notes were taken with participants' approval. The students/participants were chosen on the basis of regularity of attendance, regularity of turning in assignments and representing the grading scale from poor to excellent writers. The audio taped discussion was later transcribed verbatim and the emerging themes have been used to illustrate further students' perceptions on the matter. The names of the students have been changed.

4. Findings

The findings from the survey and focus group are aimed at shedding light on the instructional methodology from the learners' point of view. The essay results, on the other hand, will provide insights into the effectiveness of the teaching strategy.

4.1 Questionnaire

The questionnaire data obtained from the sixty-five respondents regarding the three most useful activities is shown in Table 2. More than half of the respondents mentioned activities that encourage critical thinking as the most useful ones (see Appendix 2), giving various reasons for their choice.

Table 2: Most Useful Activities

Activity	Reasons	Per cent
Mock Trial ¹	Analyzing evidence, reviewing arguments, taking a decision, writing argumentatively, discussing	60%
Juicy Baek ²	How to collect data, to suspend judgment, develop informed opinions, debate, take a position	60%
Men with the Hat Riddle ³	To think outside of the box, support decision with facts, debate, write short responses, listening to others, group work	60%

The three least useful class activities and the reasons behind these results are illustrated in Table 3; 75% of the respondents thought that note-taking activities were the least useful, followed by peer essay review and writing on the assigned position.

Table 3: Least Useful Activities

Activity	Reasons	Per cent
Note-Taking ⁴	Already have a system, don't like to take notes, too much work	75%
Peer Essay Review	Lack of competency in revision, boring, authority issue	68%
Writing on the Assigned Position	Doesn't feel natural, arguments are weaker if you don't believe in what you write	54%

Question 3 asked students to point out their difficulties with essay writing. As different responses were obtained, the teacher has categorized them into pre-writing strategies, organization and development, and style and mechanics. Based on this characterization, 62% of the respondents considered mechanics to represent the main difficulties with their writing (see Table 4). This finding was surprising to the teacher-researcher because students did not raise this as an important issue during teaching sessions.

Table 4: Writing Difficulties

Category	Per cent
Mechanics	62%
Organization and development	19%
Style	13%
Pre-writing strategies	6%
Total	100%

In response to the question about class activities considered most helpful in their development as writers, 69% of the respondents considered that a whole-class guided writing exercise on a mutually selected topic was the most helpful of all activities, while less useful were a class writing conference and an essay analysis (see Table 5).

¹ Taken from John Chaffee's book *Thinking Critically* (2006: 73–80)

² Taken from Gunn (2007).

³ Taken from Schmidt (n.d.).

⁴ Taken from Cornell University (2007).

Table 5: Impact of Class Activities in Writing

Category	Per cent
Guided writing on a mutually selected topic	69%
Debates	12%
Thinking activities such as the mock trial, legal court puzzles	11%
Teaching students how to refer to sources	5%
Reading strategies	2%
Class writing conference	0.5%
Analysis of an essay	0.5%

Lastly, students were asked to comment whether in general they found the approach taken in the course useful, and all of them responded in the affirmative.

4.2 Essay evaluation

Students' essays were evaluated by the researcher using a Simple Analytical Scale. Though the aim of classroom instruction was to guide students towards becoming better writers, it was disappointing to find that 21.6% of students failed to meet the minimum criteria; while more than half produced texts where the quality was below average (see Table 6).

Table 6: Grading of Students' Essays

Points	Description of the University of Prishtina Grading System	Number of Students	Students' percentage
Up to 59	Fail – some more work required before the credit can be awarded	11	21.6%
60–67	Sufficient – performance meets the minimum criteria	16	31.0%
68–75	Satisfactory – fair but with significant shortcomings	15	29.0%
76–84	Good – generally sound work with a number of notable errors	7	13.7%
85–92	Very good – above the average standard but with some errors	1	2.0%
93–100	Excellent – outstanding performance with only minor errors	1	2.0%
Total		51	100%

While the researcher is aware that the objectivity of this evaluation could be questioned because it was conducted by only one person, it is necessary to compare students' perceptions with the results.

4.3 Focus group

After reviewing the transcripts, the following key themes were identified:

1. making a cultural shift
2. defending a position
3. importance of mechanics
4. value of guided writing
5. the value of critical thinking for employability.

These are discussed below. Significant student comments illustrate perceptions on usefulness and effectiveness of class activities and their relation to writing.

5. Discussion

5.1 Cultural shift

Considering that the sponge approach is deeply established in the local educational system, not all methods of instruction used in the EAP-1 course were seen as valuable. Activities that encouraged different habits of thought were seen as least useful. For example:

- The Cornell method of note-taking requires students' preparation prior to class, revision after the class, and study at home. Though most of the students have developed their own methods of note-taking, applying the Cornell method would mean developing good study habits and thus becoming an active learner.
- Reading and analyzing a text, whether written by a peer or a scholar, requires one to judge the product and/or give suggestions for improvement, i.e., it requires students to be active evaluators – something they were not used to do, as Bujar explains: 'When I read a text, I know I should read it with a critical eye, but then as I am reading some inner voice asks me who am I to criticize this person'.
- Being assigned to defend or oppose a position on a controversial issue often requires learners to abandon or suspend their values, assumptions and beliefs (Chaffee 2006). Being used to passively absorbing information and not questioning either authority or the beliefs they hold, students lack confidence to give criticism and/or recommendations, as Labinot points out: 'If my teacher tells me that my paper is not good I believe her, but if a colleague of mine tells me this then I cannot accept it as s/he is in the same position as me, still learning'.

In all these situations, students needed to use different habits of thought, so it is quite predictable that they found these activities challenging.

5.2 Defending a position

The reported difficulties on writing from an opposing view and deciding on a position suggest that students consider this an 'unnatural' behaviour, as Kaltrina and Lena point out: '[...] when I have to think or write from a perspective that is different from the one I have, it feels so unnatural, so difficult' and 'I am afraid to express my opinion, because I don't know if it is the right one'.

These comments suggest that going with the crowd is the safest way for most of the students. What is more, being accustomed to the idea that there is a single and only 'right answer' inflicts dilemmas in the process of decision-making, respectively in writing. Moreover, in considering that critical thinking contains cultural components it is not surprising that students who have been brought up to think and act differently from the panning for gold approach are faced with difficulties when attempting to apply it.

5.3 Importance of mechanics in students' perceptions

Mechanics were seen by students to represent the main difficulty with writing. This indicates that the traditional product-centred approach that deals with language-level concerns is very much present in learners' practice. In other words, since students are accustomed to receive feedback on the surface level of writing, it is logical that they will give more weight to it. This could also be because students still need considerable instruction in language acquisition prior to embarking on the EAP-1 module or because the teacher needs to pay more attention to this aspect of writing (Zimmerman 1997). Nevertheless, although students claim that they encounter difficulties at the micro-level of writing, it can also be argued that both critical thinking and process writing activities seem to have helped them overcome barriers at the macro-level.

5.4 The value of practicing guided writing

Generally speaking, the questionnaire results suggest that students found the panning for gold approach useful: 60% referred to the activities that foster critical thinking and active learning as the ones they found most useful. Therefore, given the cultural issue listed in sections 5.1 and 5.2, it is not surprising that students found guided writing as the most useful activity. They need a tutor to model

the steps of the writing process, including the important pre-writing activities of discovering, exploring and evaluating ideas. Activities that also develop analytical skills such as class debates and discussions over court puzzles were regarded as helpful in improving critical writing.

Being receptive to activities that challenge their thinking and introduce new learning techniques did not mean that students instantly became effective academic writers, especially since they were working in a second language. As students pointed out during the focus group, they need more practice in order to write better. Thus, it would be a mistake to believe that learning will occur by telling learners what to do or by instructing them to watch what others do (Browne and Keeley 2004).

5.5 Perceived impact on employability

Looking at the reasons given for such a selection (see Table 2) and from the interview discussion, it can be inferred that students see the relevance of embracing this approach as it promotes skills valuable for employability, as Melita's response shows:

When we played the role of the judge, I could show my abilities as a critical thinker; I didn't have to learn anything by heart, and this is what matters because the moment we start working our employer is not going to ask us for definitions but for practical skills.

6. Conclusion

This study shows how receptive learners can be to new teaching approaches. However, a shift from a didactic approach to a critical one is slow and painful, especially in Year 2 of a B.A. programme, and teachers should be patient and structure activities accordingly, as progress will occur gradually (Binker 1993: 499). Assessing student success with such activities and their perception of their usefulness is therefore essential, to refine future teaching practice.

Negotiating alternatives with learners will make them more engaged and closer to achieving the desired learning outcomes; respectively it will push for changes in the syllabus or teaching methodology. Assessing learner needs at an early stage can help ensure that learner concerns are heard. For example, the researcher was surprised to discover that learners see mechanical aspects of language learning as their main difficulty in essay writing (see also Barkhuizen 1998), as this had not been a key issue during the teaching sessions. Creating an activity could have addressed the issue, which may have ensured better student retention.

We hope that the study findings will encourage teachers with similar challenges in teaching writing to explore learner perceptions so that pedagogy can better meet learner needs.

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Appendix 1

QUESTIONNAIRE

The aim of this questionnaire is to gain a deeper understanding of your experience with the EAP 1 course. The questionnaire is anonymous and on a voluntary basis. The findings will help the teacher/researcher diagnose the usefulness of the activities developed during the course in order to improve the teaching strategy in the future. The findings might be used for research purposes.

Please answer the following questions. If you need more space, please use the back of the page.

1. In your opinion, which were the three most useful activities in EAP class and why?
2. Mention the three activities that were the least useful in the EAP course and explain why?
3. Explain what are the main difficulties that you face when writing argumentative essays?
4. Which of the class activities have helped you mostly with your writing difficulties?
5. In general, how useful do you find teacher's approach to teaching argumentative writing and why?