

Teaching Argumentative Writing to ESOL Students: Sample Lessons with Particular Attention to Assessment Strategies

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ABSTRACT

Teaching argumentative writing to English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) learners is one of the skills required for successful academic writing. Theoretically-grounded in the Toulmin argument model, this paper seeks to explain the tenets of teaching adult ESOL learners' argumentative composition skills. It also accounts for the assessment strategies that support learners' transfer from their internalized linguistic systems to writing neat, well-supported arguments in the target language. In pursuit of this endeavor, model lesson plans are provided for teachers to test. Though this research is based on personal experience in the Algerian ESOL context, the unit plan can be generalized in other contexts to ESOL learners. Multilingual learners are becoming an inevitable part of mainstream American composition classes, which justifies this unit design's suitability in the American context.

Keywords: ESOL learners, Toulmin, portfolio, assessment, argumentation.

Introduction

Learning to argue is the backbone of oral and written discourse, ESOL learners, as less proficient in the target language, should develop reading and writing strategies to participate in academia. They should also produce neat, logically- well-organized formal written works. Assessing their progress is another skill that teachers of this population should carefully build. It is a gate toward integrating product and process, teaching, and policy-making at institutional and collegiate levels. It is also an inevitable part of any language learning in any

context; no matter which approaches teachers to choose, assessment is the agreed-upon criterion of effective teaching. Designating the word ‘effective’ to writing assessments is used throughout the available writing literature, but how ‘effective’ ESOL assessment design and practice is? Is it only interpreted through the lens of error and mistake as deviations from the ‘standards’? Throughout my learning and short teaching experience, I was constantly questioning the value of standard timed testing, which I am most familiar with where I learned and taught. In Algeria, timed testing is the norm. Our instructional design was based mostly on the pre-process approach. Still, recently the shift to the process approach, which intermingled with technology-based instruction, brought about good conversant learners but declining expected test results. What would alternative assessment methods help teachers identify ESOL learner errors rather than punish them for deviations from standard ‘norms’? Are portfolios effective in the ESOL contexts? The present paper, henceforth, aims to:

1. Design an argumentative writing unit applicable in the Algerian EFL context and any advanced ESOL class.
2. Incorporate portfolio assessment in an ESOL class.

My learning and teaching context

Algeria is a country in North Africa, bordered by the Mediterranean Sea from North, Tunisia from the East, and Morocco from the West. It is the largest country in Africa with a vast Sahara Desert. Algeria is a bilingual (Arabic and French) and diglossic¹ country. English is becoming the second chosen language for most learners in the southern Sahara regions, though it is considered a foreign language by the government (Benrabah, 2014). Detailing the linguistic

¹ A diglossic situation occurs in countries where two varieties of a language are used interchangeably according to context. In Algeria, Standard Arabic (the language of the Qur’an) is the academic language, while dialectical Arabic used for daily conversation. The latter is also mixed with French.

variation in Algeria requires longitudinal research, which is beyond the scope of this paper. Higher education in Algeria has been through many changes. Under the classical system, students should pass through a four-year cycle to get a Bachelor's degree, two years for a "Magister," and three to four years of research to obtain a Doctorate. My experience as a learner and teacher was based on the pre-LMD classical (Licence-Magister-Doctorat) system. The latter was adapted in 2004 from Europe to cope with globalization challenges (Othmane & Bouyakoub, 2020). Incorporating portfolios under the LMD system is a precursor for a fairer assessment of student writing compared to the classical system.

After passing the Baccalaureate exam in the last year of high school, students can choose the type of English major. First-year courses include British and American literature and Civilizations, Phonetics, Linguistics, Introduction to Research Methodology, Reading and Writing, Listening, and Speaking. In each class, students must pass timed-tests at the end of the two semesters. As stated previously, the whole educational system is built on timed and standard tests, which is detrimental to students' capacities and contradicts emerging ESOL research. The latter "is not a valid reflection of their knowledge and mastery and artificially inflated due to artifactual consistency in students' rate of work rather than authentic consistency in students' level of knowledge" (Gernsbacher et al., 2020, p.175).

In composition classes, students' are exposed to authentic texts followed by prompts. At the end of the semester, teachers usually assign topics, indirect questions, or particular quotes to analyze and argue. Many of my learners failed to complete their Bachelor's degree due to the unfair assessment. Inside my classroom, at the Teachers Training College and the University of Laghouat, Algeria, I tried to incorporate process pedagogy (Anson, 2014), which has become

widespread in recent years. Still, the overloaded classes (30-40 students per class) made it challenging. Compared to the small number of teachers in the English major, the high number of students is a national issue that most, if not all, universities in Algeria face. Students reflected on their writing informally after receiving their grades with their teacher or peers. We were taught the different theories and pedagogies of teaching in the Didactics course, in the same setting, but reminded that the feasibility of the process approach and experimentation with new genres is limited due to many students compared to the availability of teachers. Through the reinforcement that I got from my learning experience in the American context, I intend to design unit plans for my previous context and my simulated future ESOL population in America. It should be noted that this theory to practice framework is based on my previous experience as a learner and an EFL teacher in Algeria. It is also framed by argumentation theory and process pedagogy that I explored throughout my learning in the American context.

Theoretical overview and rationale

Formal scholarly writing requires appropriate writing techniques and sound logical layouts. ESOL and EFL learners demonstrate low proficiency in arguing and framing their claims, which impedes passing timed tests and international standard TOEFL and IELTS tests. Argumentative writing is among the most challenging tasks for ESOL students (Wei Zhu, 2001). They learn how to summarize and narrate and excel in expository prose, but building a claim, backing it with strong evidence, and exploring the reasoning or the warrant behind them can be reached through careful lesson planning, curriculum development teaching strategies. Receiving comprehensible input, using appropriate learning strategies, and fostering positive feedback are among the milestones of effective ESOL instruction. Stephen Krashen (1982), the originator of the Language Acquisition Theory, affirms that second language learners acquire the target

language by receiving comprehensible input that should be “a bit beyond the students’ current level of competence” (p. 21). Teachers, according to this hypothesis, should choose and modify the content, use level-appropriate cues, and “create the proper linguistic environment (Clark, 2003, p. 366)” for ESOL learners to foster their acquisition and learning of a language other than their first language.

Stephen Toulmin (2008) develops his strong claim in a sequence of essays to lay the foundations for a familiar argumentation model. His proposed model contains three essential components; the first is the claim. Unlike speaking jokingly, hypothetically, or frivolously, when we make a claim, we make an assertion on the other’s attention and their belief for which we seek that to be taken seriously. Unlike the traditional syllogism, which has three components, two premises, and a conclusion, Toulmin’s model consists of six segments in a scenario of challenges between a producer and a receiver. The first two segments are claims and data. The other four warrant and its backing, rebuttal, and model qualifier are the attachments or the mappings that occur between the two domains (claim and data).

Teaching the Toulmin model to ESL learners should be attuned to their level of proficiency. In this paper, his model's three core components are chosen and modified to include claims, evidence, and reasons. Zhu (2001) examined the difficulties Mexican students studying at North American universities have with argumentative writing. The results of his study revealed implications for ESOL teachers. The participants lacked proficiency in writing in this genre. They also demonstrated that they “mainly used cognitive, social, and search strategies, whereas metacognitive strategies were used infrequently” (p. 34). Greenwald (2007) used the claim-evidence-reasoning triad to equip high school students with the core components of constructing argumentative essays. She recommends designing a whole unit on argumentative

writing, testing students for understanding each segment before introducing formal high-stakes writing assignments. Her model can be adapted in ESOL contexts due to the feasibility and flexibility that it offers. Influenced by her study, I designed a teaching unit detailed under the next heading based on the modified Toulmin model that she proposed.

Barbara Walvoord (2014) suggests that learners should be taught how English and Englishes function in different discourses on different occasions. She provides ways to address ESOL learners' transition or 'code-switching' toward formal writing. Encourage register variations inside the class by allowing some informal writing in "class-preparatory writings, drafts of formal papers, and in-class or online discussion board writing" to foster fluency, Walvoord (2014) suggests. Add a "check sheet" to the assigned paper to make sure the students make enough effort to consider their readers' impressions of their writing. Walvoord (2014) also recommends adding a "log" with the paper to examine how the student worked on it. After collecting all the sheets, the instructor, to Walvoord (2014), should retain them without being read for three days. Afterward, students will be handed back those documents for revision. This strategy, she claims, teaches them "good writers' strategies" (p.79).

Grading-wise, Walvoord (2014) provides a "middle-ground" solution to ESOL instructors to ensure students get a fair and thoughtful assessment, and teachers attune their practice to target language standards. Giving students the option of submitting the paper draft to check whether it is akin to the standards rather than emotionally-harming them through failing grades is one solution to grading ESOL students. Another way is to give them a second chance to resubmit their paper. Whichever policy among these seems workable in the instructor's context should be made explicit to the learners, Walvoord (2014) concludes. In this simulated teaching

scenario, students will be instructed and assessed according to their needs and what Walvoord (2014) suggests.

Multiple-trait assessment is one of the methods, Hamp- Lyons (2009) assumes, which “builds up a scoring guide that permits a reader to respond to the salient features of the writing whether they are all at the same quality level or not” (p.349). In line with this method, Lyons emphasizes the advantages of including portfolio assessment in ESOL contexts. The portfolio assessment “method is more realistic, and in its realism appears not to penalize ESL students relative to other students as much as timed writing tests do” (p. 351). His experience with using the limited “show portfolio” at the University of Colorado helped reduce the burden on teachers to correct the full portfolio. Similarly, Elbow and Belanoff (2009) required their sample students to include “three revised papers: (a) a narrative, descriptive, or expressive piece; (b) an essay of any sort.... (c) an analysis of a prose text” (p. 97). Besides “a brief informal cover sheet” detailing their writing process and a feedback-free in-class essay. After submission, teachers meet to discuss portfolios and provide feedback on what should be considered for remedial action. In the ESOL scenario, “teachers may respond to fossilized linguistic errors in portfolios as negatively as they do them in timed essays. When teachers discuss those issues inside classes and in portfolio assessments, they work out ways to address accuracy and fluency issues and provide support for students' ideas, “macro-structural control,” and the like (p. 353).

However beneficial, portfolio assessment methods have some disadvantages and lack empirical-based studies to prove their generalizability in many ESOL contexts. Implementing this unit in the EFL Algerian context is akin to the emerging LMD system reforms, such as continuous assessment and retake exams each semester. However, teacher expertise and

administrative support should be a prerequisite to its application. Lyons (2009) claims that portfolio readings entail decisions rather than diagnostic information, and if students' self-assessment is encouraged, it needs to be recognized on larger-scale assessments. It can also make some instructors in the team uncomfortable. But the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. Portfolios offer students and teachers the opportunity to collaborate, share, and reassess their learning and teaching process. Lyons' socio-linguistic approach to assessment provides minority students the opportunities to be appreciated and judged according to their needs and aspirations and help sustain their learning process, rather than penalize them with negative grades (Lyons, 2009).

Overview of activity

In this project, I chose to design a whole unit on argumentative writing to help students build strong argumentation skills. The simulated student population that I envisioned to receive this instructional unit is advanced ESOL in the American context or the Algeria context. I assume that the students take this unit at the end of the year or the semester after mastering summarizing and note-taking. The whole unit is built on ESOL students' needs to excel in academia. When we, teachers of English as a Foreign Language, taught our students, in Algeria, how to write a position paper, we presented lectures on the importance of backing up claims in a particular discipline. We asked students to write essays on aspects of the course contents in timed examinations, but most of those students demonstrated a limited understanding of warrants or reasoning. Our students needed more sustained and prolonged exposure to effective argumentative writing instruction, and so do all types of ESOL learners.

The unit includes a preliminary diagnostic test, low-stakes assignments, and a formal high-stakes paper. Modeling is used in the form of mentor texts that students would read and

analyze. Before starting the implementation of this unit, the teacher explicitly explains to the students that they will be exploring arguments in various genres and that the first essay is a diagnostic test that should be retained as part of their portfolio assessment. In the first lesson, students will be exposed to an awareness-raising activity. The tug of war game is an engaging activity that can be easily implemented inside the classroom. So, students of all levels would be comfortable with it. Before starting the game, the teacher explains how argument is part of our daily lives. The students will be advised to avoid offensive language, respect for each other's views, euphemism, and the use of "I" instead of the directive "you." Though I assume that advanced adult learners may already be mature vis-à-vis ethical standards, some cultures conceive arguments differently.

Because this is an initial exposure to the argumentative writing activity, most of the support they will need from their peers and the teacher is accomplished inside the classroom (Walvoord, 2014). The students will discuss their paper in the school with their peers and teacher. The teacher would encourage students to correct and revise their documents inside the classroom; he would collect them and notify them that their papers would be returned after three days for final revision. This strategy aligns with what I mentioned above about ESOL multi-trait assessment and Walvoord's ESOL assessment strategies. According to Hewett et al. (2015), "Multilingual students may not be comfortable from a cultural standpoint in signaling their confusion through direct questions" (p. 299). Henceforth, the introduced technique would help them deeply understand the writing tasks. It should be noted that the implementation of the whole unit depends on the teaching context. In Algeria, a semester is five months.

As part of teaching argumentative writing to an ESOL population that I described, my assessment strategy will incorporate portfolios, as suggested by Walvoord (2014) and Lyons

(2009) above. The students will be assigned high-stakes and low-stakes writing activities throughout the semester within the argumentation framework. Most of the papers are short. The first paper will be submitted, discussed but not graded. It aligns with Walvoord's "class-preparatory writings," which encourage fluency over accuracy. Once students feel confident about their writing, their final formal paper will be graded according to the standards. Throughout building up the final argumentative essay or position paper, they should submit a "log" with their low-stakes assignments detailing how they accomplished the tasks and what kind of support they had. I would again ask the students to identify the claim, evidence, and reasoning in Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech. They would be exposed to the rhetorical triangle in the same session to show them how arguments are stylistically and rhetorically constructed. Their written work will be submitted but not corrected. Again this is a short informal paper. The previous three informal papers will be submitted, kept for three days, and returned to the students with a check sheet to help them revise their writing, as Walvoord (2014) suggests above. Group work and peer editing will be used throughout the semester. After this sequence of exposure to the professional readings, students will be encouraged to review the topics they discussed with the teachers in class to help them draft their final paper on a topic of their interest. They will be required to submit a draft and an annotated bibliography to the teacher for review before submitting the final work. All the writing that the students complete or revise will be collected and graded as part of the multi-trait assessment that Lyons (2009) suggests. Students would be required to collect their written papers and submit the revised versions for end-of-year portfolio assessment throughout the year.

Expected results

I expect my prospective students to be engaged in the unit lessons since it is thematically-based on their experiences. I also think that there might be some sensitivity and misunderstanding on the second mentor passage's contents, "Proper Sieve for Immigrants" (the two texts are included in the WebQuest that is appended to the paper) because the underlying message of the essay requires higher-levels of understanding. My task as a teacher would be mediating between their horizons and the horizon of the text. My commitment before introducing the flipped-hybrid model lesson is to ensure every student learned how to use the WebQuest individually. Students will receive sustained and detailed feedback on their first paper in-class, which is one way to create a safe and immediate feedback-based learning environment. They exchange ideas with their peers and use the checklist to self-assess. The latter build their self-efficacy as they move from one step to another. This unit is designed to establish a dialogue-supportive classroom when teachers and students meet in class. Since this is to be held in a hybrid setting, in-class sessions would provide the human to human contact that ESOL learners need to develop their speaking and listening skills.

The six-week exposure to argumentation in speaking, reading, and writing would help strengthen their four skills. I anticipate that the students will see the difference between their first written paper and their last formal essay. I expect that their self-assessment skills would be much more directed to finding a voice for their claims. Since their grades would be taken as part of a "working portfolio," students would have the chance to review their progress and show more confidence when submitting their papers. The "working portfolio" is based on students' reflections on their work during and after studying a whole unit or a curriculum. It "serves as a holding bank for students' work in progress" (ASCD 2011). Henceforth, the students would submit, review, and assess their work. Portfolios in ESL/EFL settings would sustain student

progress over six weeks. Implementing this unit design would require teacher availability for comments and individual conferencing. I expect that the teacher would devote extra efforts to this unit and mainly assess the final portfolio.

Conclusion and final reflections

In this paper intended for ESOL and EFL Algerian population, I suggested a teaching framework for learners that I had experience with five years ago. I have little knowledge of the teaching context in the States. I am designing lessons based on simulation and improvisation and the six-year experience I had in Algeria. I embody the ESL population, which is one of the strengths I had upon choosing the unit's theme and the texts.

The proposed unit plan in this paper aims at offering a sequenced teaching framework for ESOL learners. I started by contextualizing this research in my previous learning and teaching milieu but expanded the unit design to include all types of advanced ESOL learners, including my current American context. I hope that shortly I get an online ESL teacher job to implement the strategies I developed in this project. I am also hopeful that every teacher in the States and my fellows in Algeria would consider integrating some of the techniques used in this project. The CCCC Statement on Second Language Writing and Writers stipulates that L2 writers “have become part of writing course and programs” (qtd. in Matsuda & Hammill, 2014, p. 266). It indicates that multilingual learners are increasingly present in mainstream classes, which was one reason for choosing the unit's theme and mentor texts. As mentioned previously, this paper is based on theory and research within argumentation theory and the flipped-hybrid teaching model. The practical part of the article detailed the lessons that the teacher should implement. However, in the sample response, I played the student's role in answering the questions via-a-vis motivation and engagement with the teaching unit. The objectives stated in the introduction of

the paper were hypothetically reached. However, experimentation with the proposed lessons is pivotal to its generalization to other ESOL and EFL contexts.

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Appendix A

Lesson I Plan model

Grade level(s): Advanced ESL/EFL

Duration: 90 mins

Lesson Title: Introduction to Argumentative Writing

Students' Objectives:

Students will:

1. Identify arguments we live by.
2. Learn the ethical standards and the objectives of the unit.
3. Learn to organize arguments according to their strength.

Materials: White board/ markers/ post-it notes.

Abbreviations: Teacher (T), Students (Ss).

Lesson Procedures

Pre-tasks (10 mins):

Teacher explains that the previous paper was a diagnostic paper serving as an introductory output on argumentative writing.

T explains the learning objectives of the unit and the lesson.

T distributes a note on Ethical standards, which includes: avoiding the use of offensive language, respect for each other's' arguments, the use of euphemism. Use I instead of the offensive directive you.

Tasks (50 mins):

T identifies a question of truth, a controversial topic that students may have some knowledge about such as, a. what are the advantages US educational systems offer to international students, b. On the whole, is there justice for all? (source: <https://justbuyessay.com/blog/argumentative-essay-topics>).

T asks students if they have any background information about the topic.

T draws a tug of war diagram on the board

T asks students to form two groups and to move chairs and desks accordingly.

T explains that one group should gather information on the topic they agree on, and the other group does the same for the counterclaim. Students will be allowed to use the internet in their phones, PCs, or tablets to gather resource information for the topic.

Ss will write these arguments on a post-it note.

T asks students to order their arguments according to their strengths.

A group representative reads the weakest, and the teacher writes them on the ‘rope’ on the board.

T explains which argument is the strongest using the Think Out Aloud technique.

T asks students what new ideas they have about the question of truth: Is the best answer in a “gray area”—most of the time true but not always, or true half the time?

T explains to students that they should be able to write the beginning of an argumentative essay at this stage. They can state a claim and one or more supporting details.

Post-tasks (5 mins):

T informs students that they will be working on a WebQuest at their own pace before the next in-class session.

Appendix B

Lesson III Plan Model

Grade level(s): Advanced ESL/EFL

Duration: self-paced (one week)

Lesson Title: Introduction to Argumentative Writing

Internet Site Title: zunal.com

Internet Site URL: www.zunal.com/webquest.php?w=428374

Author: Sara Mechraoui

Students' objectives:

Students will

1. Identify parts of an argument (claim, reasons, and evidence) through modeling.
2. Use and consult relevant web links.
3. Watch how argument works in authentic mentor texts.
4. Transfer input from the WebQuest to their writing by writing the first informal one-page long paper.

Introduction

Greetings to all,

The art of arguing was the primary skill that ancient civilizations developed to build societies and interact with others. It is also a skill that everyone develops to make assumptions and prove them. In the previous lessons, we have been working on many types of essays. As we move toward the end of the semester, it is pivotal to grasp the essential parts of argumentative essay writing. In this WebQuest, you will go through the stages of identifying, classifying and producing an introductory argumentative essay. Note that the paper will be corrected in class.

Tasks:

This WebQuest will help you comprehend, analyze, and synthesize your argumentation writing skills. The videos and the resources provided to you in the next step of the WebQuest will assist you in identifying and understanding argument. By the end of the WebQuest, you will have the means to develop a strong claim, evidence, and supporting details. You will type your final writing in a Word document, print out a hard copy, and bring it to class in the next session.

Procedure:

1. Go here <https://college.cengage.com/english/raimes/digitalkeys/keyshtml/writin13.htm> to review definitions of claim, evidence, and reasons.
2. Next, download these PDF files. I want you to carefully read the two texts and to look at the definition of the key terms provided.
3. Watch the video (it will open in a new window) to further strengthen your understanding of argumentative writing. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eRXhLzee-3Q>
4. Go back to the two texts above and identify claim, reasons, and evidence in the two texts by filling out the chart provided here after you download it :
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1m76ytW2SyrU_V2h9LSINyEnTHje7pFBLJLH2pKn6cI/edit
5. Write a one-page long paper reflecting on how each writer defines diversity. Do you agree with what they put forward as claims, reasons, and evidence? Your essay should contain direct quotations and paraphrasing from the two texts.

Evaluation: Your primary informal writing paper will be corrected inside the class with peers and your teacher. Make sure you bring a printed copy of your essay and print out the rubric underneath to evaluate the two texts and your paper.

Conclusion: Congratulations! You now learned how to identify the core elements of an argument. Now write a comment on your experience with WebQuest and the flipped-classroom technique.