

Conceptualisation of Critical Literacy and Argumentative Writing as an Essential Tool for the Development of Dialectic Reasoning among Students

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Abstract: *Critical literacy is a skill needed for academic and intellectual achievement, lifelong learning, discourse, future job prospects and other endeavours. Although it is instrumental to developing social interactions and relationships, some students cannot think critically and contribute meaningfully to spoken/written discourse because they do not possess the necessary skills and strategies. One way of developing critical literacy is through argumentative writing. Often, some students perceive argumentative writing as a complex and complicated skill in spite of its importance to their academic and lifelong goals. This paper discusses the importance of critical literacy and explores how argumentative writing can help develop this skill to salvage this situation. The article concluded that students should be exposed to the rudiments of argumentation to become critical literates who can critically scrutinise, appraise, and interpret information for their academic and social transformation.*

Keywords: Critical literacy, critical thinking, argumentation, writing, English as Second Language.

1. Introduction

The definition of literacy has changed over the centuries due to human, cultural, and technological evolution. Literacy in contemporary society means being active, critical, and creative users of both print and spoken language (Smyth, 2011). Literacy extends beyond learning to read and write alone to include other contemporary practices that inform how individuals read, write, communicate, and access other contemporary issues that classify them as social beings. Keefe and Copeland (2011, p. 97) enumerate five core definitional principles for literacy: "All people are capable of acquiring literacy; literacy is a human right and is a fundamental part of the human experience; literacy is not a trait that resides solely in the individual person; it requires and creates a connection (relationship) with others; literacy includes communication, contact, and the expectation that interaction is possible for all individuals; literacy has the potential leading to empowerment, literacy is the collective responsibility of every individual in the community".

Deducing from the above principles, literacy is not isolated from other different practices that occur in society. This is because it equips people with critical reasoning tools that challenge and transform sociocultural practices through reflection and careful thought (Chala & Chapetón, 2012). Reflective and careful thoughts of a literate can be aired via speaking and writing practices. Writing, which is a productive skill and one of the frontiers of literacy, helps individuals express, communicate, share, and negotiate their opinions and feelings about the world. Literacy skills in the 21st century include the ability to use technology effectively and the abilities necessary to problem-solve, collaborate, and present information through multimedia. Literacy encompasses information literacy, multiliteracies, new literacy, digital literacy, and web literacy (Pilgrim & Elda, 2013). Research has revealed that literacy in Nigeria, even the sub-Saharan Africa standard, is low, but much lower is critical literacy (Ogu, 2012). Students' lack of critical literacy skills is awful and demands urgent attention in schools because social contexts for learning have changed as students are no longer consumers of information but knowledge creators (Fola-Adebayo, 2019). To this end, this paper discusses how to enhance critical literacy among students for effective dialectical reasoning through argumentative writing.

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2. Critical Literacy and Critical Thinking

Choo and Singh (2011) define critical literacy as a dynamic involvement with the information circulating around us, which demands the need to think critically. Critical literacy is connected to the act of discourse because it requires the skill to reflectively read and write through a critical eye in order to critically approach, evaluate, compare, contrast, analyse, and synthesise information. The information resides in discourses, messages, books, songs, movies, printed and visual materials etc. it is assumed that when learners are critically literate, they are able to scrutinise, appraise and interpret information critically. Therefore, critical literacy helps individuals question societal issues and norms relating to human relationships in speech and writing. Tabrizi and Rideout (2017) emphasised that the cognitive domain of Bloom's Taxonomy reiterates the necessity of critical literacy in pedagogy, especially the last three higher-order levels, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, needed for the art of critical literacy. We argue that the actualisation of these three higher-order levels in the teaching-learning situation requires critical thinking.

The use of writing is pivotal to developing critical thinking skills where the teacher "can encourage the development of dialectic reasoning by requiring students to argue both [or more] sides of an issue" (Choo & Singh, 2011). Suhartoyo (2017) identifies five criteria for effective critical thinkers and writers, namely: comprehending the ideas; reduction in assessment anxiety; monitoring the progress; preparedness to explore diverse sources and follow new alternatives; and personal interest/high curiosity.

Critical thinking is the ability to analyse, question, interpret, evaluate, critique, infer from the text or situation based on judgment (Qamar, 2016), and make thoughtful and rational decisions based on the analysis. Adeyemi (2012, p.156) explains that "we live in a world of problems – social problem, economic problem, political problem, ethnic problem, religious problem, educational problem, science and technologically related problems. He notes that it takes a sound mind, a mind imbued with reflective thinking, which can engage in deep analysis, to come up with causes of the problem at hand and generate possible solutions or options to arrive at a decision; to solve or get out of a problem". Based on this, one could then argue that critical thinking helps individuals think through ideas and knotty issues, identify disputes, weigh up presuppositions, and explore other multifarious sources of knowledge. Schafersman (1991) notes that a number of people follow authority headlong; they cannot think for themselves but rely on others to think for them. Critical thinking empowers individuals for academic achievement, lifelong learning, intellectual development, better living, future job prospects and other endeavours. Individuals who have these aforementioned traits could be functional and responsible to themselves and society at large; challenge the status quo, discover useful information; question authorities and traditional beliefs; and challenge received dogmas and doctrines.

Some researches have been carried out on critical thinking and argumentative writing. Among these are Mansoor and Pantea (2012), who examined the effect of critical thinking on developing argumentative essays by Iranian English as Foreign Language university students. The findings revealed that critical thinking never aided them to write strong argumentative essays. Aderina (2016) focused on students' strategies in implementing critical thinking when writing an argumentative essay. The findings showed that the students mostly used cognitive strategies in writing their argumentative essays. Suhartoyo (2017) investigated the importance of critical thinking competence in students' writing experiences. The study concluded that students might be good at writing an argumentative essay but becoming critical thinkers cannot be guaranteed if students have no knowledge of critical literacy. Pei et al. (2017) examined the relationship between critical thinking and argumentative writing among EFL learners in China. The study showed that undergraduate English majors in China did not possess strong critical thinking skills and therefore advocated the integration of critical thinking into EFL writing instruction.

Srinawati and Alwi (2020) worked on critical thinking ability in EFL students' argumentative essay writing. Their study found out that students who were not exposed to critical thinking instruction performed less than their mates who benefited from critical thinking instruction. Murtadho (2021) investigated metacognitive and critical thinking practices in developing EFL students' argumentative writing skills. The results showed that students' argumentative writing skills improved when exposed to metacognitive and critical thinking processes. The literature reviewed

in this paper has dealt with various concerns about critical thinking, but none focuses on the feasible means of teaching argumentative writing, which is a means that develops critical literacy.

The modern democratic society needs individuals who engage in dialectical reasoning, question the source of information, cross-check the information received by means of questioning, determine the premises and prejudices (Sünbül & Kurnaz, 2016); analyse the information; form ideas and make decisions. With the injection of Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) to every sphere of life, students should not be caught in the web of falsehood information and dogmatism that could be detrimental to their lives and development of the society, rather, they should sieve pieces of information they receive daily. Resultantly, they become critical thinkers, objective problem solvers, trailblazers and future nation builders. The present 21st-century society should not only prioritise knowledge production but also promote critical literacy as a veritable key to dialectical reasoning. Hence, we argue that critical thinking is an active process, which requires students' active intellectual engagement. Dialectical reasoning involves having divergent perceptions of a subject in a discussion, in speech and/or writing, for purposes of ascertaining the truth through reasoned argumentation. There are diverse means of inculcating the art of critical thinking in students. One of such means is the use of argumentative writing, which is exemplified below.

3. Argumentative Essay

An argumentative essay is one of the most complex forms of writing (Maleerat & Sarjit, 2014), perhaps because it confuses on a persuasive discourse. Often, reading a text and synthesising the information to make claims and warrants so the reader/writer can make inferences from the text precedes argumentative writing (Stasaitis, 2016). It requires students to argue for or against controversial topics, proposals, or thesis statements considering multiple perspectives using research, evaluative thinking, critique, and careful use of evidence to substantiate claims, in order to reasonably and logically convince others who have different perspectives of the issue discussed to accept the validity of claims. Argumentation skills are critical both in the classroom and in the real world. Perhaps, this is why Song, Deane, Graf and Rijn (2013) stated that students must learn to state their own positions, evaluate arguments, and respond to different perspectives if they are to become successful professionals and members of a democratic society.

It is observed that argumentative writing is the act of appealing to the sense of reasoning, emotions and good character of an audience using sociocultural, cognitive and linguistic perspectives. In the same vein, "argumentation is a procedure to compose an argument by looking for actual evidence to back up the claim or a thesis statement. That is "argument begins with taking a stance and giving evidence in order to convince the readers to execute the action or to accept the idea based on a controversy" (Maleerat & Sarjit, 2014 p.195). These pieces of evidence could be extracted from the texts read to back up claims. The purpose of an argumentative essay is to convince, get an adhesion, justify a way to see facts, refute interpretations about an event, or persuade the reader to change an opinion about a subject (Chala & Chapetón, 2012). Therefore, for an argument to be valid, it must be supported by reflection and careful thought; concrete evidence; appropriate diction, grammar and vocabularies; sound reasoning through the provision of analogies, facts and figures; logical reasons and reasoning and quotations from luminaries. Several factors contribute to good argumentative writing. Not only does the writer need to generate ideas but also make sure that the ideas are meaningful. Generating new ideas is not sufficient. The writer ought to arrange the scattered ideas logically in his/her mind before putting pen to paper so as to actualise a logical, sensible, smooth, well related and comprehensible argument.

Suhartoyo (2017) identifies eight elements that teachers need to consider when designing a scoring rubric for argumentative writing: introduction and thesis statement; development; refutation; conclusion; organisation; grammar; vocabulary; mechanics. Anak (2019) explains that a good piece of argument has six components: claim [C]: the statement of the thesis, data [D]: the evidence providing proof for C, warrant [W]: the principle that bridges D to C implicitly/explicitly, proving the legitimacy of D, qualifiers [Q]: the linguistic cues that show the strength of the C, D or W, backing [B]: further support for W and rebuttal [R]: response to the anticipated objections against the arguments. Anak (2019) further notes that an argumentative essay could be in different forms. The first is a one-sided style (proside) which discusses one point of view in an essay. The second

one is clustering style (contra-side), where one body paragraph talks about the opposing argument while the other three body paragraphs focus on the pro side. The third one is the alternating style, where the body of each paragraph has one contra argument, and it is rebutted by pro argument. The fourth and last one is the combination style. Introduction, body and conclusion are essential parts of an argumentative essay. The thesis statement or claim is embedded in the introduction while supports, warrants, backings and rebuttals are in the body. Summation and final evocative thoughts are in the concluding part.

Of all types of essays, the argumentative essay seems to be complex and challenging to teach because it demands sophisticated cognitive and linguistic abilities (Song et al., 2013; Maleerat & Sarjit, 2014; Peloghitis, 2017). Despite the key role of argumentation to academic excellence, societal deliberations and general life issues, students at various levels of education, especially tertiary level, are incapable of writing good argumentative essays. Although engaging in argumentative writing is a common phenomenon in tertiary institutions, students are expected to propose a convincing thesis statement, argue for their standpoints and compile evidence to support the claim in a persuasive approach. Song et al. (2013) assert that argumentation is a skill that many students currently lack, which leaves them ill-prepared for college and careers.

Hence, to write a good piece of argumentative writing is often difficult for English as Foreign Language/English as Second Language students because of issues such as teachers' focus on the basics of composition with little emphasis on argumentation (Hillocks, 2002). Students' inability to understand the attributes of a good essay such as coherence, topic sentence, unity and grammatical accuracy affect their performance in English communicative and linguistic abilities. Setyowati et al. (2017) note that EFL learners are faced with two major problems when asked to write in English - what to write and how to start. The "What to write" problem deals with how to generate ideas, whereas the second one deals with how to start writing a composition. Ezeokoli and Igubor (2016) posit that students' argumentative essays rarely concede opposing positions, consider the merits of different views, or attempt to systematically incorporate or refute alternative views. This may be due, perhaps, to the neglect of the teaching of argumentative writing.

A study by Maleerat and Sarjit (2015) reveals that consistent barriers to writing argumentative essays in tertiary institutions are students' inability to produce a clear thesis statement because of unfamiliarity with the genre; insufficient knowledge of grammatical structure, lexical and argumentative features; inability to organise ideas and produce concrete evidence to write a well-organised essay. Aderina (2016) asserts that ESL and EFL face lots of difficulties such as lack of proficiency in skills that inform coherence and cohesion of the writing; inability to organise, plan, write and edit their essays; inappropriate knowledge of the presentation of clear ideas and persuasion to drive home the ideas. Students who are versed in grammar use might lack sufficient knowledge of generating ideas, outlining the ideas, and passing their ideas. Wrong use of cohesive devices in connecting sentences and paragraphs may obstruct the free flow and easy comprehension of ideas. Construction of thesis statements, arguments and supporting details may be problematic as well. Forming and organising a coherent paragraph using appropriate, cohesive devices mitigate problems in argumentative essay writing. Improper use of arguments, counter-arguments, or supportive statements may result in confusion and the mix up of ideas (Lam et al., 2017). These problems have deeply affected students' writing competence in general and, specifically, writing academic arguments.

Therefore, diagnosing students' weak points in argumentative essay writing would give clues on how to address these weaknesses. The weaknesses could be students' inability to read, interpret what they read, create ideas, express their ideas, arrange them, and convincingly analyse ideas generated using critical thinking skills. Suppose students read easily and comprehend well but find generating, arranging and analysing ideas complex. In that case, the teacher could check if these students understand text organisation and underlying structure of particular essay types and use appropriate teaching/learning strategies to remedy these difficulties. Therefore, teaching text organisation and the underlying structure of argumentation can aid students' knowledge of argumentative essays. Hence, the need to explore strategies that could improve students' argumentative writing abilities, especially at tertiary level.

3.1 Effective Strategies for Argumentative Essay

There are five phases for a successful conversational engagement in an argumentation cycle. ESL students can proceed anywhere in the argumentation cycle and tilt in any direction between parts of the process.

“1) understand the stakes: to make effective appeals in an argument, students must understand the stakes, which involves thinking about the context and the target audience. 2) explore the subject: to have a meaningful conversation about a topic, students must understand it. Shallow knowledge leads to ineffective argumentation. 3) consider positions: to play a role in an argumentative dialogue, students must take a position and consider the positions others have presented. 4) create and evaluate arguments: Students must present plausible reasons and evidence and address counter-arguments to defend a position. They should also evaluate the arguments to identify unwarranted assumptions that could undermine the logic. 5) organise and present arguments: to join the discussion, a student must frame his or her own case, and consider how to structure and present each argument” (Song et al., 2013 p.2).

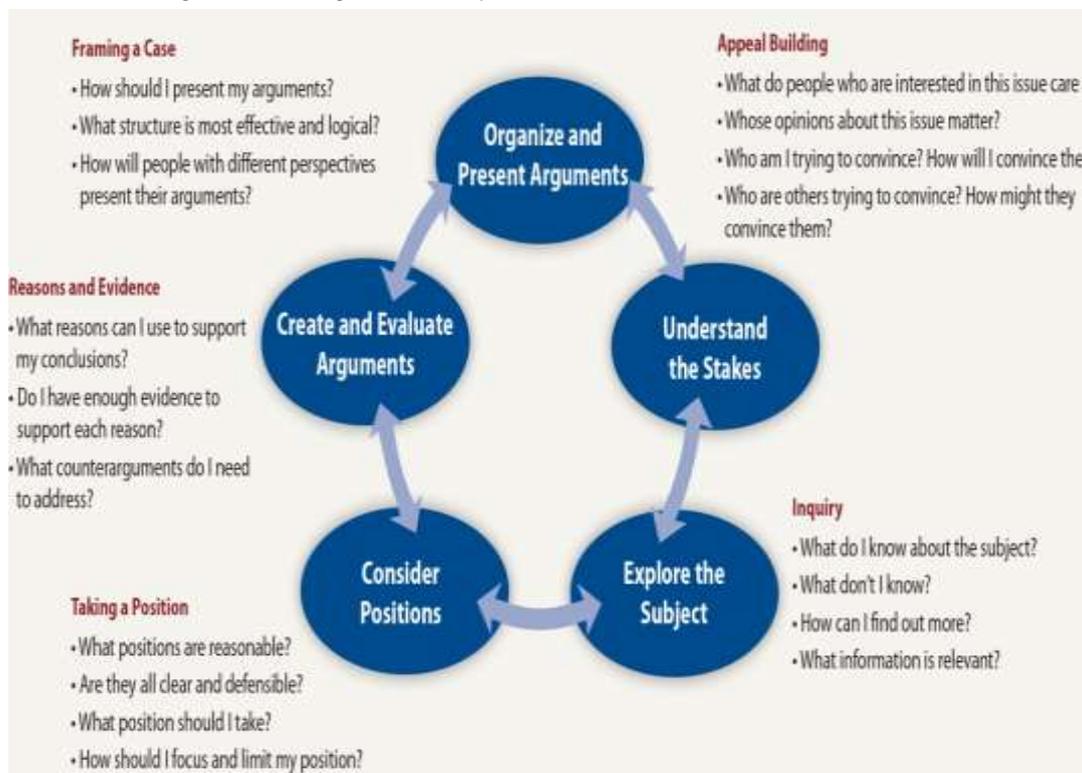


Figure 1. Five phases of participating in argumentative discourse, adopted from Song et al. (2013).

In another development, Basic Education (nd, p. 7) states that the following should be considered when writing an argumentative essay: “the essay should start with the writer’s view of the topic in an original and striking way; the writer should give a range of arguments to support and substantiate his or her view; the writer focuses on points for or against a statement; an argumentative essay can be subjective and strong opinions are expressed, a variety of rhetorical devices and persuasive techniques should be used; the language used is emotive and can be emotional but should not be rude; the conclusion should be a strong, clear and convincing statement of the writer’s opinion”.

Students at every level of education can engage in argumentation, but there are observable differences and expectations in the standards of argumentation at each level. Clayton (2014) discusses these expectations which could be adapted to any educational system of any country:

- Opinions are expressed through a combination of dictation, writing and drawing at kindergarten.
- Opinion pieces are written at the point of introducing topics or texts of discussion, thereafter, opinions are stated, reasons for the opinions are given, and some sense of closure are provided at first and second grade. Second-grade students employ transition words to link their views and reasons for their views.
- Third to fifth level students have their opinion pieces written on books or topics of discussion and organisational structure for their evidence. Fifth-grade students are required to present their claims logically, improve on their use of linkers and include a concluding statement.
- Students in sixth to eighth grade no longer employ opinion pieces but argument pieces. Logically organised reasons and evidence from reliable sources are included in the arguments to support their claims. At this level, arguments are made on both sides for better comprehension of the relationship that exists between claims and counterclaims in their writing. Also, a concluding section that aligns with the argument is presented.
- There is a progression of knowledge in the use of counterclaims in argumentative writing as students move through middle school and high school. Acknowledgement of opposing claims, development of claims and counterclaims by providing proof for each and recognition of the strengths and limitations of both claims and counterclaims are expected at this level.

Argumentation is made interesting, easy and participatory when students have been availed the opportunity to engage in oral argumentation prior to written arguments. The teacher serves as the facilitator who kick-starts classroom discourse in the form of dialogue. Students, through this means, shape their own thinking when they listen objectively to other's ideas and reach a common understanding of the topic discussed. Clayton (2014) offered some strategies that could help teachers develop students' conversation skills as a precursor to argument writing in the classroom. Teachers could invite students to shape the classroom culture for argumentation; argue issues that are authentic and debatable; prepare with high quality questions; require students to use data and research to substantiate their claims; let students' thinking drive and shape the discussion; use talk moves to model the facilitation of the discussion; and provide a summary and closure.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Little is known about how non-native speakers develop their academic writing skills and gain access to the discourse community for which they are being prepared to join in their future careers (Almelhi, 2014). However, ESL learners ought to be exposed to argumentative writing, which is one of the means of sharpening, shaping and directing the course of students' critical literacy and dialectical reasoning. Argumentative writing is a stepping-stone to students' academic performance, the actualisation of dreams to become successful professionals and acceptable members of a democratic society. It is a skill needed for the formulation of ideas, problem-solving, critical reasoning and making sound judgments. At every stage of education, argumentation progresses longitudinally. It is expedient that students are exposed to the rudiments of argumentation in order to know how to take a stand on controversial issues and support their claims with relevant and multiple sources of evidence that are considered valid so as to change people's opinion about a subject. Argumentative skills can be developed through high-quality classroom conversations using learner-friendly strategies. To this end, English language teachers should not only place a premium on the language proficiency of students alone but also see the need to incorporate critical literacy into teaching/learning situations for effective dialectic reasoning. Students engage in dialectic reasoning in their day-to-day activities; therefore, it must be given the necessary attention it deserves. Dialectic reasoning reflects when students discuss their ideas with their mates or teachers; participate in dramatic acts; make use of their thinking caps in different situations; hear out the thoughts of others and make sense of it; explain their ideas in a comprehensible manner; put themselves in the position of others and guess reasonably from the assumptions of others.

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