

# Digital Writing Tools

## *Teaching Argumentative Essays beyond the Traditional Frontiers*

Soni T. Tandiana, Fuad Abdullah and U. Komara

*Teacher of English Education Department, Siliwangi University, Tasikmalaya, West Java, Indonesia*  
{sonitantandiana, fuad.abdullah182}@gmail.com, ujangkomara@unsil.ac.id

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**Abstract:** Argumentative essay is a text type to convince the readers and drive them to perform an action as framed by the writers. Constructing an argument within such an essay can determine how the writers persuade and the readers are persuaded (Rex, et. al. 2010). However, insufficient experience, unsupported prior knowledge and limited access to information may be a few problematic obstacles for the students to create reasonable and convincing arguments. For this reason, this study delineated how Digital Writing Tools (DWTs) were utilized to teach and learn argumentative essays. It involved five EFL learners of an English Education Department of a University in Tasikmalaya. Classroom observations were deployed as a primary technique to collect the data. The findings revealed that the teacher and the learners performed various classroom activities while teaching and learning argumentative essays with Digital Writing Tools such as (1) teacher's explanations of learning materials, (2) teacher's suggestions on the students' argumentative essays writing, (3) teacher's exemplification of learning materials, (4) students' arguments without using DWTs, (5) teacher's suggestions for using DWTs, (6) students' learning activities with DWTs, (7) teacher's modelling of text (s) and (8) students' arguments after using DWTs. This study suggests that DWTs could foster pedagogical practices in the digital writing classroom.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

A rapid advancement of technology and its integration into language teaching and learning has significantly changed how teachers and students communicate each other, including the way they listen, speak, read and write (UNESCO, 2004; Kilpatrick, et. al., 2014; Simpson and Obdalo, 2014). In this sense, it enables them to collaborate, solve problems, make decisions and consume information (Techataweewan and Prasertsin, 2017). Besides, the integration of technologies into classroom activities could bridge the students' prior knowledge, learning materials and preceding learning experiences (Kilpatrick, et. al., 2014, p. 609). Further, the students require technological skills for preparing them to enter a novel competitive workforce (Nobles and Paganucci, 2015, p. 17).

Hence, the growth of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in language teaching and learning does not only affect the students' personal lives but also social and professional ones (Khubyari and Narafshan, 2016, p. 59).

In Indonesia, writing is presumed as one of the most challenging skills for language learners to grasp (Widodo, 2008). As a matter of fact, time constraints become one of the classical problems during teaching and learning writing (Pujianto, et. al. 2014, p. 100). It means that the students only write in the target language (e.g. English) while performing classroom activities and switch the use of English into their L1 (regional languages) and L2 (Bahasa Indonesia) after leaving the class. In addition, the practices of teaching writing in Indonesia typically have been heavily relied on fostering the students' knowledge about spelling, word formation, vocabulary, grammar and theories of writing instead of the contexts, students' requirements and goals (Alwasilah, 2001, p. 25). In a similar vein, the students' tediousness of learning English, their insufficient lexical and grammatical competences in English, the teachers' monotonous teaching strategies and the absence of applying instructional media emerge as other factors affecting their writing skills (Megawati and Anugerahwati, 2012, p. 184). For these reasons, teaching writing should not only be emphasized on the linguistic accuracy as proposed by the *traditional product-oriented writing* paradigm (e.g. providing the

students' a corrective feedback on the individual grammatical constituents at the sentence level) (Ling, 1984) but also the macro strategies (e.g. planning, drafting and revising) and micro strategies (e.g. content, words and syntax) (Cumming, 2001).

Given these facts, the impetus of paradigmatic shift from traditional-oriented language teaching to technological-based language teaching has crucially influenced teaching and learning second language writing, particularly English. To illustrate, Cotos (2011) introduced Intelligent Academic Discourse Evaluator (IADE) as an automated writing evaluation (AWE) feedback to teach and to learn L2 academic writing. She argued that IADE's colour-coded and numerical feedback has facilitative potentials in language learning. More practically, it was represented in evidence of focus on discourse form, noticing of negative evidence, improved rhetorical quality of writing and increased learning gains (p. 420). Likewise, Alanazi (2013) claimed that electronic writing (E-writing) can assist the students to write faster and motivate them to be flourishing writers. Also, E-writing supports the students' writing pleasure and shapes their experiences developing their positive self-esteem and recognition of formal writing activities. Moreover, Rodrigues, et. al. (2016) contended that the use of Wiki as web 2.0 enables the teachers to regularly supervise their students' progress through their Wiki pages. In addition, Wiki can establish a learning milieu for the students to accomplish their writing activities and gain additional information about writing (p. 20). Furthermore, Hergenrader (2015) assumed that games would not only foster the students' critical sensibilities as media consumers but also sharpen their skills in using digital tools. Additionally, games enable the students to perform collaborative projects, notably in a creative writing class (p. 57). In short, integrating technology into language teaching and learning generates an innovative paradigm among English language teachers currently.

Argumentative essay is a text type to convince the readers and drive them to perform an action as framed by the writers. Argumentation is a popular kind of essays question for it forces the students to think on their own positions. For instance, they should take a stance on an issue, reinforce their stances with strong reasons and fortify their reasons with solid evidence (Oshima and Hogue, 2006, p. 142). As a result, argumentative essay is sketched to accentuate on debatable issues in the public eyes. More practically, it is deployed to be one of the placement tests for the prospective university students and a way to help them detect and overcome a controversial issue in

their daily activities due to Western culture believes it as a medium for reinforcing intellectual development (Macdonald and Macdonald, 1996, p. 388). Consequently, argumentative essay is considered as an indispensable genre for the university students.

Empirically, there have been various investigations focusing on teaching and learning argumentative essays. To depict, Hillocks Jr (2010) studied how teaching arguments affected the development of critical thinking and writing. Besides, de Smet, et. al. (2011) identified the effect of electronic outlining on the quality of students' writing products and how outlining affects perceived mental effort during the writing task, especially argumentative texts. They reported that electronic outlining increased the quality of students' argumentative texts and mitigated mental effort. Moreover, Soleymanzadeh and Gholami (2014) scrutinized the possible correlation between the students' essay scores based on IELTS analytic essay scoring criteria and those based on the ratio of thematic progression patterns. Furthermore, Tandiana (2014) identified the students' errors in argumentative writing. The findings revealed that the weak arguments, bias claims and unconvincing warrants become the salient causes of their errors. Similarly, Tandiana et. al. (2016) probed the application of Talk-Write Technique to enhance the students' argumentative writing skills, particularly in terms of Discussion essays. They claimed that the implementation of Talk-Write technique enabled the students to learn in a more effective, blissful and energetic situation. Recently, Pessoa (2017) delved how SFL and explicit language instruction can enhance the teaching of argumentation in the disciplines. She noted that SFL-based conceptualization of argumentation was able to cater teachers and students with the linguistic tools to learn to argue for the sake of engaging them in arguing to learn. Unfortunately, there has been surprisingly a few studies scrutinizing the deployment of technology to teaching argumentative essays or argumentative writing (e.g. Tan-Ooi, 2013; Ismial, 2016; Fink, 2017), particularly in Indonesian EFL context (e.g. Silcha, 2016 et. al.). With this in mind, this study was in part motivated to fill the voids in delineating how Digital Writing Tools are utilized to teach and learn argumentative essays.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Description of Argumentative Essay

Argumentative essay refers to an essay functioning to convince the readers about the truth of an essential statement (Hyland, 1990). It engages the arguments, facts, reasons, description or explanation favouring the matter being argued to reinforce the writers' positions (Emilia, 2005, p. 59). Moreover, Fahim and Mirzaii (2013, p. 8) claim that the capacity to write argumentatively relies on EFL/ESL learners' equipment of intellectual capacity to think critically. Consequently, the writer's ability to think critically can influence how they argue in their writing. Likewise, the writers should be able to situate themselves in what positions they are related to an arguable issue. In this case, ensuring the readers with reasoning and facts can be a supportive aspect while arguing (Lap and Truc, 2014, p. 68). Therefore, argumentative essay is probably constructed in a particular way, such as the inclusion of an opinion with support, a statement of a counterargument, a rebuttal and a concluding statement espousing the opening opinion (Chase, 2011, p. 1-2).

The structure of writing, argumentative essay is assumed to possess some versions of essay outline (Hyland, 1990; Toumlin, 2003; Emilia, 2005). Initially, Hyland (1990) views argumentative essay from the genre analysis. In this case, a text (essay) is outlined based on its purpose rather than content. The essay is considered as the highest unit of description consisting of organized boundaries and an unambiguous function. Specifically, this essay is characteristically typified by a three-stage structure, namely *Thesis*, *Argument* and *Conclusion* (Hyland, 1990, p. 68). Actually, each stage consists of moves functioning to specify the information within those stages (*Thesis*, *Argument* and *Conclusion*) (Hyland, 1990). Shortly, the units of essay described in this view tends to emphasize on the communicative purposes of written language.

The present study determines Argumentative essay as the focus of investigation it enables the students to evaluate the issue based on two different perspectives (Bailey, 2006) and decide one of them as the final judgement.

### 2.2 Teaching Argumentative Essays in Indonesian EFL Contexts

Writing *argumentative essay* has obviously become one of the most crucial enterprises in higher education level (Crowhurst, 1988; Hillocks Jr, 2010; Helwa, 2014). To illustrate, it assists the students to write miscellaneous writing tasks. This requires the students to be able to ensure the audiences (readers) and focus on a situation representing the distinctions between the writers' and the readers' beliefs and attitudes (Helwa, 2014, p. 3). Another reason is the coherent production of a well-argued case is necessitated in university entrance examinations and in the process of scientific articles selection (Crowhurst, 1988, p. 3). This indicates that the university students are expected to possess an arguing capacity when they learn at the tertiary level of education as the representation of their critical thinking (Hillocks Jr, 2010). Similarly, the students' success in academic realm and career is probably affected by the ability to identify a case and argue to it effectively (Hillocks Jr, 2010, p. 25). Moreover, the L2 writers tend to have insufficient individualized voice compared to L1 ones so that such a phenomenon raises an assumption that L2 writers as falling short of native standards by the non-discerning readers (Helms-Park and Stapleton, 2003). For these reasons, the appropriate use of techniques during teaching writing is presumably required, notably in producing an *argumentative essay*.

Responding to the magnitude of teaching *argumentative essay* to the higher education level students, there have been a number of inquiries conducted in the last years. For examples, Chase (2011) analyzed the argumentative writing skills of academically underprepared college students at the Columbia University. Besides, Dabaghi, *et. al.*, (2013) tried to compare the dissimilar roles of critical thinking in students' performance on argumentative and narrative written tasks with *Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal (WGCTA)*.

In Indonesian educational context, various research also have apparently emerged as a reaction to the importance of writing and teaching how to write *argumentative essays*. For instances, Mutiaraningrum and Cahyono (2015) conducted a study on examining online debate in *argumentative writing* course by exploring its potentials and challenges. In particular, the researchers distributed the questionnaires to identify their participants' thought about the potentials and challenges of online debate. As a result, they found that the potentials of online debate covered the form of time flexibility,

learning autonomy, and critical thinking based on the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy. Besides, the challenges of the online debate were the emergence of delayed responses, confusion in the implementation on the part of the students, and technical problems dealing with signing up and posting delivery (Mutiaraningrum and Cahyono, 2015, p. 43).

### 2.3 Description of Digital Writing

The development of web-based technology is assumed to boost teaching writing and bridge the disparity of writing skills (Vue, et. al., 2016). Additionally, Mayer (2005) adds that the studies on the impacts of multimedia to language learning demonstrated that providing information in multiple formats (e.g. text with pictures, complex diagrams with audio narration, animations, simulations, and video) presumably reduced cognitive load on working memory, increase information processing and extend comprehension. In this respect, webs, as a multimodal platform, cater a plethora of options for accessing, presenting, encouraging writing practices and acquisition of writing insights and skills (Vue, et. al., 2016).

### 2.4 The Practical Implementation of Digital Writing Tools

Digital literacy has allowed the students to access various information easily. As an example, it allows the users to obtain rich data available in internet compared to the paper-based resources.

Managing information is a digital literacy component that students acquire and use in their daily lives when joining online communities and keeping up with the diverse networks they are a part of. Moreover, integrating and evaluating information are vital skills required by the students in the current age. With this in mind, the teacher should be able to play their roles as an expert in evaluating information, showing students the differences between reliable and unreliable digital resources.

The most important components of digital literacy are common for future computer users and ICT professionals: accessing, managing, evaluating, integrating, creating, and communicating information individually or collaboratively in a networked, computer-supported, and web-based environment for learning, working, or leisure. These skills are directly related to basic competences. Therefore, digital literacy is as relevant as traditional literacies, such as reading and writing, mathematics, or the management of social behaviour. Below is an overview of the

relationships of digital literacy components and basic competences.

*Accessing information*, defined as identifying information sources as well as having the techniques for collection and retrieval of such information, is a basic component of all literacies. Digital literacy significantly broadens the scope of potential sources of knowledge. However, information search in this area requires more sophisticated information management skills than traditional literacies that use resources whose validity and authenticity is relatively easier to assess. When using an Internet-based knowledge portal, applying an existing organizational or classification scheme to evaluate its content is not always possible. Books and journals, for example, may be validated by the reputation of their publishers. Conversely, most web sites do not bear the label of a well-known institution.

In relation to such an issue, *evaluating information* (making judgements about its adequacy, currency, usefulness, quality, relevance, or efficiency) comes to play here. Being able to determine the authority or time of the information retrieved online requires digital literacy skills that only the expertise and experience of education may furnish individuals.

### 2.5 Previous Studies on Digital Writing Tools

The advent of sophisticated technologies in English language teaching and learning has rapidly and considerably affected the way of reading, writing and communicating (Kilpatrick, et. al. 2014). More specifically, Blogs, wikis, email, instant messaging, text messaging, digital gaming, social networking, and applications software have all become an integral part of students' community and personal literacies (New London Group, 1996; Leu and Kinzer, 2000; Kress, 2003; Kist, 2010). Conversely, although the increasing amount of studies on teaching writing based on technology (Niesten and Sussex, 2006; Chi, 2006; Zochs, et. al.; Mc Williams et. al., 2015; 2016; Yamac and Ulusoy, 2016), a little attention is addressed to the study investigating the implementation of digital writing tools in teaching writing (e.g. Kilpatrick, 2014). In fact, the integration of technologies to the teaching and learning process potentially enables the students to connect their prior knowledge and construct their previous experiences (Kilpatrick, 2014: 609). To fill this void, the current study depicted how Digital Writing Tools (DWTs) were utilized to teach and learn argumentative essays.

### 3 METHOD

The present study applied the lesson observations in which the transcription was provided as the primary data to analyze. Once the data had been collected, they were analysed qualitatively. This enables to have interpretive scheme. The data of this study were obtained from lesson observation of the classroom activities covering the teacher's performance and the students learning activities. The whole classroom activities were recorded by utilizing video recorder. The video recording of lesson observation was transcribed and analysed as the primary data of this study. The data were taken focusing on answering the research question, *how are DWTs are utilized to teach and learn argumentative essays in the classroom?*

Once the data had been collected, they were analyzed qualitatively. This enabled us to have interpretive scheme. The data of this study namely observational data were analyzed by employing Anderson's interaction framework model (2009) to explore the digital data collected from the observations. Another term of this enterprise was the so-called micro-interaction analysis (Widodo, 2016). Digital data were transcribed and reviewed. Technically, the actions, moves and interactional patterns of the participants were organized and classified into particular interactional patterns, such as the interaction of the teacher-the students and the students-students.

### 4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Anchored by the in-depth analysis proposed by Anderson's interaction framework (2009) to identify the digital data collected from the observations, the researchers discovered eight emergent themes. The themes were drawn based on interactional patterns, such as the interaction of the teacher-the students and the students-students. Such themes are (1) teacher's explanations of learning materials, (2) teacher's suggestions on the students' argumentative essays writing, (3) teacher's exemplification of learning materials, (4) students' arguments without using DWTs, (5) teacher's suggestions for using DWTs, (6) students' learning activities with DWTs, (7) teacher's modelling of text (s) and (8) students' arguments after using DWTs. As a result, more specific explanations on those themes are presented subsequently.

#### 4.1 Teacher's Explanations of Learning Materials

*Teacher's explanations of learning materials occupied the most frequent appearance, namely 22. It occurred in the entire observations, namely observation 1 (four occurrences), observation 2 (13 occurrences) and observation 3 (five occurrences). As an example, the teacher defined what writing is and wrote his definition on the whiteboard, as depicted below.*

*Excerpt # 1*

*Yah, writing in here means pouring something, pouring ideas by getting ideas, generating and devolving ideas into a written form or printed material. ((Teacher wrote the sentence on the white board)) (Video # 1 Observation 1)*

In this case, the teacher explained the definition of writing to help the students understand the basic concept of writing, such as generating ideas, pouring and developing them into the written mode.

#### 4.2 Teacher's Suggestions on the Students' Argumentative Essays Writing

In relation to *teacher's suggestions on the students' argumentative essays writing*, the teacher suggested his students to review their own B.A. theses, notably the first paragraph of *Introduction* section. In this sense, he questioned the existence of theories in their *Introduction* section. Then, he confirmed that they did not need to insert theories in *Introduction* section due to it functions to introduce their writing issues. He mentioned that his claim was based on the viewpoints of some authors, scientists or linguists. Basically, it is aimed at convincing the students towards his claim.

#### 4.3 Teacher's Exemplification of Learning Materials

Dealing with *teacher's exemplification of learning materials*, the teacher gave an example about how to solve the grammatical errors in TOEFL test. In particular, he suggested his students to use their prior knowledge to help them answer each question correctly. Besides, he contended that the use of analogy during taking TOEFL test enables them to predict the correct answer through connecting their prior knowledge to the problems their faced currently. For instance, if they find a question about a common expression in English and they are required to match the use of expression and the context where it occurs.

#### 4.4 Students' Arguments without using DWTs

The teacher seemingly endeavored to examine the students' prior knowledge of what writing is. In response to it, student 1 answered that writing is a way how the ideas are transformed into a written mode and it was based on his personal opinion. Even, he presumably showed a doubtful expression when answering such a question. This fact is supported from his uncertain facial expression, namely seeing his friends to get a help. Another response of student 1 was to address the teacher's question on how Obama can produce a powerful and convincing arguments while delivering a speech. To illustrate, he assumed that Obama said "We are together, we will make American to be better on the future." Nonetheless, his argument has not convinced the teacher because it was not backed up by the convincing facts. With this in mind, although the student 1 tried to actively answer each question posed by the teacher, his answer was not based on the theoretical underpinnings or empirical evidence. In other words, his answer still cannot convince the teacher. This phenomenon belongs *students' arguments without using DWTs* as one of the classroom activities because he did not use any digital devices to search for supportive information on his arguments.

#### 4.5 Teacher's Suggestions for using DWTs

Teacher encouraged the students to utilize DWTs while arguing, including when they are writing an argumentative essay. He further suggested his students to utilize any sorts of DWTs, such as Google. Hence, they can discover more accurate information and produce a convincing, powerful and well-established argument. This activity is categorized as *teacher's suggestions for using DWTs*.

#### 4.6 Students' Learning Activities with DWTs

The excerpt # 15 below denotes that the students did what the teacher's suggestions for using DWTs while comprehending and producing argumentative essays. For example, they were required to locate the definition of writing based on various theories or experts' notions. This classroom activity belongs to *students' learning activities with DWTs*.

*Excerpt # 15*

*The students were searching in google the definition of writing (Video #1 Observation 1)*

#### 4.7 Teacher's Modelling of Text (s)

Another finding revealed that the teacher tried to facilitate the students to recognize and understand types of argumentative essay through giving a number of texts as models. In other words, he did not only teach his students argumentative essays theoretically but also practically. As a result, the students can internalize the learning materials (e.g. argumentative essays) conveyed by the teacher and put it into practice. This type of classroom activity enables the students to have a learning experience on recognizing each part of argumentative essays systematically. Briefly stated, this activity is called as *teacher's modelling of text (s)*.

#### 4.8 Students' Arguments After using DWTs

The excerpt # 18 emphasizes the previous classroom activities (e.g. teacher's suggestions for using DWTs and students' learning activities with DWTs) representing the importance of applying DWTs to learn and write argumentative essays. Also, this classroom activity contradicts to another one, namely *students' arguments without using DWTs*. The most salient example can be viewed from the quality of arguments produced by *the students before and after using DWTs*

Overall, DWTs give the significant impacts on the students' arguments. This is supported by the facts that the students are apparently more engaged when learning in the classroom, notably in learning argumentative essays writing.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

This study reported a general overview of findings obtained from the data analysis procedures. To begin with, the findings revealed that the teacher frequently explained the learning materials traditionally without involving DWTs. This fact is represented by the amount of such a classroom activities, namely 22 occurrences. Also, he positioned himself as a center of attention during teaching and learning process in the classroom. Hence, his teaching approach presumably still reflects teacher-centered approach. Unfortunately, the use of DWTs in the classroom

remains a limited portion. However, he tried to lead his students to apply DWTs during teaching and learning process because one of the classroom activities in which he performed is *suggestions for using teacher's DWTs*.

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