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The effect of peer talk on the two-sided argumentation essays of freshman college students: A descriptive analysis

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the effects of prewriting discussions on the two-sided argumentative essays of freshman college students by examining their essays under the conditions of peer talk prewriting discussions and comparing the quality of their work to those students who had no peer discussions before drafting their essays. The papers were given a) holistic scores using Knudson's (1992) scoring system for argumentation essays and b) primary-trait scores based on Toulmin's (1958) modified model/criteria of argument. Based on their holistic scores, the essays of students who had no discussion prior to actual writing revealed excellent and outstanding level of argumentation skills compared to their counterparts. When analyzed using the primary-trait scoring rubric, essays of both groups demonstrated the same characteristics or strengths in their arguments, except in their systematic identification of counter-arguments. Findings of this present investigation seem to favor non-engagement of students in peer talk/discussions if holistic scoring will be used to score their essays. Peer talk did not seem to heighten the awareness of the students to explicitly state their position and to support it by explicitly identifying their arguments in favor of their chosen side. This paper also suggests various ways to address these issues.

Key words: argumentation essays, peer talk, prewriting discussion, writing

1. INTRODUCTION

The growing evidence suggesting the difficulty encountered by students in writing argumentative essays (Knudson, 1991) affected other research analyzing the causes of the problem and proposing ways to address it (Felton & Herko, 2004; Gowhurst, 1988; Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1982; Regala-Flores, 2007). One of the proposed techniques was to adopt the "conversation-to-composition model" by Bereiter & Scardamalia, (1982 in Knudson, 1991, p. 173) because "conversation is the starting place for writing or the context for exploring the structure of persuasive argument" (Felton & Herko, 2004, p. 674). Despite its growing popularity among teachers, not much had been written about the effect of prewriting discussions on the quality of students' compositions. Shi (1998) argued that the few studies that examined its effect have suggested students write better after talking about a topic (Bossio, 1993; Kennedy, 1983; Sweigart, 1991); produce various positive effects in different writing tasks (Meyer, 1980 in Shi, 1998); and contribute to students' better understanding of the complexity of topics, especially with peer groups (Sweigart, 1991). Mason (2001) posited that in a science classroom

setting, collaborative learning on different beliefs and ideas of science concepts as well as individual writing to express, clarify, reflect and reason on, and communicate own conceptions and explanations are fruitful tools in the knowledge revision process. In an environment where talking and writing were interrelated, students had more chances of learning than does talking or writing alone (Dysthe, 1996 in Mason, 2001). However, mixed or conflicting results also abound with regard to the effect of prewriting discussions on the students' papers. In a study conducted by Shi (1998) involving 47 adult ESL students who wrote their opinion essays written under conditions of peer discussion, teacher-led discussion, and no discussion, "showed no statistically significant differences except for the fact that students were found to write longer drafts in the condition of no discussion, shorter drafts after teacher-led talk, and drafts with a greater variety of verbs after peer talk" (p. 319).

Given these mixed results and the pedagogical implications of this issue in L2 contexts, I am interested to know whether prewriting discussions would yield good quality writing outputs among college students.

With an aim to determine the effects of prewriting discussions on the two-sided



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argumentative essays of freshman college students, the present study examined students' writing under the conditions of peer talk prewriting discussions, comparing the quality of their work to those students who had no peer discussions before drafting their essays. The present study aimed to identify the role of talking in composing so as to gain insights into ESL teaching and learning practices.

The following questions are specifically addressed:

1. Are there differences in the demonstrated argumentation skills between the two groups?
2. Is students' writing more effective after peer talk or no discussion?
3. What is the role of peer talk in the composing processes of L2 learners?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Participants

One hundred-twenty freshman college students enrolled in English One course from the College of Education, pursuing a Bachelor's Degree in Educational Psychology and Secondary English Language Teaching were purposively selected to participate in this study. Sixty students were identified for the control group or No Discussion Group, (henceforth, NDG) and 60 students composed the experimental group or the With Discussion Group (henceforth, WDG).

The other teacher who taught the experimental class (WDG) was an experienced teacher, had an extensive language teaching for more than 30 years, and currently pursuing a doctorate degree in applied linguistics from the same institution. She had been teaching in the same university for five years now.

To ensure reliability and validity in rating the students' essays, three inter raters assessed the students' essays. Two were part-time faculty members of the Department and has been teaching English One for at least three years. The researcher was the third inter-rater.

2.2 Procedure

Following the stages of the process approach to writing, students were asked to write argumentation essays. These essays were part of the major requirements of the said course. Students wrote these essays in the classrooms in response to the standard writing prompt used by the faculty of the Department. The process approach was used—that is, they were asked to

brainstorm, gather data, outline, write first drafts, undergo peer editing, write second drafts, undergo teacher conferencing/editing (conferencing may be done anytime when necessary), and write final drafts. Note, however, that in the control group the no peer talk / discussion was followed, i.e., students went through the writing process individually without any opportunities to discuss with their peers. This writing process lasted for two weeks for both groups.

The students wrote their argumentative essays as a response to the following writing prompts:

Write an argumentation essay on your preferred medium of instruction for Philippine schools (both grade school and high schools) giving at least three arguments to support your stance / position. Provide evidence for each argument and refute one counterargument.

2.3 Scoring

The student papers were given (a) holistic scores using a replication of the rubric formulated by Knudson (1992) and (b) primary-trait scores that was a modification of Toulmin's criteria. Studies show that holistic scoring provides little, if any, information that is useful in descriptive assessment because it does not provide information as to why a paper is assigned a particular score (Faigley, Cherry, Jolliffe, & Skinner, 1985, in Knudson, 1998). On the other hand, primary-trait scoring is descriptive because it furnishes information as to why a paper is assigned a particular score (Lloyd-Jones, 1977; Faigley et al, 1985 in Knudson, 1998). Primary-trait scoring uses criteria that can be designed or developed for each writing task.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data are presented using frequency and percentage distribution and mean and standard deviation for both the holistic scoring and primary-trait scoring. The answers to research questions 1 and 2 are found in the following sections.



Table 1
Frequency and Percentage Distribution of the No Discussion Groups' Argumentative Essays based on Holistic Scoring

Scores	<i>f</i>	%
6	25	41.67
5	22	36.67
4	11	18.33
3	2	3.33
2	0	0.00
1	0	0.00
Total	60	100

Table 2
Frequency and Percentage Distribution of the With Discussion Groups' Argumentative Essays based on Holistic Scoring

Scores	<i>f</i>	%
6	5	8.33
5	22	36.67
4	20	33.33
3	13	21.67
2	0	00.00
1	0	00.00
Total	60	100

Table 1 and 2 show the most common holistic scores of the two groups' argumentative essays. As can be seen, majority of the sampled essays of the NDG or the group with no peer discussion (47 out of 60 or 78.34%) received the scores of 6 and 5 (25 out of 60 or 41.67% and 22 out of 60 or 36.67%, respectively) while those of the WDG or the group that had peer discussions (42 out of 60 or 70%) received the scores of 5 and 4 (22 and 20 out of 60 or 36.67% and 33.33%, respectively) indicating that there are significant differences in the argumentation skills of these students.

Almost 80% of the students from the NDG seem to have no difficulty with written argumentation, implying that when analyzed, their papers addressed the topic, stated and elaborated the arguments, and exhibited logical thought.

These papers also responded to the task with developed and substantiated reasons/appeals, and functioned as a unified piece of persuasion.

A score of 6 is characterized by excellent organization/fluency, effective word choice, and elaborate multiple points of view.

Students from NDG mostly got a holistic score of 6 demonstrating that their papers are

outstanding. The students' proficiency in writing argumentation papers may be attributed to the extensive and varied class discussion / activities provided prior to writing about the issue or topic reinforced by the individual's effort to research and read on the topic, confirming what was suggested in the previous study that extensive discussion in class can probably be provided to give them sufficient information (Meyer, 1980; Regala-Regala, 2007). Note, however, that these discussions involved the entire class facilitated by the teacher, rather than peer talk / discussion.

Compared to the first group, 70% of the students in the second group (i.e., those who had peer discussion prior to actual, individual writing) seem to point to the fact that they had some degree of difficulty with written argumentation. Table 2 shows that 27 out of 60 of the sampled papers received scores of 5 and 4 which means that when evaluated these students demonstrated between very good and good attempts at developing a persuasive argument. A holistic score of 4 indicates that these papers contain arguments that are moderately well developed and supported, and may state or develop the opposite point of view.

Papers that contained several reasons to convince the audience of a point of view but have no apparent organizational strategy and had responses that are only somewhat elaborated but are organized characterize a score-point of 4.

The finding that peer talk / discussions versus its absence prior to writing had very discernible effect on the scores of students' writing is both comparable and contrary to reviewed research findings. Indeed, other studies have shown evidence that talking before writing is effective in terms of better holistic scores (Felton & Herko, 2004; Mason, 2001; Bossio, 1993; Kennedy, 1983; Meyer, 1980; Sweigart, 1991 in Shi, 1998). The contrasting finding in Shi's (1998) research is itself notable. She argued that "although peer talk / discussions might have an effect on students' writing, the talking effect might not necessarily have an immediate influence as students wrote their first drafts" (p. 332). She attributed this to the fact that the time allocated to accomplish the task might be responsible for the high scores in students' writing and implied that "the positive results of previous studies may have been spurious because they allocated more time to the overall task in comparison to the write-only condition" (p. 332).

However, the present study reveals that despite the absence of peer talk prior to writing, essays of NGD students seem to be of better



quality than those of WDG. What I can surmise at this point that will account for such phenomenon is the quality of the discussion engaged in by the students. It is most likely that when left on their own, students seem not to expend the same amount of effort and intelligibility or depth compared to teacher-led or class discussions. It could also be attributed to the students' lack of knowledge or familiarity with the selected topic despite the class discussions. Asking the students to engage in simple research or gathering of data can address this lack of knowledge. We can also look into the possibility that students may not have taken this writing assignment seriously owing to the fact that this was written a few days before the term ends.

The primary-trait scoring, based on the modified Toulmin's criteria, specified that each paper be evaluated according to each of four features: Arguments, Evidence, Counter-Arguments, and Refutation. Scores ranged from 1 (low) to 7 (high) for arguments and evidence while scores for counter-arguments and refutation ranged from 1 (low) to 4 (high). Summed scores of the three raters ranged from 3 to 21 for the arguments and evidence and from 3 to 12 for the counter-arguments and refutation. Analyzing the papers using the primary-trait scoring points to the specific demonstration or characteristics of skills among the students rated.

Table 3
Frequency and Percentage Distribution of the No Discussion Group for Arguments and Evidence based on Primary-Trait Scoring

Ratings	Arguments		Evidence	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
7	26	43.33	16	26.67
5	30	65.00	42	70.00
3	4	6.67	2	3.33
1	0	0	0	0.00
Total	60	100	60	100

Table 4
Frequency and Percentage Distribution of the With Discussion Group for Arguments and Evidence based on Primary-Trait Scoring

Ratings	Arguments		Evidence	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
7	6	10.00	2	3.33
5	41	68.33	39	65.00
3	13	21.67	5	8.33
1	0	0	0	0.00
Total	60	100	60	100

Table 3 and 4 show the frequency and percentage distribution for the specific features of the two groups' primary trait scoring, particularly argument and evidence. Based on the results, students from both groups (65% from the NDG and almost 70% from the WDG) would require readers to infer their intent or argument from the information provided. However, enough information is given so that generalizations are related to the proposition or topic.

Also worth mentioning is the fact that almost 45% of the student papers from the No Discussion group received a rating of 7 which indicates that the writers' generalization are clearly and completely stated. This shows that the ability of the NDG to express their arguments is significantly higher than their counterparts from the WDG.

Since almost 78% of the students do not clearly state their argument, they cannot give complete evidence to support it. Thus, the reader must infer much from the data. This lack of support for the claims in the sampled papers may be due to the fact that students rely only on what they know about the topic since they are not really required to do extensive research in their English classes.

Table 5.
Frequency and Percentage Distribution for Counter-arguments and Refutations of the No Discussion Group Based on Primary-Trait Scoring

Ratings	Counter-arguments		Refutations/Response to Oppositions	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
4	31	51.67	32	57
3	19	31.67	17	26
2	9	15.00	9	13
1	1	1.67	2	4
Total	60	100	60	100



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Table 6
Frequency and Percentage Distribution for Counter-arguments and Refutations of the With Discussion Group Based on Primary-Trait Scoring

Ratings	Counter-arguments		Refutations/Response to Oppositions	
	f	%	f	%
4	13	16.25	12	20
3	29	36.25	27	45
2	11	13.75	14	23.33
1	7	8.75	7	11.67
Total	60	100	60	100

Frequency and percentage distribution for counter-arguments and refutations for the two groups are shown in Table 5 and 6. Interestingly, the data indicate that almost 52% (31 out of 60) of the writers from the NDG have systematically identified the counter-arguments and have strongly refuted them.

Those who had peer talk / discussion prior to writing (36% or 29 out of 60 students), on the other hand, offered some vague opposition in their essays, requiring the readers to provide the link between the vague counter-argument and their refutation.

It is no surprise then that they are relatively weak in the use of refutation, since they do not state specific opposing views.

That the students' difficulty, particularly from the WDG, in identifying the opposing views and offering a refutation may be attributed to the limitations of their knowledge about the issue. It may also be possible that they were aware of the opposing views while they were engaged in the peer discussion and having addressed these in their discussions, they may perhaps not realized that they still had to mention, elaborate on, and refute in writing these opposing views when they begin to write. In the previous study (Regala-Flores, 2007), it was noted that the general instructions in the writing prompts could have been a factor why this skill was not evident in the students' sample essays because they only required students to give at least three arguments in favor of their stance and at least one refutation.

What could have caused the lapse? Knudson (1992) noted that students were sharp in the areas of making arguments and stating propositions or plan of action but weak at supporting these arguments with evidence, and they did not link arguments and evidence to

propositions with warrants. She added that these student writers did not state opposing views or respond to them. What this emphasized, she argued, was the fact that "student writers are relatively competent at providing elements of an argument, but not at providing *all* elements of an argument and of tying these elements together" (emphasis mine, p. 172). McCann (1989 in Knudson, 1992) suggested that these elements where these student writers are weakest are the ones for which prompts are more readily available in conversations (e.g., offering and interpreting evidence and recognizing and responding to counter-arguments. There may have been some grain of truth in this observation, but the present study seems to contradict this analysis given the fact that students from the With Discussion group who might have benefited from peer talk / discussions compared to the No Discussion group were the ones who failed to be explicit in their elaboration and refutation of the opposing views. A plausible and more acceptable explanation would be the one offered by Erftmier (1985 in Knudson, 1992): "Students cannot transfer persuasive strategies used in oral dialogue to written monologues and do not have a well-developed schema for written persuasion" (p. 168).

Essays from the NDG received the holistic scores of 6 and 5, and their primary-trait score were 7 and 5 for their clear and complete statements of arguments and evidence and a score of 4 for their systematic identification and use of refutation whereas those who had peer talk / discussions prior to writing received the holistic ratings of 5 and 3, and their primary-trait scores were 5 for their ability to state their arguments and provide evidence to support them. Given these data, it observed that the argumentative essays of students who did engage in peer talk / discussions demonstrate better quality of writing as evidenced by the higher holistic and primary-trait scores they received.

However, this study is not conclusive. To obtain an accurate and complete picture of the argumentation skills of freshman college students, more sample writings across departments or colleges must be considered. There is a need as well as to look into the research design employed in investigating this pedagogically important issue.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the foregoing discussion, the sampled essays show that students' argumentation skills differ between two groups



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in both holistic and primary-trait scores. The essays of students who had no discussion prior to actual writing revealed excellent and outstanding level of argumentation skills. Holistic scores of 6 and 5 characterized papers with excellent attempts at developing a well-developed argument with the author having no difficulty stating their viewpoints. These papers are well organized, fluent, and function as a unified piece of persuasion. A score of 6 is also characterized by correct usage of punctuation marks and mechanical errors do not interfere with reading the paper or there are few mechanical errors. On the other hand, essays of those who had peer talk / discussions showed between very good and good levels of argumentation skills.

Receiving holistic scores of 5 and 4, these essays responded to the task with developed and substantiated reasons and appeals. They were well organized, fluent, and unified. They had a clear opening and explicit statement and development of the thesis. However, the stated reasons, despite not being contradictory, have no apparent organizational strategy. They seem to have difficulty with written argumentation, but the students appear to have similar responses to the task and exhibit some development of logical reasoning and somewhat elaborated arguments.

What do the results imply?

First, findings of this present investigation seem to favor non-engagement of students in peer talk /discussions if holistic scoring will be used to score their essays. Peer talk did not seem to heighten the awareness of the students to explicitly state their position and to support it by explicitly identifying their arguments in favor of their chosen side. Thus, the need for explicit instructions and constant reminders about clear statement of an argument or a proposition to ensure effective argumentation essays; importance of evidence to support and develop a line of thinking or conclusion; and identification of and response to counter-arguments to be given in all stages of writing. Unless this is ensured, determining where the difficulty in writing argumentative essays stems from, i.e., students' lack of logical thinking skills or problems with instructional studies might not be easily resolved (Knudson, 1992).

Secondly, results from previous studies as well as this present study pointed out that students have trouble transferring their persuasive strategies used in oral discussions to written arguments (Bereitmer & Scardamali,

1986; Erftmier, 1985 in Knudson, 1992). Felton & Herko (2004) noted

the need to recognize the argument skills students already possess and to harness those skills in the writing process. She suggested that by drawing on students experience in oral argumentation, they can better understand the structure of their written arguments. By having them test their written arguments in oral debates, they might awaken the critical audience in them and let them see the intimate relationship between the two (p. 682).

This exercise can be done right after they have written their first draft and before they write their second drafts.

Thirdly, findings of this study show that students are poor in responding to opposing views despite the suggested peer talk activities in various research. It is not clear where this weakness is stemming from. This can be attributed to their lack of audience awareness or lack of a firm grasp of what constitutes an effective argumentation papers. Peer talk / discussions as gleaned from this present study did not guarantee addressing the opposition or in cases where they were able to state the opposing view, they failed to refute them convincingly. Does this stem from a strong tendency to maintain their own position and appear hesitant to recognize a different or an opposing view when there were few cases where they did recognize them? Will allowing them to continue their dialogue or oral discussions throughout the entire writing process improve their argumentation essays?

Finally, further investigation of all these issues is necessary since this study found no significant differences in the quality of students' compositions under various writing conditions in terms of their skill in giving enough information so that readers need not infer much from their provided data or evidence. There is a mounting evidence suggesting that talking in the L1 is efficient in helping students generate ideas of what and how to write, further research should try to find out whether L2 learners might benefit from a prewriting discussion in their L1 before they write in a second language. As many L2 researchers have suggested, L1 has an important effect on L2 writing, and writing strategies can be transferred from L1 to L2 (Cumming, 1989; in Shi, 1998). Also, research on whether the



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combined writing conditions, i.e., the no discussion, the teacher-led discussions, and prewriting discussion may be worth exploring to determine their effect on the quality of argument writings.

However, it is worth reiterating here that even when they did not engage in peer talk prior to writing, the quality of their essays did not suffer, confirming Shi's (1998) findings that there "there was no statistically significant differences" on students' essays written under conditions of peer discussion, teacher-led discussion, and no discussion.

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