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EMPOWERING EFL STUDENTS THROUGH ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING: A PATH TO CRITICAL LITERACY IN ENGLISH EDUCATION

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Abstract: In many EFL classrooms, students struggle to express complex ideas in English beyond basic conversation. This paper argues that argumentative writing can serve as a strategic bridge between language development and critical engagement. Drawing from descriptive classroom analysis and practical teaching experience, the study explores how writing structured arguments supports learners in constructing logical reasoning, defending perspectives, and interacting with diverse viewpoints. Through consistent practice, students not only build linguistic fluency but also develop habits of reflection and independent thought. The study highlights that integrating argumentative writing into EFL instruction enhances learners' academic readiness and critical literacy. Implications for teaching practice and curriculum development are discussed based on field observations and theoretical grounding.

Keywords: argumentative writing; EFL learners; critical thinking; literacy development; classroom practice

INTRODUCTION

In today's rapidly changing world, where information spreads instantly and opinions circulate widely, the ability to think critically and express ideas in writing is an essential skill for university students. Within English language education, particularly in EFL contexts, argumentative writing holds a central position. It not only develops students' linguistic competence but also strengthens their capacity for independent thought and reasoned judgment. Unlike narrative or descriptive writing, argumentative writing requires them to take a stance, support claims with evidence, and respond to counterarguments. In this way, it demands not only language accuracy but also intellectual engagement and critical awareness.

For EFL students, argumentative writing provides more than a chance to practice grammar and vocabulary. It creates space for them to develop a personal voice, clarify opinions, and construct logical arguments. Through this process, they engage with real-world issues such as environmental challenges or social debates and learn to connect classroom learning with broader social contexts. This reflects how argumentative writing can nurture *critical literacy,* which is the ability to question information, evaluate perspectives, and make informed judgments.

Despite these benefits, the practice of argumentative writing is still limited in many English classrooms. Learners often struggle to organize ideas, use evidence effectively, or disagree respectfully. Teachers, on the other hand, face curricular constraints, large class sizes, and limited time for in-depth writing instruction. As a result, writing tasks tend to focus more on form and accuracy than on developing critical literacy.

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Previous studies such as Bailey (2018) and Graff & Birkenstein (2021) have highlighted the strong links between argument-based instruction and students' cognitive as well as communicative growth. However, few studies have examined how EFL writing instruction can be designed to explicitly foster critical literacy skills. This gap which is between the acknowledged importance of argumentative writing and its limited pedagogical implementation underlines the need for more practice-oriented approaches.

This article seeks to address that gap by exploring how structured argumentative writing tasks can be meaningfully integrated into EFL classrooms. Drawing on both pedagogical theory and teaching experience, it offers insights for teachers on fostering critical literacy and supporting students to write with clarity, confidence, and purpose.

METHOD

This study employs a descriptive-analytic design. This is suitable for this article because the purpose is not to test a hypothesis but to provide an in-depth account of how argumentative writing practices emerge in the EFL classroom. Such a design makes it possible to describe patterns of EFL student performance while also analyzing them against established theories of writing pedagogy.

The data were drawn from classroom observations and teaching documentation collected over four semesters of undergraduate writing courses. A total of 68 EFL students participated across these courses, with class sizes ranging from 15 to 20 students. Observations focused on EFL students' written drafts, peer feedback sessions, and classroom discussions about argumentative texts. Field notes were taken during lessons, and selected student essays were archived to trace recurring challenges and strategies.

The Toulmin model requiring claim, data, warrant, backing, qualifier, rebuttal served as the primary analytical framework. It was introduced to EFL students as a guide for structuring arguments. For example, when writing about environmental issues, they were asked to state a claim like "*Plastic waste should be reduced*", support it with data in terms of statistics from reliable sources, and provide warrants which are logical connections between claim and evidence. In class discussions and writing workshops, the lecturer highlighted how rebuttals and qualifiers could strengthen their reasoning. These applications of the Toulmin model were then examined to see how they engaged with its components and where difficulties emerged.

By integrating literature-based perspectives with systematic classroom observations, the method provides a comprehensive understanding of both the challenges that the students face and the pedagogical strategies that can support the development of argumentative writing and critical literacy in EFL contexts.

FINDING

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The integration of argumentative writing into EFL classrooms reveals several interrelated areas that shape both teaching practices and student learning outcomes. These findings are drawn from classroom observations, reflective teaching journals, and analysis of 68 EFL student essays collected across four semesters. Scores presented in the bar graph (Figure 1) were based on a rubric assessing six domains. They are (1) critical thinking, (2) language development, (3) structure and coherence, (4) engagement and motivation, (5) assessment and feedback, and (6) addressing challenges. Each domain was rated on a 1–10 scale according to the EFL student performance and teaching reflections.

Development of Critical Thinking

One of the most consistent patterns observed was the close link between argumentative writing and the development of critical thinking. As the EFL students learned to construct and defend a position, they were encouraged to question assumptions, evaluate perspectives, and provide logical reasoning. This aligns with Graff and Birkenstein's (2021) claim that argument-based instruction cultivates intellectual engagement.

For example, an early draft on environmental issues read *"Plastic waste is bad for the environment, so people must reduce it."* After guided instruction using the Toulmin model, the revision became *"Plastic waste should be reduced because it causes serious ocean pollution. According to WWF (2020), about 8 million tons of plastic enter the sea every year. Although plastic is useful for daily life, its long-term impact on marine ecosystems is more dangerous than its convenience."* This shift illustrates how scaffolding can move the EFL students from unsupported opinions to evidence-based reasoning.

Structure and Coherence

Another area of growth involved the EFL students' grasp of structure. When explicitly taught thesis construction, topic sentences, and transitions, they showed progress in organizing their essays. Hyland (2019) emphasizes the importance of coherence for persuasive writing, and this was confirmed in classroom observations.

A notable improvement was observed in the EFL students' ability to create more coherent and connected arguments. For example, an initial draft simply stated, *"Technology is good. Students like it. It helps learning."* This fragmented expression showed limited cohesion and failed to explain why technology supports learning. After explicit instruction on thesis building and transitions, the revision became more sophisticated, *"Technology enhances learning because it gives students access to wider information sources and interactive tools. This benefit, however, requires guidance to prevent distraction."* The revised version demonstrates a clearer argument and logical flow, linking advantages with a cautionary note. Still, not all of the EFL students achieved this level of coherence. Some produced essays with strong introductions but weakly connected body paragraphs, suggesting a need for sustained practice and repeated scaffolding.

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Challenges in Evidence and Counterarguments

Despite progress, challenges were evident. Many students struggled to support claims with relevant evidence or to respond to counterarguments effectively. Bailey (2018) notes that without explicit guidance, EFL learners tend to rely on formulaic expressions, a pattern seen here as well.

Examples of these challenges can be seen in the EFL students' drafts. One student wrote, *"Homework is not good because it makes students tired. Teachers should not give homework,"* a statement that expresses a clear opinion but provides no supporting evidence. Another student attempted to include a counterargument by stating, *"Some people say social media is good for students because it gives information. But too much social media is not good because students can forget their study."* While this shows some awareness of opposing views, the rebuttal remains weak and lacks credible support. Taken together, such excerpts illustrate that although the EFL students were able to state positions, their higher-order reasoning skills, particularly in constructing rebuttals and evaluating evidence, were still underdeveloped.

Engagement and Motivation

The EFL student engagement increased noticeably when writing tasks were connected to real-world issues. Topics such as gender equality or online learning often generated more thoughtful and reflective responses from students. For example, one student wrote, *"Education is not only a process to transfer knowledge but also to shape the character of young generation who can think critically and solve problems."* This illustrates how meaningful topics encouraged the EFL students to go beyond surface-level opinions and articulate more complex ideas. Such connections suggest that when classroom writing tasks are grounded in issues relevant to the EFL students' lives, they not only enhance engagement but also foster critical literacy by linking academic practice with personal and social realities.

Feedback and Assessment

Continuous formative feedback helped students revise more effectively. Rubrics emphasizing reasoning and organization clarified expectations. As one student noted in reflection, *"I can understand better what is missing when teacher shows me the rubric."* This echoes Hyland's (2019) argument that clear assessment criteria enhance writing development.

Figure 1. Impact of Argumentative Writing Across Key Instructional Domains

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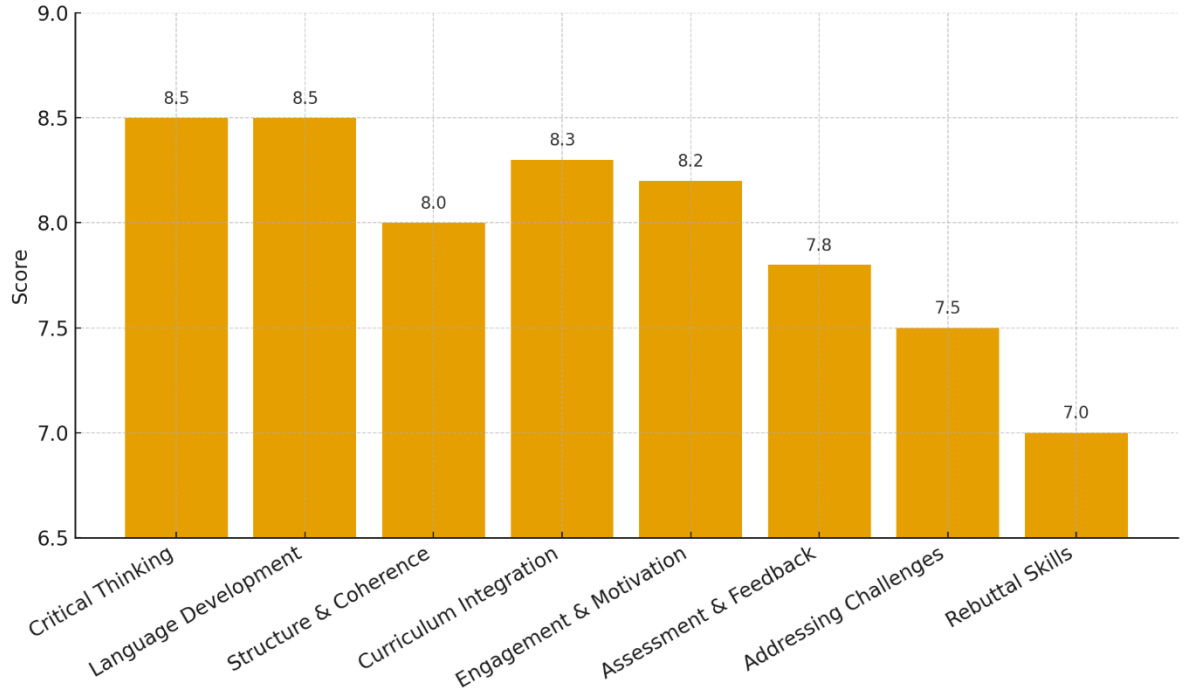

The bar graph summarizes rubric-based scores across six domains. Critical Thinking (8.5) and Language Development (8.5) were the strongest areas, indicating that argumentative writing sharpened reasoning while improving vocabulary and grammar. Structure and Coherence (8.0) also scored high, affirming the value of explicit instruction.

Engagement and Motivation (8.2) reflected the positive impact of real-world topics, while Curriculum Integration (8.3) highlighted the benefits of sustained exposure across levels. Assessment and Feedback (7.8) showed steady but improvable results. The lowest-scoring domain, Addressing Challenges (7.5), revealed persistent weaknesses in thesis formulation, evidence selection, and counterargumentation—areas requiring more scaffolding.

Balanced Perspective

Taken together, these findings present a dual picture. On one hand, argumentative writing enhances critical literacy, strengthens linguistic competence, and increases student engagement. On the other hand, recurring difficulties in evidence use, rebuttals, and referencing show that benefits are not automatic. Effective integration requires careful design, scaffolding, and explicit teaching strategies. Thus, while argument-based instruction holds strong pedagogical promise, it must be balanced with realistic recognition of challenges in EFL classrooms.

Student Writing with Strengths and Weaknesses

Several excerpts from students' essays highlight both strengths and areas for improvement in their argumentative writing. For instance, one student wrote, *"Homework is not good because it makes students tired. Teachers should not give homework."* This sentence shows the ability to

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state a clear position, but it lacks supporting evidence and remains overly general. Another example demonstrates an attempt at rebuttal: *"Some people say social media is good for students because it gives information. But too much social media is not good because students can forget their study."* Here, the student shows awareness of opposing views, yet the rebuttal is weak and the reasoning vague. A more advanced excerpt reads, *"Education is not only a process to transfer knowledge but also to shape the character of young generation who can think critically and solve problems."* While this reflects a strong thematic focus and awareness of broader social purposes, it still suffers from limited supporting evidence and a lack of concrete examples. These samples suggest that while students are developing essential argumentative skills such as stating positions and acknowledging counterarguments, they require further scaffolding to strengthen evidence use, coherence, and critical engagement.

Table 1. Examples of Student Writing with Strengths and Weaknesses

Student Excerpt	Strength	Weakness
"Plastic waste should be reduced because it causes serious ocean pollution. According to WWF (2020), about 8 million tons of plastic enter the sea every year. Although plastic is useful for daily life, its long-term impact on marine ecosystems is more dangerous than its convenience."	Clear thesis, use of evidence, attempt at rebuttal	Needs smoother connection between evidence and rebuttal
"Homework is not good because it makes students tired. Teachers should not give homework."	Clear stance, simple and direct	Lacks evidence, oversimplified reasoning.
"Some people say social media is good for students because it gives information. But too much social media is not good because students can forget their study."	Awareness of counterargument	Rebuttal is weak, lacks credible support
"Education is not only a process to transfer knowledge but also to shape the character of young generation who can think critically and solve problem."	Advanced vocabulary, attempt at complex sentence structure	Grammatical errors, vague generalization
"I believe online learning is effective because many students can study in their home. Research says online learning is popular now."	Clear claim, relevant topic	Weak citation ("Research says"), poor academic referencing.

CONCLUSION

The integration of argumentative writing into EFL instruction offers far-reaching benefits that extend beyond language proficiency. When students are guided to engage with real-world issues through structured argumentation, they begin to develop habits of critical inquiry, clarity of

expression, and intellectual independence in which the skills that are essential for academic success and civic participation. Far from being a peripheral exercise, argumentative writing deserves a central place in English education, where it can function as both a linguistic and cognitive tool.

For educators and curriculum designers, this calls for a shift in perspective: argumentative writing should not be treated as a one-time unit, but rather as a recurring, scaffolded practice embedded across levels of instruction. Its long-term impact depends on thoughtful implementation, consistent reinforcement, and adaptation to learners' needs. As classroom practices evolve, continued reflection and inquiry into the pedagogy of writing will be key to sustaining its relevance and effectiveness.

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