COGNITIVE SCIENCES AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Strategies to Minimise Students' Weaknesses in Discussion Essay

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ABSTRACT

Discussion essay plays a crucial role in academic writing. It has been proven to enhance students' analytical and critical thinking skills effectively. However, students often struggle to compose a good writing due to their inability to use the language features. In that regard, this study aims to identify students' weaknesses in the discussion essay and the changes seen after the intervention. The study used a purposive sample of 10 first-year students from the Computational Science Programme in Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) who took Academic English 2 as an elective course. The study adapted the four stages of action research proposed by Mertler and Charles (2005). It administered a pre-test, post-test and an observation on the students. The findings indicate a significant decrease in the frequency of errors in the language features, namely verb, persuasive language and technical terms, after the two-month intervention. Students also exhibited positive learning behaviour throughout the intervention by participating actively in the learning activities.

Keywords: discussion essay, language features, academic writing, intervention

1   INTRODUCTION

Writing is undeniably a vital tool for learning a discipline. It involves a complex intellectual task involving many language components such as phonics, grammar, comprehension, vocabulary and mechanics, some of which students may lack or have partially mastered. It can be a great challenge for students to explicate complex subjects in tertiary institutions if they lack academic writing. Writing academically will help students build higher-order thinking skills needed to analyse and focus on technique and style (Azizi Ahmad, 2018; Elser, 2008). However, having poor writing skills could be detrimental to university students. Nowadays, the global workplace, irrespective of the field, job and expertise, require students to be proficient in writing (Snyder, 2018; Solomon, 2018). Isarji et al. (2013) showed that employers demanded workforces who are proficient in writing. Workplace writing requires workers to deal with professional documents. For that reason, it is of utmost importance to be able to follow the recognised business format, have writing fluency and apply correct mechanics of writing (Yusuf, Yunus & Embi, 2018). In that regard, the university plays a crucial role in equipping graduates with the necessary skills to cater to the industry's needs.

At the university level, academic writing is compulsory for all students. Ahmad Azizi (2018, para. 2) explains that the course "serves as a tool of communication that conveys acquired knowledge in a specific field of study". There are four types of academic writing: analytical, critical, descriptive and persuasive. Each type has specific features and purposes. For students in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields, taking Academic English as an elective course is another systematic approach to be trained to become good writers. The course exposes students to vocabulary, grammar and the four language skills, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. In any academic writing course, students learn the four principles of effective writing: unity, support, coherence and sentence skills (Langan, 2005). However, writing can be a difficult task for English as a second language (ESL) students. Academic writing requires the students to convey their ideas within a framework of domains at the university level. By doing so, they can demonstrate the ability to engage the reader in academic discourse. To ensure the students will master the skill, there is a need to carefully design the course by integrating suitable pedagogical and methodological approaches. According to Badiozaman (2017), the academic writing unit has a significant positive impact on ESL students writing skills. It acts as a scaffolding for students who are underprepared to face the academic challenges of tertiary study.

Realising this importance, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) has designed the English language generic course according to the students' proficiency in the language. Students who obtained Band 4 and above in their Malaysian University English Test (MUET) are required to take Academic English 2. In this course, students are required to produce three types of written academic texts which are information report, explanation report and discussion essay. However, the discussion essay is given emphasis and tested in the final examination. One of the main purposes incorporating discussion essay in the course is to measure students' critical thinking skills. The essay requires them to include a comprehensive discussion on the different side of a given topic (Caryle, 2018; Van Geyte, 2013).
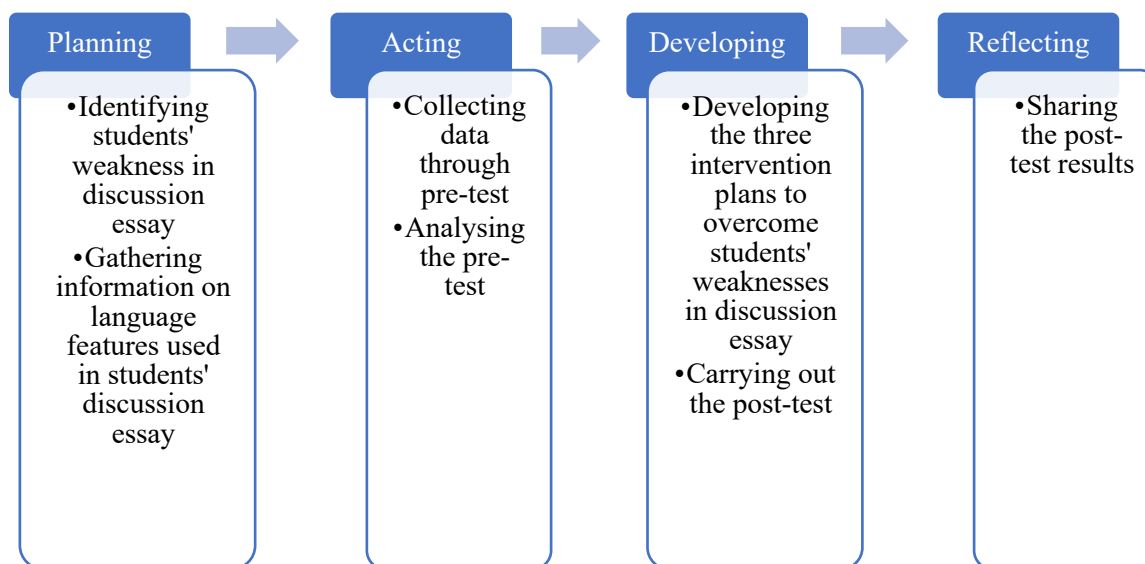
Moreover, they must demonstrate a well-rounded understanding of the issue before starting their conclusions and opinions. Due to this aspect, students might find it challenging to present their

arguments if they cannot master the language features, affecting their ability to produce a quality essay. Therefore, this study has the following two main aims:

1. What is the students' weakness in the discussion essay?

2. What are the changes made in the discussion essay after implementing the three language intervention strategies?

2   METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative method. It used content analysis which is in line with the characteristics of an action research design. The study was conducted on ten first-year students from the Computational Science Programme. These students were chosen purposefully because they obtained Band 4 in their MUET and required to enrol in a generic undergraduate course known as Academic English 2. One of the core components of this course is to write discussion essays. To obtain the required data, the researcher adopted the four stages of action research proposed by Mertler and Charles (2005). Figure 1 shows the procedures involved in the implementation of this research.

Planning	Acting	Developing	Reflecting
•Identifying students' weakness in discussion essay •Gathering information on language features used in students' discussion essay	•Collecting data through pre-test •Analysing the pre-test	•Developing the three intervention plans to overcome students' weaknesses in discussion essay •Carrying out the post-test	•Sharing the post-test results

Figure 1. Procedures of the action research.

At the planning stage, the researcher conducted a pre-test with the students. The rubric was distributed to the students a week before the test to understand the desired performance in the discussion essay. Besides, the researcher also aimed to encourage the students to plan their steps to enhance the quality of their essay. During the pre-test, the students were required to write a discussion essay entitled 'Should capital punishment be abolished?' They were given one hour to complete the essay in the class. Students were expected to discuss both sides of arguments, and

each viewpoint must be well-developed and supported with appropriate elaborations containing evidence, facts, anecdotes or hypothetical situations. This quality of viewpoints can only be achieved if the students can demonstrate the ability to use the language features as emphasised in the module like generalised participants, variety of verb types, some uses of the passive voice, abstraction, technical terms, connectives associated with reasoning, persuasive language and modals.

Next, students' essays were then collected and graded following the Academic English 2 discussion essay analytic marking rubric at the acting stage. Based on the pre-test marking analysis, the researcher listed the frequency errors of eight language features in the students' writing. However, only the top three weaknesses were chosen. Therefore, the researcher developed three intervention plans to tackle the top three identified weaknesses at the developing stage. The intervention was carried out in six weeks non-consecutively, and the students' attendance was full. Each intervention was done for two weeks, and one hour was allocated for each intervention session. Taking into account the mid-semester break, the plans took up two months to be completed. The timeline and brief descriptions of the interventions are portrayed in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Intervention Plans

Week	Intervention	Weaknesses	Strategies	Details
1	Plan 1	Verb	Jumble-up Words	Constructing simple sentences and highlighting verbs
2	Plan 1	Verb	Jumble-up Words	Changing the verb forms
3	Plan 2	Persuasive Language	Convince Me	Searching and highlighting words and phrases
4	Plan 2	Persuasive Language	Convince Me	Writing simple cause-effect sentences
5	Plan 3	Technical Terms	Word Cloud	Listing a word list related to the issue using Wooclap
6	Plan 3	Technical Terms	Word Cloud	Creating captions to illustrate the meaning of the words

During the intervention, the researcher observed students' learning behaviour, like their participation in classroom discussion and activities. The post-test was carried out upon completion

of the intervention plans. The students were required to write a discussion essay entitled "Advantages and disadvantages of the death penalty." The essays were marked and analysed using the same marking rubric. During the data analysis process, the researcher focused solely on using three language features: verb, persuasive, and technical terms. For ease of category, the researcher applied the sentence highlighting technique. Each feature was highlighted with a different colour.

At the final stage of this research, the researcher shared the intervention's result with the students. It is of paramount importance for the students to receive feedback because it would give them clear guidance on how to improve their discussion essay in their final exam. At this stage, the researcher also justified how their marks were derived and identified the specific qualities in their essays. This way would help them be more aware of the importance of academic writing as it serves as scaffolding in their thesis writing.

3   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1   Pre-Test

The pre-test essay was entitled 'Should capital punishment be abolished?'. It was chosen because the issue was current and debatable. Based on the marking analysis, the frequency of each weakness is shown in Table 2 below:

Table 2. Pre-test Result

Language Features	Frequencies
Verb	48
Persuasive Language	19
Technical Terms	17

Based on this analysis, the frequency of errors for the three language features, namely verb, persuasive language and technical terms, were apparent in students' writing. The students were confused about the plural form of the subject. It has led to frequent subject-verb agreement errors in their essays. Below are the examples of subject-verb agreement error:

> One of the biggest misconceptions about this issue are… [Student 1]
>
> Capital punishment are undeniably unacceptable… [Student 5]
>
> The authority has the right to… [Student 7]

Besides, they mixed up tenses when presenting position and arguments for and against, although they were taught that timeless present tense is mainly used in discussion essays. Apart from that, their essays showed a lack of persuasive language. The student used less emotive language in their essay to convince the reader of the merits of their stance on the topic. Below are the examples of persuasive language error:

Taking someone's life is not right… [Student 2]

The government should review the law… [Student 4]

Some people support the punishment as way to avoid crime… [Student 10]

Moreover, the wrong usage of technical terms was expected, and it could probably be due to students' unfamiliarity with the topic.

3.2 Post-Test

To ensure the data are valid and reliable, the post-test was set up similarly to the pre-test in terms of the type of essay, theme and time allocation. Students were required to write a discussion essay entitled "Advantages and disadvantages of the death penalty." The students' written data were assessed using the same marking scheme applied in the pre-test. The frequencies of the three weaknesses found in the post-test are shown in Table 3 below:

Table 3. Post-test Result

Language Features	Frequencies
Verb	21
Persuasive Language	9
Technical Terms	3

The table shows that the students' primary weakness is a verb with 21 occurrences. Though the frequency error dropped after the intervention, it was found that the students still committed minor grammatical mistakes like using quantifier with a singular noun and singular verb. For example:

Every human have the inalienable right to life… [Student 2]

Every legal system are fallible… [Student 5]

Every law have to be… [Student 6]

Next, the persuasive language accumulated a total of 9 errors. Based on the writing analysis, the students tended to assume the reader to react a certain way. For example:

Imagine if that happened to one of your loved ones, you would be sad… [Student 1]

You would feel the same way if it happened to you… [Student 8]

You would definitely take the same action if… [Student 9]

These sentences imply that the students still had a problem using emotive language as they were unable to discuss the people's reactions towards the issue thoroughly. The weakness with the least number of frequency is technical terms. Students' familiarity with the issue probably explains the drastic decrease in frequency.

3.3   Total Frequency of Errors in the Pre and Post-Tests
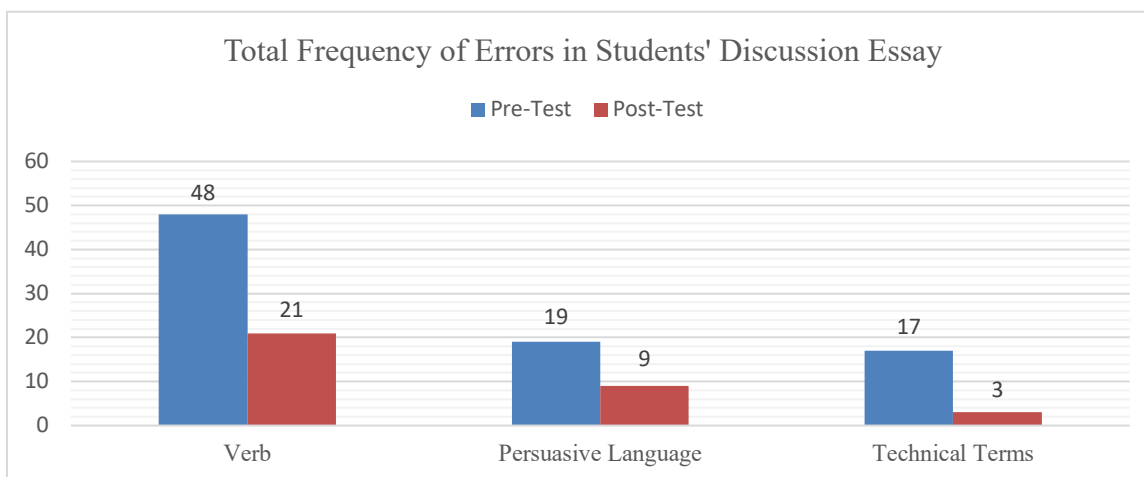
Figure 1. Total Frequency of Errors in the Pre and Post-tests

Based on Figure 1, it can be concluded that the three main weaknesses in the students' writing had decreased. The number of verb errors that occurred in the post-test was 21 compared to 48 in the pre-test. In English as a Second Language (ESL) context, subject-verb agreement is often regarded as the most challenging thing to learn because this rule is not applied in the students' first language. Furthermore, these students were from the computational science programme, and they mostly dealt with designs and mathematical models, thus putting less emphasis on grammatical aspects. The result suggests that a comprehensive intervention plan like providing students with grammar drills every week could help them retain basic grammar skills.

Apart from that, the number of the wrong usage of persuasive language decreased from 19 to 9. The students admitted they had never learned the use of emotive language before. However, the significant decrease of this error signifies that the "Convince Me" strategy managed to improve students' writing as they were able to evoke an emotional response through the use of emotive language. The strategy required students to search and highlight words or phrases that carry emotional or persuasive language before they were tasked to create sentences based on them. This practice is similar to memory strategy aimed to enhance students' understanding by creating a word-meaning map in their brains (memorising useful words or phrases) or mental linkages. To further enhance the technique, the students were required to write simple cause-effect sentences too. They were given simple topics like 'Causes and Effects of the Civil Right Movements', 'Effects of Prisoners' Right' and 'The Effects of Sociology on Crime Prevention'. Throughout the intervention, the students also actively asked questions regarding the use of adjectives and adverbs and requested the researcher to provide them with more exercises on emotive language. Although this intervention seems to work well with the students, further intervention is needed and there is an urge to design intervention that could enhance students' persuasive writing skills.

The finding also revealed that the number of errors in technical terms dropped from 17 to 3. From the observation, it can be said that the students easily grasped the terms related to the issue once they are familiar with it. "Word Cloud" strategy allowed students to brainstorm words related to the capital punishment issue. When they were instructed to construct sentences based on the brainstorming words, it helped them develop sentence-level composition skills. The analysis of their post-test showed that they were capable of using the technical terms correctly. It is a clear indication that they could comprehend the issue well and compose good writing.

4 CONCLUSION

From the analysis of these data, it can be concluded that the students showed significant improvement in their writing. It is proven by the decreasing number of weaknesses in their essays. The three interventions, namely "Jumble-up Words", "Convince Me", and "Word Cloud", has great potential for addressing the weaknesses during the post-test. On the other hand, the researcher still needs to do further unpacking to design a more comprehensive intervention that would cater to students' learning needs. It should be noted too that the result may vary or differ in other types of writing as the interventions in this study are specifically designed for the three particular weaknesses for this particular type of writing.

This study has three limitations. The first limitation is the insufficient sample size. The number of students who registered for the course was only ten, and they were all Band 4 achievers. Should there be Band 5 achievers and students from other programmes enrolling in the course, it would be interesting to identify their weaknesses in the discussion essay. Perhaps this would give the researcher more opportunities to design other intervention strategies that would cater to students of different learning ability. The researcher would also be able to compare the frequency of errors made by the different MUET achievers. Secondly, due to the time constraint, the researcher did not design other intervention strategies for five other language features stated in the Academic 2 module, namely modals, abstractions, generalised participants, passive voice and connectives. The researcher had to comply with the course plan. The students had to learn citations and referencing, reading skills, and oral presentation skills before they were exposed to report writing and discussion essays. Therefore, the researcher had to prepare various learning activities in order to enhance those skills. Thirdly, both pre and post-test essays only tested on the capital punishment issue. The weakness in the language features and the results for each intervention strategy might be different should there be more topics with different issues were given. Hence, the results of this study cannot be generalised to other students.

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