



Full Length Research

## Promoting English as a Foreign Language for Students' Critical Thinking Skills in Argumentative Essay Writing

<sup>1</sup>Wubante Mekonnen, <sup>2</sup>AbiyYigzaw (Professor) and <sup>3</sup>Haile Kassahun (Associate professor)

<sup>1,3</sup>Department of English Language and Literature,

College of Social Sciences and Humanities,

DebreMarkos University, DebreMarkos, Ethiopia

<sup>2</sup>Department of English Language and Literature,

Faculty of Humanities,

Bahir Dar University, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia

**Correspondence:** wubantemekonnen6@gmail.com

**Abstract:** One of the ways to teach Critical Thinking (CT) is through argumentative essay writing. All processes in constructing an argumentative essay require writers to think critically. Regarding to the importance of CT in writing argumentative essays, university students are the most appropriate participants of this study. Therefore, 60 undergraduate management students in DMU participated in the study, particularly in Basic Writing Skills class. This quasi-experimental research aimed at investigating the effects of integrating CT in teaching EFL writing on students' CT skills in argumentative essays. EFL students' CT ability is relatively low in that the participants' scores in the pre test did not reach the average. This implies that the courses offered to undergraduate students focus on language proficiency. On the other hand, the post test results in the treatment group revealed there were good progresses on their CT skills. As a result, the integration of CT is bound to guide students to think more critically and they scored best after the intervention. In addition, CT is teachable in foreign writing classes and can be well applied in the writing of argumentative essay.

**Keywords:** Argumentative Essay Writing: Critical Thinking: Effects: DebreMarkos University: English as Foreign Language.

**Cite This Article As:** Wubante, M., Abiy Y. & Haile, K. (2022). Promoting English as a Foreign Language (EFL) for Students' Critical Thinking (CT) Skills in Argumentative Essay Writing. American Journal of Multidisciplinary Research in Africa, 2(2): 1-7.

## **1. Introduction of the Study**

According to Fulwiler (2002) and Bassham et al. (2011), writing is a process of composing ideas that starts from exploring and researching to drafting, revising, and editing or perhaps publishing them to the world. This implies that writing is a process that refuses a perfect formulation, which is complex, adjustable, and multifaceted. In other words, writing is not a simple activity that could be done in a spontaneous way, yet writing is a complex process that requires efforts. The complex process of writing requires the writers to express and pour their ideas to make a connection between the writers and readers (Nik et al., 2010). In another opinion, McCrimmon (1973) also states that the writers should think of their readers long before beginning to write, the choice of subject, the quality and arrangement of work, the types of specimens and examples, the sentence composition, and the choice of words. Thus, the writers must consider the readers' sense.

Most problems happen when the writers' statement seems clear for them but it is not quite clear for the readers since they could not always notice from the words alone just like what the writers have in mind. Thus, the ability to write effectively is increasingly important since it is a way of communication, which allows people to interact each other across nation and cultures (Weigle, 2002). Other problems come if the writers could not think properly since writing needs a systematic process of thinking to obtain a conclusion of knowledge (Murtadho, 2013). If the writers do not have a good quality of thinking, they would find it so hard in constructing their ideas, thoughts, or arguments into a good quality written form. In line with the above ideas, Murtadho (2013) adds that the necessity of composing ideas, thoughts, or arguments is not a simple thing to do since the mastery of writing ability is the one that should be built and understood properly and perfectly.

At work or school at any levels, writing is essentially needed in many aspects. Writing could be one of the ways to develop CT (Bassham et al., 2011). Through writing, the students show how they articulate things. Likewise, it will show how they think. They will be required to actively and skilfully conceptualize, apply, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate (Bloom, 1956; Paul & Elder, 2008) information to reach an answer or conclusion. Therefore, the ability to think critically is very important in writing. CT is a higher thinking order, which is different from thinking. It requires a high advance thinking skill in a various number of complex ways that involve knowledge and attitudes (Cottrell, 2005). It goes beyond the memorization of facts. It does not only reach what the facts are or what the arguments are since CT is a cognitive process that is correlated with using mind. Furthermore, Cottrell (2005) and Paul & Elder (2008) stated that CT shows how the facts are sustained, how the arguments are constructed and how the conclusions are attained.

Based on several levels of writing, the most appropriate level for developing CT is argumentative writing. An argumentative essay is an essay where writers use some reasons to support their opinions regarding to an issue that they agree or disagree with (Oshima & Hogue, 2007; Cottrell, 2005). In an argumentative essay, the writers must not only provide reasons to support their point of view but also expose the problems from the opposite reasons as the evidences of the false ones. This is aimed to make considerations for all the issues since it indicates that the writers are reasonable and open-minded. All processes in constructing an argumentative essay require the writers to think critically. CT is related to reasoning or the capacity of rational thought (Cottrell, 2005; Paul & Elder, 2008). "Rational" means using reasons to solve problems. Reasoning comprises analyzing evidences and drawing conclusions.

Regarding to the importance of CT in argumentative essays, university students are the most appropriate participants of this study. One of the most appropriate skills in language that could be developed by university students through CT is writing argumentative essays on the given topics/issues. By taking these facts into consideration, this study focused on investigating the undergraduate

second year management students' at DMU, Ethiopia in the academic year of 2021 through their argumentative essay writing. Therefore, we seek answers to the research questions: (1) Is there a difference among students' use of CT skills in their argumentative essays? (2) What are the effects of integrating CT on teaching argumentative essay writing?

## 2.0 Methodology of the Study

### 2.1 Design of the Study

The research design of the study was quasi-experimental that employs a pre-test – post-test design with two group participants. The comparison group was taught using the conventional method; whereas, the treatment group was taught through using questioning method. For the purpose of this study, the participants in the two groups were given argumentative essay writing pre-tests before the intervention. Similarly, the two groups were given argumentative essay writing post-tests. However, for a better understanding, students' written essays can be represented in the argument map as follows.

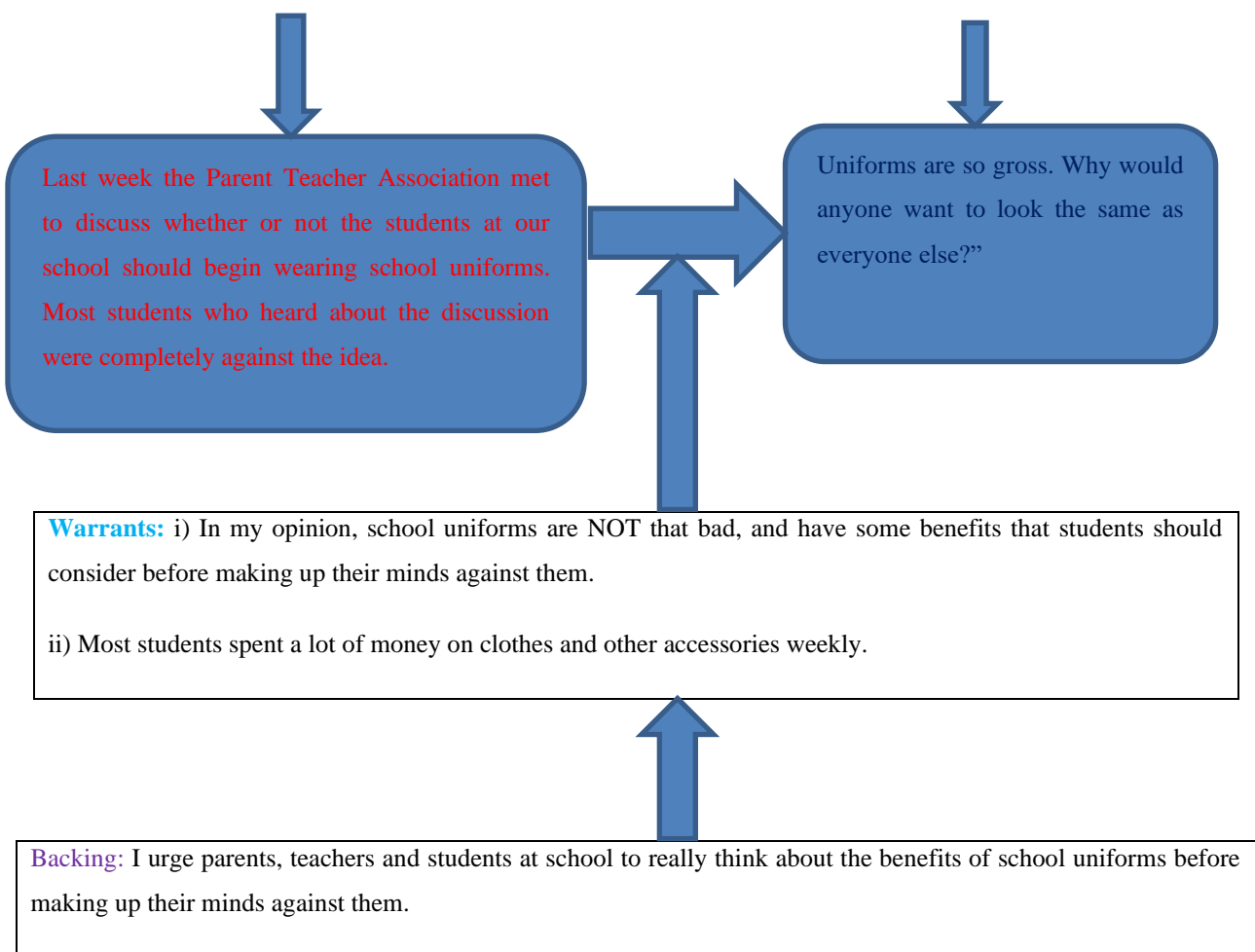


Figure 1: Ground Claims:

## **2.2 Participants**

In this study, a total of 60 two intact group Social Science students in DMU enrolled for Basic Writing Skills Communicative were included. In the students' university stay, two Communicative English Skills Courses are given to second year management students as compulsory. Before this course, the students have taken two Communicative English Skills (FLEN 1011& FLEN 1012) Courses prepared by MoE (2018) in which writing is one aspect of them for two semesters. Earlier to the university course, students have learned English language subject beginning from grade one to university.

## **2.3 Data Gathering Instruments**

### **2.3.1 Test**

The test that comprises both pre-tests and post-tests was used to gather data on students' CT skills. One argumentative essay writing pre-test was given to understand the students' existing CT skills. Likewise, other argumentative essay writing post-test was also given to determine the effects of the intervention, whether students' CT skills were improved. The tests were developed by the researchers considering the students' local context and their background knowledge.

### **2.3.2 CT Essay Scoring Rubric**

The CT skills rubric was adapted from Facione (2011), "Critical Thinking: What It is and Why It Counts" incorporating common CT skills including interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation and self-regulation. The rubric is a seventeen and sixteen point scale that refers to the students' CT skills under each common CT skills. Three experienced EFL university teachers marked students' argumentative essays independently based on the given criteria. Training on the use of the rubric was given to the raters. Inter-rater reliability was calculated with Pearson's correlations (Pearson's  $r$ ), and it was 0.84 which shows the reliability of the test.

## **2.4 Descriptive Statistics**

**Table 1: Pre-test and Post-test Scores**

<b>Groups</b>	<b>Pre-test Scores</b>		<b>Post-test Scores</b>	
	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>Treatment Group</b>	46.13	3.16	55.4	3.31
<b>Comparison Group</b>	46.37	3.11	46.13	3.12

To examine the effects of the CT-oriented approach on students' improvement of CT scores, the participants' pre-test and post-test CT scores were compared through the analysis of a series of independent samples t-tests. As shown in table 1, the mean pre-test CT score was 46.13 (SD=3.16) for the treatment group and 46.37 (SD=3.11) for the comparison group.

**Table 2: Treatment Group: From the Pre-test to the Post-test**

<b>Treatment Group from pre-test to post-test</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>T</b>	<b>Df</b>	<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>
	<b>-9.73</b>	<b>0.15</b>	<b>10.47</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>.000</b>

P < .05

**Table 3: Comparison Group: From the Pre-test to the Post-test**

<b>Comparison Group from pre-test to post-test</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>T</b>	<b>Df</b>	<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>
	<b>0.24</b>	<b>-0.1</b>	<b>.29</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>.77</b>

P < .05

The result of an independent samples t-test in table 1 shows that there was a significant difference ( $t=10.47$ ,  $df = 29$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ) in the pre-test CT scores between the two groups. In other words, the treatment group and the comparison group were at the same level in terms of their CT abilities before the study. In addition, as the mean pre-test CT scores of the two groups were at a relatively low level (under a score of 50), the CT ability of both groups was below average before the study (table 1).

The post-test CT scores as it is presented in tables 2 and 3, there is an increase in the treatment groups, compared with their respective pre-test CT scores. For this, table 2.4.2 revealed from the result of an independent samples t test, the post-test CT score of the treatment group was significantly higher ( $t=10.47$ ,  $df=29$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) than that of the comparison group ( $t=0.29$ ,  $df=29$ ,  $p > 0.05$ , table 3).

Specifically, the pre-test-post-test mean CT scores of the treatment group was  $-9.73$  ( $SD=0.15$ ); while the mean CT scores of the comparison group from the pre-test-post-test score was  $0.24$  ( $SD=-0.1$ ). Meanwhile, the pre-test-post-test CT scores in the comparison group showed no significant difference. On the other hand, the pre-test-post-test CT scores of the treatment group showed that the group performed better in their CT than the comparison group after following the treatment.

### **3.0 Analysis and Discussion**

The pre-test results of this study revealed that EFL students' CT ability was relatively low. This implies that the participants' scores in the pre-test did not reach the average (i.e. less than 50). One basic reason for this was that the courses offered to students focus on language proficiency. The other reason may also happen when the writers' statement seems clear for them but it is not quite clear for the readers since they could not always notice from the words alone just like what the writers have in mind. In contrast, the findings of the study in the post-test revealed that asking students to write argumentative essays in the treatment group help them to improve their CT skills from time to time. In addition, students in the treatment group could also support their argumentative essays with convincing arguments. Therefore, teaching argumentative essay can be taken as a good instrument for promoting students' CT skills (Bassham et al., 2011).

The comparison group students did not show any significant improvement in their CT ability. This result is related with Gelder (2005) who stated that “humans are not naturally critical” (p.42). On the other hand, the students in the treatment group exhibited a significant improvement in their CT skills in argumentative writing. They were able to use more credible evidence, address alternative positions and arguments, support conclusions, and maintain the logical flow of ideas in essays. The positive results support the possibility of introducing CT in foreign writing classes.

#### **4. Conclusion Remarks**

The finding of this study revealed that students’ CT skills can be promoted through teaching argumentative essay. The writing process and CT took place in the argumentative essay writing classrooms when writers are encouraged to focus on the technical skills of writing. In academic writing, writers needed to make decisions for materials, for idea, and for the content of their writing. This study found that previous language proficiency had influence on writing process and CT skills. Therefore, the integration of CT is bound to guide students to think more critically. In general, CT is a teachable skill in foreign writing classes. CT skill scan be taught using argumentative essay writing in EFL classrooms. The whole thinking process in preparation of writing can be captured in the classroom when learners learn from the choosing of materials to drafting and revising. Finally, it is suggested that future research explore the best ways for promoting undergraduate students’ CT skills and English language abilities in EFL context. Future research could also be done to identify the most preferable approach in integrating argumentative writing while teaching CT skills in real EFL writing classrooms.

#### **Authors’ Contributions**

All authors of the research had their own contributions in the process of conception and design, acquisition of data, and analysis and interpretation of data. All have been involved in revising the manuscript critically. All take public responsibility for the whole content. All are equally accountable for all aspects of the work. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

#### **Availability of Data and Materials**

Please contact corresponding author for data requests.

#### **5.0 References of the Study**

- Bassham, G., Nardone, H., Wallace, J. & Irwin, W. (2011). *Critical Thinking: a Student's Introduction*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Education.
- Bloom, B. (1956). *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: Handbook I: Cognitive Domain*. New York City, NY: Longmans, Green.
- Cottrell, S. (2005). *Critical Thinking Skills: Developing Effective Analysis and Argument*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Facione, P. (2011). *Critical Thinking: What it is and why it counts*. Millbrae, CA: Measured Reasons and the California Academic Press.
- Fulwiler, T. (2002). *College Writing (3<sup>rd</sup> edition)*. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook Publisher.
- McCrimmon, J. M. (1973). *Writing with a Purpose. (Short edition)*. Florida: Florida State University Press.
- Murtadho, F. (2013). *BerpikirKritis Dan StrategiMetakognisi: AlternatifSaranaPengoptimalan*.
- LatihanMenulisArgumentasi. 2<sup>nd</sup> International Seminar on Quality and Affordable Education (ISQAE 2013).

Nik, Y., Hamzah, A. & Rafidee, H. (2010). Why Writing in ESL is Difficult for Undergraduates in a Public University in Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur: Malaya University Press.

Oshima, A. & Hogue, A. (2007). Introduction to Academic Writing (3<sup>rd</sup> edition). White Plains, NY: Pearson Longman.

Paul, R. & Elder, L. (2008). Critical Thinking: The Art of Socratic Questioning, Part III. Journal of Developmental Education , 31 (Spring).

Paul, R. & Elder, L. (2013). Critical Thinking: Tools for Taking Charge of Your Professional and Personal Life. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Weigle, S. (2002). Assessing Writing. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.