



STUDENTS' ATTITUDES AND PROBLEMS ON QUESTION-BASED ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY WRITING INSTRUCTION

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Abstract

Teaching argumentative essay writing to students through questioning is prominent to provide them with sufficient skills to compete in this world. Having this in mind, this descriptive study was conducted to identify students' attitudes and their common problems in practicing argumentative essay writing skills through questioning method at DMU, in Ethiopia. To fulfill the purpose of this study, sixty management students answered the questionnaire. The results from the questionnaire revealed that all students have positive attitudes towards using the method while practicing writing. The data also revealed that inappropriate teaching method, time constraints, and large class size were the most common problems that did not allow students to apply their argumentative essay writing skills through questioning method effectively. This study recommends educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders to reconsider the attitudes and problems of university students while designing question-based argumentative essay writing teaching materials.

Key Words: Attitudes, Critical Thinking, practice, Problem, Questioning, Writing

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INTRODUCTION

Higher order questioning can be a stimulator to activate students' schemata and allow students to think and to elaborate their opinions in which the language is used meaningfully and purposely while writing argumentative essays. High level questions are extremely beneficial for student learning. They are questions which require students to analyze, synthesize, evaluate, categorize or apply what they have read (Vogler, 2005; Tienken, 2010). Higher level questions do not frequently have one correct answer, but rather encourage students to produce a response which is unique to their thinking and interpretation of the text (Tan, 2007; Tienken, 2010). Research (for example, Lundy, 2008) has also shown that asking higher level questions are fundamental to student teaching.

Writing is one of the major skills in English that is considered as active or productive skills. Aldersen and Bachman (2002, p.5) define writing as a standardized system of communication and as a tool for learning that indicates students' thinking and reasoning skill. In addition, Reichenbach (2001) claims that writing is a process that assists us in producing thoughts, in clarifying our points of view or belief, and in sorting out the evidence for thinking our beliefs are true. Thus, writing achievement is the students' ability in expressing their ideas, thoughts, and feelings in writing that is measured by a writing assessment. Although mastering writing is essential, writing skill especially an argumentative writing is recognized as the most difficult and challenging English skill since it needs using lexical and grammatical features strictly and takes a lot of effort. Negari and Rezaabadi (2012) believed that writing as a demanding job takes a lot of time to be fully mastered. University students in their Basic Writing Course notice by themselves that some difficulties are found when the teacher asks them to write an argumentative writing. They argue that writing forces them to use formal language, grammatical structures and logical evidence exactly in argumentative writing. Another problem of students is to get an idea about what they are going to write and not well organized to express it. They do not know how to express their idea into written terms so that they do not produce good argumentative writing.

Students' attitudes are also the main factors that determine their success in language learning. Attitude to the second/foreign language, its speakers and the learning context may all play some part in explaining their success or failure in different aspects (e.g. writing performance and CT abilities) of language learning (Candlin & Mercer, 2001). Moreover, various studies (Verma, 2005; Karahan, 2007; Denny, 2012; Mcleod, 2014 as cited in Paker & Erarslan, 2015, p. 1-11) have pointed out the significance of attitudinal factors in language learning. In an academic setting, the major focus of many teachers is on preparing learners to cope with the language requirements, and in particular, the writing requirements of university courses (Bruce, 2008). The increase in writing activities has presented teachers with the challenge of determining their students' attitudes towards writing. This takes us to a key factor (i.e. questioning) which influences the success of students in their academic writing.

Tan's (2007) study of teachers' questioning behavior found that university students in China had difficulties in accustoming to higher order questioning. Similarly, Wu's (1993) study of classroom interaction and teacher questions reported that secondary school students in Hong Kong were reluctant to volunteer to answer questions in class. The data demonstrated that general solicits almost invariably fail to elicit any verbal responses and when students were called upon to respond, they might prefer to hesitate and give short answers where possible so that they could avoid giving their peers the impression of showing off. On the contrast, Lin (2005) found that undergraduates in Taiwan are motivated in learning English by asking higher order questions.

Even though essay writing and skills are crucial for success at universities, our teaching experiences have told us that Ethiopian university students are used to sit quietly in class and grab the knowledge delivered by the teacher due to the exam-oriented education system. Writing argumentative essays in English is a common problem among university students. The researchers also observed that many students have less interest to write argumentative writing skills with relevant and logical ideas. From the facts above, it is inferred that using questioning method becomes a solution to help learners to practice argumentative writing skills in EFL classrooms. The main goal of this study is to investigate students' attitudes and their problems towards questioning method in practicing writing at DMU, Ethiopia. Therefore, this study tried to answer the following basic questions.

1. What are students' attitudes on questioning method while practicing argumentative essay writing?
2. What are the problems of students in practicing argumentative essay writing through questioning method?

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a descriptive method. The researchers chose this method since it helped them to gather available data from the target participants on the title in short time.

Participants

In this study, a total of 60 management undergraduate students enrolled for Basic Writing Skills Course were included. Before this course, the students have taken two Communicative English Skills (FLEN 1011 & 1012) Freshman Courses prepared by Ministry of Education (MoE 2018 & 2019) in which writing is one aspect of them for two semesters. Earlier to these university courses, they have learned English language subject beginning from grade one to university.

Data Gathering Instrument

Attitudes have no physical dimensions. In other words, attitudes are abstract concepts in that it is difficult to measure them. This means attitudes cannot be measured directly. When people are asked about their opinion of any object or their attitude towards any topic, they usually fail to respond to it accurately and make some superficial and inaccurate statements instead (Tavsancil, 2005). Despite all these difficulties, it is possible to measure students' attitudes towards lessons by the methods and techniques such as question lists, observation, incomplete sentences, telling stories, choosing the wrong answer and text analysis. As it is clear from Eren's study (2001), observation of students' behavior and the questions students ask about any topic are the two important methods to be followed in order to measure attitudes. However, the former (that is, observation of behavior) is time consuming and a very

difficult task to carry out. For that reason, mostly, the latter (that is, students' statements about a lesson or a topic) is taken into account.

Attitude scale, as a method which is chosen, is most commonly used to measure attitudes in this study. While measuring attitude, a list of sentences related to the event and object which are the subjects of investigation is prepared and students are asked to answer these questions in line with their real thoughts. The result must reflect whether they are mostly in favor of the event or object or against it. Therefore, questionnaire (i.e. question items on essay writing through questioning were adapted from Paul and Elder (2008), and the students' problems on writing skills were prepared by referring to different appropriate review literatures) has been used as the major data collecting instrument in this study.

Close-ended questions are then incorporated to draw information about students' attitudes and problems towards writing in the context of questioning method. For this, 36 items were prepared for measuring students' attitudes towards writing through questioning. Students for the two types of question items were asked to show their level of agreement with the statements out of five options (5= strongly agree to 1= strongly disagree). In addition, 15 items were prepared in order to investigate students' problems towards writing in the context of questioning. Students were asked to show their agreement towards problems with five options (1= very low to 5= very high). The statistical analysis of the questionnaires was conducted using SPSS 20.0 software. Using Cronbach's alpha, the reliabilities of the questionnaires were 0.86 and 0.84 (for the question items mentioned above respectively). Regarding validity, the questionnaires were examined by 3experienced TEFL instructors at DMU, concluding that the questionnaire was content valid.

Sampling

The two class students from management department at DMU were included in the study using comprehensive sampling technique. Then, they were made to fill out the questionnaire.

Data Analysis

Data gathered through questionnaire has been effectively analyzed quantitatively using mean and standard deviation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following section shows the result of the study from the students' questionnaire. The first table focuses on identifying the students' attitudes (36 items) regarding writing in the context of questioning method. The next table focuses on students' problems (12 items) towards writing they have faced through questioning method. The results are summarized using statistical descriptions (means and standard deviations) as follows.

Table 1: Students' Attitudes about Argumentative Essay Writing through Questioning Method

No.	Items	Responses	
		M	SD
I. Analysis			
The teacher's question in my argumentative essay writing classroom helped me to:			
1	Use the language in new and concrete way.	2.8	1.4
2	Analyze information so as to reach a particular conclusion.	2.6	1.2
3	Find evidence to support a specific opinion, event or situation.	2.9	1.4
4	Identify the causes of a certain issue.	3.0	1.6
5	Identify characteristics of issues.	2.6	1.2
6	Interpret ideas on a given issue.	2.8	1.4
II. Synthesis			
The teacher's question in my argumentative essay writing classroom helped me to:			
7	Produce something unique or original to an issue.	2.6	1.2
8	Compose new ideas.	2.8	1.4

9	Predict an outcome to an issue.	3.0	1.6
10	Solve problems for which there is no single right answer.	2.9	1.4
11	Think of different endings for the essay.	2.6	1.2
12	Connect and integrate many points accordingly.	2.8	1.4
III. Evaluation			
The teacher's question in my argumentative essay writing classroom helped me to:			
13	Form judgments and make decisions using stated criteria.	3.0	1.6
14	Offer an opinion on an issue without a single correct answer.	3.2	1.7
15	Judge the merits of ideas logically.	3.4	1.8
16	Judge and argue about issues.	3.8	1.9
17	Develop the habit of judging an essay in a timely way.	3.2	1.7
18	Place sentences in order of their importance.	3.6	1.9
IV. Socratic Questioning Method			
The teacher's question in my argumentative essay writing classroom helped me to:			
19	Understand what the issue or the topic in the essay is about. (Focused)	4.0	2.0
20	Reflect specific facts relevant to a given issue. (Focused)	3.0	1.6
21	Explore and manipulate the concept/issue/topic. (Focused)	4.2	2.1
22	Make me active meaning maker. (Focused)	4.4	2.2
23	Evaluate a broad range of related issues and topics (Exploratory)	4.0	2.0
24	Activate my prior knowledge and previous connections (Exploratory)	3.0	1.6
25	Frame useful follow up questions to search further ideas to my essay. (Exploratory)	4.0	2.0
26	Be clear or fuzzy in my overall thinking. (Exploratory)	4.2	2.1
27	Explore more beliefs and assumptions on the issue or topic (Spontaneous)	4.4	2.2
28	Develop my broader thinking for exploring deeper meanings (Spontaneous)	4.2	2.1
29	Promote open discussion while searching relevant ideas to the essay. (Spontaneous)	4.4	2.2
30	Be interested on the topic by raising important ideas to the issue. (Spontaneous)	4.0	2.0
V. Applying Process-based Writing Approach through Questioning			
The teacher's question at any level of my argumentative essay writing classroom helped me integratively to:			
31	Develop ideas in writing an essay. (Pre-writing)	4.0	2.0
32	Increase fluency and expression in my writing. (Drafting)	4.2	2.1
33	Get a chance to share my writing with colleagues for comments. (Feedback)	4.4	2.2
34	Produce conventional writing. (Editing)	4.4	2.2
35	Make my written work available with others. (Publishing)	4.0	2.0
36	Assess the strengths and weaknesses while writing my essay. (Evaluating)	4.4	2.2

Table 1 displayed that all participants have positive attitudes towards teacher questioning in teaching argumentative essay writing classrooms. All results are above average (2.5). The different types of questions also help students to practice various stages while writing an essay. In addition, the Socratic questioning method helps them to think and develop relevant and most appropriate ideas on the writing topics (issues) necessarily. From this, it is possible to conclude that questioning can be taken as one method in helping students to practice writing lessons very well in EFL classrooms.

Table 2: Students' Problems in Writing Argumentative Essay through Questioning Method

No.	Items	Level of the Effect	
		M	SD
1	Students' cultural difference	4.2	2.1
2	Language competencies	4.7	2.8
3	Lack of interest	4.0	2.0
4	Topic selection	4.7	2.8
5	Poor critical thinking skill	4.7	2.8
6	Availability of resources	4.6	2.4
7	Shortage of time	4.8	2.9
8	Teacher's assessment system	4.2	2.2
9	Lack of training	4.0	2.0
10	Lack of experience	3.8	1.9
11	Crowded classroom	4.6	2.4
12	Personal beliefs and preconceptions	4.6	2.4

The data in table 2 revealed that there are many common problems that affect students' writing through questioning method. However, shortage of time, language competence and poor CT skill are the main problems to students while practicing writing through questioning method. In addition, lack of interest and availability of resources and other factors also took their own contributions in affecting students' writing skills in the context of questioning method.

Discussion

The result of this study showed that students have positive attitudes towards questioning method which influences the practices of their writing skills and in EFL classroom in a better way. This finding coincides with Vogler (2005) and Tienken (2010) studies who remarked that high level questions are extremely beneficial for student learning. The result of the study, on the other hand, provides evidence for questioning as a facilitative and important method in developing writing and thinking skills in foreign language learners. As it is already stated by Aldersen and Bachman (2002), writing is a system of communication. It is also considered as a tool for learning that indicates students' writing, thinking and reasoning skills. Therefore, questioning is one basic clue or stimuli for improving students' writing skills and thinking abilities while writing essays (Peterson & Taylor, 2012). In other words, to practice argumentative writing successfully in class, students need to acquire questioning method as a prerequisite.

Although higher order questioning used in EFL classroom was reported successful in literature, it might not be the case when applying it to different culture and education system because of the attitudes and further problems on the learners' side (Halim & Muhibbah, 2015; Abdullahi, Rouyan, Noor & Halim, 2018). In an academic setting, as Bruce (2008) claims, the major focus of many teachers in writing classroom context is on preparing learners to cope with the language requirements, and in particular, the writing requirements of university courses. As a consequence of the above statements, students' argumentative essay writing skills are limited on acquiring the basics instead of learning out of the box.

CONCLUSION

Students developed positive attitudes towards argumentative essay writing through questioning method at DMU. Moreover, questioning was used as a tool in serving as a clue or stimuli to students that helps students in generating, organizing, developing and evaluating ideas. Therefore, questioning was taken as facilitator and important strategy in developing writing skills and thinking abilities in foreign language learners. However, students in their writing classes faced problems such as shortage of time, language competence and poor CT skill. Therefore, students should be encouraged to work hard to apply questioning method in their writing classrooms. In addition, the reason that students present their positive attitudes to writing in the context of questioning method can be helpful in improving their writing. It is also vital to select the appropriate teaching materials which can support teachers to promote

the application of writing. Such research could provide considerable insight into foreign writing practices through questioning method in EFL context. Future studies can be conducted in different contexts using various instruments.

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