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Students' perspectives on writing an argumentative essay in an academic literacy module

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Background: Argumentation, which is an important skill required of students in higher education, is often assessed through writing. It is a difficult skill for students to grasp, resulting in many challenges; however, it can be developed through practice and should receive greater attention, as it fosters the development of critical thinking skills, thereby better equips students to become active and democratic citizens.

Objectives: This study reflects on first-year students' perceptions and experiences of writing an argumentative essay in an Academic Literacy module. The aim of the study was to gain a better understanding of students' writing challenges in order to develop meaningful ways of revising the course and ultimately enhancing their argumentative skills.

Method: A qualitative approach was used, and data were collected by means of an online student questionnaire. The theoretical framework underpinning this research is socio-constructivism.

Results: The findings revealed specific areas of challenges experienced by students, which may not necessarily be attributed to cognitive abilities or unfamiliarity with the different components of an argument, but rather to aspects that are often overlooked, for example, lack of practice and discomfort arising from the topic.

Conclusion: The study highlights the importance of conscious planning and the scaffolding of each stage of the process through ample opportunities for both dialogue and writing practice. Some pedagogical implications are suggested.

Contribution: Currently, the literature on argumentation in the South African context, as reflected through student voices, is scarce. This research helps to address this gap. Additionally, the pedagogical implications provide ways in which student challenges may be addressed.

Keywords: argumentation; argumentative essay writing; higher education; critical thinking; learning and teaching; academic literacy.

Introduction

Argumentation is regarded as an essential 21st-century skill required of students. It facilitates learning by helping students develop critical thinking, academic writing, and communicative skills (Kleemola, Hyytinen & Toom 2022; Wingate 2012). By developing strong argumentation skills, students can become active and democratic citizens. In the higher education context, argumentation is usually practised and demonstrated through different learning activities, one of which is the writing of an argumentative essay (Latifi, Noroozi & Talaee 2020). Notably, argumentation is a challenging skill to teach. Moreover, it is also difficult for students to grasp and, as such, is a skill in which they often perform poorly (Ferretti & Lewis 2013). Becoming 'good at it' is a lifelong journey that needs to start early (Van Gelder 2005:42); however, it is a skill that can be taught and developed through practice (Duro et al. 2013).

With the above in mind, argumentation is explicitly taught in the undergraduate Academic Literacy (AL) module. Students then demonstrate the skills they have learnt by writing an argumentative essay. Argumentation is particularly important for the cohort of students, as their future professions involve community engagement. They should therefore be able to engage with community issues by presenting and justifying their views in a logical manner. However, despite the many scaffolds put in place to teach students how to develop and present an argument, their final work often requires significant improvement. This suggests that the current approach used to teach argumentation in the module may not be fully meeting students' needs and may therefore need to be revisited.

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Understanding students' overall perceptions of writing an argumentative essay is especially important in multilingual contexts and among first-generation university students, as is the case at most South African universities. These students may lack access to support systems and/or experience challenges related to language proficiency (Meyer & Schreiber 2024; Pienaar, Padmanabhanunni & Smith 2021). They may also have had limited exposure to argumentative structures and be unfamiliar with the necessary academic conventions (Mudau, Cekiso & Mandende 2025; Wingate 2012). Additionally, students, especially English second-language (ESL) speakers, may not be able to express their arguments adequately in English, which can mask their critical thinking skills (Johan et al. 2023). By understanding the specific barriers students face, the process used to teach argumentative writing in the course can be revisited to improve its effectiveness.

While some international studies have explored the challenges students face when writing argumentative essays, these studies have mostly assessed students' argumentative writing from a textual perspective by analysing their written products (Ghanbari & Salari 2022) or by using Likert-scale items to assess their argumentative writing challenges. Notably, within the South African context, although studies have examined students' general writing skills (e.g., Mudau et al. 2025), research on argumentative writing remains relatively sparse. Additionally, very few of the existing studies have foregrounded student voices by asking students to share their overall perceptions of writing an argumentative essay – a gap that this study attempts to address.

Hence, the central research question for this study is: How do undergraduate students perceive and experience the process of writing an argumentative essay in an AL module? To explore this further, the study addressed the following specific questions to extend the literature on argumentation in higher education:

- What are students' perceptions of writing the argumentative essay?
- What challenges do students encounter when writing an argumentative essay?
- What aspects of argumentative essay writing do students find less challenging?
- How can insights from students' experiences inform the teaching of argumentation in the AL course?

Literature review

Writing and argumentation

Writing is a complex physical and mental activity (Nunan 2003). It is an important skill for students, as it is through writing that they can express their 'thoughts, ideas and attitudes' (Dang, Chau & Tra 2020:206). More specifically, through the writing of an argumentative essay, students are able to adopt a position on a topic and persuade the reader of their viewpoint by providing various forms of support. They are also able to anticipate opposing ideas and acknowledge these in their writing, while simultaneously convincing the reader that their own position has merit (Chase 2011). Additionally, students are expected to present their ideas in a clear and logical manner, using sound reasoning so that the reader can follow their argument. These requirements make the writing of an argumentative essay far more cognitively demanding and therefore more challenging than other forms of writing, such as narrative writing (Noroozi, Biemans & Mulder 2016).

Nonetheless, despite the cognitive demands of argumentative essay writing, the skills that students acquire through this form of writing are essential to all aspects of life (Kuhn 1992), as the ability 'to form and hold beliefs, make judgements, and consider opposing views' (Dickson 2004:35) is vital to the significant decisions that people make in their lives (Chen & Jun Zhang 2025) As such, the teaching of argumentative skills is important not only for learners in academic contexts, but also in the workplace and in everyday life.

Challenges in writing the argumentative essay

Several international studies have identified challenges and gaps in both first language (L1) and second language (L2) students' basic argumentation skills, experienced not only by novice students but also by senior students (Kleemola et al. 2022). Some of these challenges include linguistic difficulties, inadequate background knowledge, problems with the organisation and structure of the essay, and the ability to think critically (Al-Abed-Al-Haq & Ahmed 1994; Ka-kan-dee & Kaur 2014). Additionally, some studies have shown that students may struggle to adopt a position, which is central to argumentation (Kleemola et al. 2022; Wingate 2012), and this may result in an over-reliance on research sources (Kleemola et al. 2022; Lea & Street 1998; McCulloch 2012). Similarly, students may experience difficulty in acknowledging and presenting a view that differs from their own position, namely a counter-argument (Hyytinen et al. 2021), as well as difficulty in providing a rebuttal to that position, referred to by Perkins (1989) as 'my-side bias'. Wingate (2012:153) argues that this could be attributed to students having limited or even incorrect conceptions of argumentation. All these issues relate to the core elements necessary for the successful writing of an argumentative essay.

Within the South African context, most studies have focused on students' general writing abilities or specifically on ESL students, rather than on argumentative writing per se. These studies portray a bleak picture of the writing preparedness of students entering university, reporting that they struggle with various aspects of writing, including, among others, grammar, coherence and cohesion, spelling, and the ability to present convincing arguments (Cekiso, Tshotsho & Somniso 2016; Mdodana-Zide & Mafugu 2023; Mudau et al. 2025; Pineteh 2014). To illustrate, in a study on students' general writing abilities, Mudau et al. (2025) found that students experienced difficulties in conducting research, structuring arguments, and citing sources correctly. Mudau et al. (2025) attribute these difficulties to

limited prior experience and inadequate preparation at high school level, which result in students struggling to adapt to the formal writing expectations required at university. Similarly, in a study conducted by Pineteh (2014:15) on the academic writing challenges of undergraduate students, he reports that students experience difficulties in 'reading critically, interpreting, analysing and synthesising ideas'. These challenges arise from students' inability to cope with the literacy expectations of the institution. This is often linked to students' diverse literacy and schooling experiences, as well as the fact that English, which is the medium of instruction at most South African universities, may not necessarily be the native language of many students.

More recently, to enhance the writing skills of ESL university students, Mdodana-Zide and Mafugu (2023:34), working within the context of a writing centre, explored the academic writing difficulties experienced by students. They (Mdodana-Zide & Mafugu 2023) found that students struggled to understand both the content of the topic and the topic itself. Consequently, while some of the students' discussions related to the content, many of the responses were vague, unrelated, and/or lacked depth. Other challenges included difficulties with organising the assignment, language and mechanics, referencing, and in-text citation. In order to support students' writing development, Mdodana-Zide and Mafugu (2023) recommend collaborative strategies – in their case, between the writing centre and lecturers.

Given the range of academic writing challenges students face, understanding the specific difficulties they encounter when writing an argumentative essay becomes even more important. Such insight will not only contribute to the existing body of literature by addressing the noted gap but will also inform pedagogy aimed at improving the effectiveness of writing interventions in the AL course and across the institution.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework underpinning this research is socio-constructivism (Vygotsky 1978). In constructivism, 'learning by doing' is emphasised, together with the support of scaffolding – a term introduced by Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) and associated with Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The premise of the ZPD is that an inexperienced individual can learn the required skills with the assistance of a more experienced individual – skills that they may not have been able to acquire independently (Taber 2020). In other words, students are able to learn from the teacher as well as through social interaction and engagement with peers. Through scaffolding, a teacher is able to support students within their ZPD as needed, and gradually reduce this support until it is no longer required.

Closely aligned with Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD is Lea and Street's (2006) Academic Literacies approach, which views reading and writing as social practices. The Academic Literacies approach focuses on the development of students' literacy practices, which lies at the core of the AL module. Since each discipline has its own discourse, values, and practices, students are taught how to navigate between these disciplinary contexts. More specifically, guided by the Academic Literacies approach, students are provided with the necessary tools to enable them to move between different writing styles for different tasks and to use the appropriate literacy practices required for each style of writing, while also engaging with the relevant 'social meanings and identities' that may arise from each task (Lea & Street 2006:227).

Research methods and design

Research context

This study forms part of a larger project aimed at enhancing learning and teaching through reflection on interventions in an AL module at a higher education institution in South Africa. The university in question draws most of its student population from historically disadvantaged communities, with many first-entry students being first-generation university students as well as speakers of English as an additional language (EAL).

Background: Teaching argumentation in the Academic Literacy module

The AL module is a compulsory semester module offered to different groups of Community and Health Sciences students during both semesters of the academic year. The module is designed to provide students with the various literacy practices required in their respective disciplines so that they may gain equal epistemic access to disciplinary knowledge. The process approach to writing is used in this module for all written assessment tasks, including the argumentative essay. Students first submit a draft on which they receive detailed and constructive feedback from their tutors. This is followed by a tutorial session during which students are given collective verbal feedback on common problem areas as well as strong elements identified in their essays. Students then use the remainder of the tutorial session to engage with the tutor feedback, seek clarification where necessary, and begin the revision process.

As part of the pre-writing activities aimed at helping students develop their understanding of, and thoughts about, the topic, the essay question is unpacked during a lecture. During this process, key words are identified and explained, and the scope of the debate is discussed. Thereafter, students brainstorm the topic with a seated partner, which includes listing points both for and against the topic. They are also encouraged to research the topic to gather sufficient information for both sides of the argument and to provide evidence in support of the points they identify. Using this information, students then draw a mind map and ultimately decide on their position.

The topic students were required to debate was: 'Should social justice begin at school level?' This was a contentious issue in South Africa, as many parents were advocating for greater diversity in the curriculum and for schools to accommodate cultural and religious diversity in student uniforms. Time permitting, the brainstorming and mind-mapping activities continued into the tutorial session, which concluded with a debate.

In the lectures, concurrent with the teaching of skills such as summarising and paraphrasing information, distinguishing between formal and informal writing, referencing sources, reading critically, and applying logic and reasoning, the classical model of argumentation was used as a framework to teach students the different components of an argument. Students were taught how to write an effective introduction, including, among other aspects, presenting a claim and sub-claims, as well as how to structure body paragraphs by developing sub-claims using support, evidence, and statistics. In addition, students were taught how to acknowledge and respond to counter-arguments without undermining their own point of view. This was done in a scaffolded manner, and students were provided with ample examples of each component taught.

Research design

This study adopted a qualitative research design rooted in an interpretivist approach, as it sought to understand first-hand how the students experience writing an argumentative essay (Denzin & Lincoln 2018). The approach was inductive, as it enabled the researcher to gain a clearer understanding of participants' views through their own voices (Babbie 2015).

Participants and sampling

As part of the larger study, the current research explores students' perceptions of writing an argumentative essay and the difficulties they experienced in the process. Since the purpose of this research was to inform pedagogical practices in the AL module, the views of all students in the class were sought to obtain a comprehensive picture of their collective experiences. The study was conducted during semesters 1 and 2 of the 2023 academic year with all first-year students registered for the module. In any given semester, approximately 200 students register for the module. Participation was voluntary, and no incentives were provided.

A total of 65 students participated in the study. Their ages ranged from 18 to 22 years, and approximately 63% of the participants were EAL speakers. Since the purpose of the research was to solicit student feedback solely to strengthen the course, the response rate is irrelevant. According to Ballantyne (2003, cited in Nulty 2008), even if only one response was received from one person out of 100 participants, this would not necessarily be problematic unless the response differed substantially from what the other students would likely have said.

Data collection

Data were collected by means of a questionnaire designed by the researcher to gather information on students' perceptions of writing the argumentative essay. A questionnaire was considered appropriate for this study because of its efficiency, its ability to maintain anonymity, and its role in mitigating power imbalances that may arise between the researcher and students (Ranganathan & Caduff 2023).

The first section of the questionnaire collected students' biographical information (name [*pseudonym*], age, gender, mother tongue, etc.). The second section consisted of a combination of closed and open-ended questions designed to elicit students' engagement with and overall experiences of writing the argumentative essay, as well as the aspects they found most and least challenging. These questions included, among others, the following: 'Did you enjoy writing the essay? Explain your answer'; 'What did you find most challenging about writing the argumentative essay?'; and 'What did you find least challenging about writing the essay?' These questions were specifically phrased to obtain responses relevant to the key research questions. The questionnaire was disseminated to students at the end of each semester via Google Forms. Students had the option of remaining anonymous or using a pseudonym.

Data analysis

The data obtained from Google Forms were transferred to an Excel file, after which the responses to each open-ended question were analysed thematically – a widely used technique for analysing qualitative data. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework for thematic analysis was used to guide the process. This involved multiple readings of student responses in order to become familiar with the data. Thereafter, the data were coded inductively by highlighting key words and phrases in relation to each question. These words and phrases were then grouped into initial themes, which were then reviewed and confirmed. The data analysis process was iterative, and the six steps were applied rigorously and reflexively to ensure credibility and dependability of the findings. In addition, thematic analysis proved useful as it enables the researcher to examine all the perspectives provided by the participants, highlighting similarities, differences and additional insights (Newell et al. 2011).

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of the Western Cape Humanities and Social Science Research Ethics Committee. The ethical clearance number is HS22/2/12. Student participation was voluntary, and all participants signed consent forms. They were assured that the information collected would be used solely for the purposes of this study, that their identities would not be disclosed, and that they could use pseudonyms should they wish to do so. The data are stored on the researcher's portable hard drives, which are protected by a unique password.

Findings and discussion

Students' perceptions of writing the argumentative essay

Enjoyment

Just over half of the participants indicated that they did not enjoy writing the essay. These students included both English first-language (EFL) and EAL speakers, although the majority were EAL speakers. These findings indicate that writing at university level is a specialised form of language use (Archer 2010) that can be challenging for both EFL and EAL speakers, suggesting that both groups require guidance in writing (Wingate 2015). The fact that more than half of the students did not enjoy writing the argumentative essay is of concern, as enjoyment – which may be described as the positive feelings experienced when completing a task – is an important emotion that can encourage students to engage more actively in a task (Derakhshan & Yin 2024). Furthermore, enjoyment of a task is often associated with stronger performance. Students' reasons for not enjoying the task are discussed in the next section on challenges because of the overlap in themes.

Reasons for enjoyment

The two main themes relating to students' enjoyment were the relevance of the topic and the development of literacy practices learnt in the course.

Topic relevance: Some students' enjoyment of the task was enhanced by their positive engagement with the topic, as reflected in the comment below:

> 'I really liked the topic of whether social justice should begin at the school level. I found the topic to be engaging because it required me to reflect on my own experiences and opinions as well as other people's circumstances. The essay topic also presented many possible arguments to approve or disapprove of whether social justice should begin at the school level. Therefore, I liked the process of choosing which evidence to support either side of the argument. I enjoyed researching and collecting material because I had to use local sources since the topic was in the context of South Africa. This provided me with an understanding and awareness of the conditions in South Africa.' (Takumi iko, Semester 2, 20 years)

Linnenbrink and Pintrich (2003) argue that when students perceive a task as meaningful, valuable, and interesting, it is more likely to evoke positive emotions, which may in turn positively influence their overall performance.

Development of literacy practices: These practices included critical thinking, and analytical and writing skills as reflected in the following comments:

> 'I was challenged and encouraged to critically and analytically think and discuss through an opinion while considering external factors.' (Claire, Semester 1, 19 years)

> 'It needed critical thinking and critical writing which enhanced my writing skills.' (Urrah, Semester 1, 17 years)

According to Beniche, Larouz and Anasse (2021), students who are able to think critically are better positioned to present their ideas logically and are more likely to avoid emotional responses and prejudice when supporting their stance.

Emotional and motivational aspects

Students' overall engagement with the material appeared to be relatively positive. They reported that the lectures were easy to follow, largely because the slides were detailed and clear, numerous examples were provided, explanations were thorough, and the teaching was clear. These factors may have contributed positively to students' motivation. Almost all students indicated that they made use of the resources available on the course site. However, some students described the resources as being difficult, which may have affected their engagement with the task.

Additionally, the topic appeared to evoke emotional responses among some students, as they perceived it to be sensitive and controversial. Sensitive topics may affect students on a personal level, resulting in discomfort that can potentially stifle critical engagement rather than promote it (Mendelowitz 2003).

Challenges students face when writing the essay

The main themes emerging from students' responses included understanding the topic, the level of preparedness from prior schooling, the sensitivity of the topic, the structure of the essay, and research and information-literacy challenges. These themes are discussed below.

Understanding the topic

Some students experienced the topic as confusing and difficult to understand, as reflected in the following comments:

> 'It was confusing and I did not understand the question.' (Barbie, Semester 1, 19 years)

> 'Because I did not understand the question on what we had to write about.' (Ntosh, Semester 1, 20 years)

Understanding the topic is the first and most important step in the writing process, as failure to interpret an essay question correctly often leads to the inclusion of irrelevant information as well as difficulties in mastering the writing skills required in relation to the topic (Mdodana-Zide & Mafugu 2023). Although many factors may contribute to students' poor writing skills – for instance, inadequate preparedness for the transition to university, language proficiency challenges, and unfamiliarity with university literacy practices and disciplinary conventions (Mudau et al. 2025) – Wingate (2015) stresses the importance of providing students with explicit guidance throughout the essay-writing process, including during the planning stage, which focuses on identifying and understanding the key words relating to the topic.

As discussed earlier, in the AL module the topic was first unpacked during a lecture, after which students brainstormed the topic with a seated partner. However, this approach may present challenges if both students have limited insight into the topic. Hence, group brainstorming is recommended (Dornbrack & Dixon 2014), as there is a greater likelihood that at least one student in the group may possess some knowledge of the topic. Additionally, Dornbrack and Dixon (2014) argue that individual brainstorming alone is insufficient, as students' own knowledge or understanding of the topic may be flawed or inaccurate. The effectiveness of group brainstorming is further emphasised by Rao (2007), who found that the quality of students' writing improved when they were first given time to think independently about the topic and generate ideas, then worked in pairs to share those ideas, followed by a class brainstorming session. Dornbrack and Dixon (2014) and Rao (2007) suggest that brainstorming should be explicitly taught to students.

In the AL module, while the concept of brainstorming was briefly explained to students, greater emphasis on the process may have enhanced students' engagement with the task making it less challenging. Furthermore, although students were encouraged to read the text provided to them on social justice in schools, an ideal starting point may have been a discussion of the text itself. This would have given students who lacked background knowledge or awareness of social justice an opportunity to engage more fully with the topic and gain a better understanding of the essay question, which may in turn have resulted in a more productive brainstorming session.

Level of preparedness

Students' previous educational experiences may have had a significant influence on their writing proficiency, as reflected in the following comments:

> 'I didn't enjoy it because it was different from how I used to write in high school.' (Melokhule, Semester 1, 18 years)

> 'Compared to the high school framework I'm used to, it was completely dissimilar …' (Thando, Semester 2, 19 years)

Similar findings were reported by Mudau et al. (2025), who assessed first-year students' perceptions of the factors affecting their academic writing. Mudau et al. (2025) highlight the varying levels of writing preparation across different high schools in South Africa. They argue that students from schools where the emphasis was primarily on rote learning, examinations, and group work often find the transition to university writing requirements significantly more difficult. In contrast, students who had received effective writing instruction at high school level felt better equipped to deal with writing tasks at university-level. This is evident in the following comment:

> 'It was not hard because since I did English Home Language at school; my English teacher had taught us how to write a good Argumentative essay, we did Argumentative essays in Literature and in Long transactional texts etc. …' (Lindt, Semester 1, 18 years)

It is possible that Lindt's strong schooling foundation helped to ease her transition to university writing. Additionally, the support provided within the AL module may have further assisted her in adapting to the required writing conventions. However, in cases where students had not previously been exposed to different writing genres, the support offered in the module may not have been sufficient. This possibly suggests the need for greater emphasis on the initial stages of the writing process, such as the planning and brainstorming phases as discussed earlier. Furthermore, the use of sample essays or exemplars has been found to be useful in demonstrating quality and developing students' understanding of what constitutes good work (Sin 2019).

Sensitivity of the topic

The topic of social justice evoked tension and discomfort among some students, as illustrated in the following comment:

> 'The topic is controversial and had a lot of possible sensitive sub-claims that was not easy to explain without offending anyone.' (Ezekiel, Semester 2, 19 years)

Mendelowitz (2003) argues that the writer's identity plays an important role in the way texts are produced. Furthermore, students need to feel empowered to adopt positions with authority and confidence (Mendelowitz 2003). While some students, such as Takumi iko, appeared comfortable with the topic and were able to draw from their own experiences, Ezekiel, on the other hand, felt uncomfortable expressing views that she believed might offend others.

Research studies (Dustin, Schmalz & Allen 2022; Millner 2023; Zembylas 2017) argue that discomfort in the classroom should be embraced. While it is important for teachers to create a 'safe' classroom environment, this does not mean that the classroom should be entirely free from discomfort. Boler (1999:176) argues that students should be encouraged to move 'outside their comfort zones' and to question their 'beliefs and assumptions', which, according to Zembylas (2017), may lead to shifts in thinking and possibly even social transformation.

Structure and organisation

Within this theme, two sub-categories emerged, namely writing a claim and sub-claims, and providing counter-arguments, as illustrated in the following comments:

> 'The structure of it and that you had to have a main point and two sub-claims. Having to choose a side but also somehow think of how others think of your point …' (Urrah, Semester 1, 17 years)

> 'How to write a counter-argument without making it seem as though I agree with it.' (Lily, Semester 1, 20 years)

These comments reflect the difficulty some students experienced in positioning themselves within the argument, identifying points to support their stance, and simultaneously considering possible counter-arguments – all of which are key and interrelated components of an argumentative essay. For example, failure to adopt a clear position can negatively

affect students' ability to develop rebuttals, which require a basic understanding of position-taking (Kleemola et al. 2022). Similarly, students' limited knowledge of the topic may prevent them from adequately analysing and evaluating information, resulting in difficulties in identifying conflicting viewpoints (Wingate 2012).

Additionally, students are expected to establish a position, which requires them to express a voice and adopt a stance. These are less obvious features of academic writing and are often not made explicit to students. Furthermore, once students have established a position, they are expected to present it coherently and logically. These aspects of developing an argument pose considerable challenges for students.

To assist students in overcoming some of these difficulties, Wingate (2012) suggests that writing instruction should focus on the importance of developing an argument by establishing one's own position – which lies at the core of argumentation – rather than focusing solely on linguistic or 'surface' features. Students should also be made aware of how features such as structure and style contribute to the development of an argument. In addition, Wingate (2012) highlights the value of exemplars in providing students with an authentic understanding of the expected standards. Finally, Dang et al. (2020) concur that it is not uncommon for students to experience challenges with structure, as well as with generating and developing ideas logically, as these tasks require strong research skills, which students in the current study also identified as challenging.

Research and information-literacy challenges

These challenges related to the availability of information, difficulties in finding relevant information, and difficulties in distinguishing relevant from irrelevant information, as illustrated in the following comments:

> 'There not being a lot of resources on the internet to provide our information with the necessary statements or info required.' (Binyamin, Semester 2, 18 years)

> 'Finding information for the counter argument.' (Zee, Semester 2, 19 years)

> 'Finding critical information to back up your points.' (Thando, Semester 2, 18 years)

From these comments, it appears that some students may not have known how to conduct research and were therefore unable to locate relevant information, while others may not have known how to use information effectively in a presentable manner. Alternatively, they may have struggled to comprehend the information because of inadequate reading skills. Similar findings were reported by Pineteh (2014) in a study on the academic writing challenges of undergraduate students. Pineteh (2014) found that students displayed poor research skills and experienced difficulties in reading, interpreting, and synthesising information from different sources. As a result, they had limited ideas about the topic and were unable to provide sufficient evidence in support of their views, leading to unsubstantiated claims.

It is well established that both reading and writing are essential to argumentation (Newell et al. 2011). Possessing the necessary background knowledge on a topic, acquired through reading, is critical if students are to express and support their claims effectively (Dang et al. 2020). These factors may therefore help to explain why students experienced difficulties with the structure of the essay. In light of this, it becomes essential to provide sustained reading support and to embed information literacy more explicitly within the AL course.

Least challenging aspects of writing the argumentative essay

The most frequently occurring themes related to writing the introduction and conclusion, as well as structuring the essay, will now be discussed.

Writing the introduction and conclusion

A few students indicated that they did not experience any difficulties when writing the introduction and/or conclusion, as reflected in the following comments:

> 'The introduction was easy to write.' (Paradise, Semester 1, 18 years)

> 'Writing the conclusion, because it was simply a bit of the introduction and body paragraphs summarised.' (Reid, Semester 1, 19 years)

This may be because the introduction typically involves summarising the topic and stating the aim of the essay, while the conclusion generally requires a summary or reflection on the essay. These are often regarded as lower-order skills (Anderson & Krathwohl 2001) or more familiar AL practices (Lea & Street 1998).

Structuring the essay

Interestingly, the students who reported that they found the structure of the essay least challenging were mostly EAL speakers. This may be because they attended schools in which English had long been established as the language of learning and teaching; however, this could not be confirmed. This is evident in statements such as:

> 'Organising the essay structure.' (Zeigh, Semester 1, 20 years)

> 'The structure of the essay and the conclusion.' (Josh, Semester 2, 18 years)

Implications for pedagogy

The findings of this study drew attention to several issues related to the learning and teaching of the argumentative essay in the AL module. In this section, some of these issues are highlighted and reflected on to suggest possible ways in which argumentation skills may be taught more effectively in the course.

Need for explicit pre-writing support

Pre-writing support includes the guidance and resources made available to students before they begin writing and

should be provided in a scaffolded manner. An important part of this process includes, among other aspects, unpacking the essay question, identifying key concepts, and clarifying the expectations of the task to enhance students' understanding of both the task and/or the topic. Dornbrack and Dixon (2014) suggest brainstorming as a means of improving understanding of the topic. While brainstorming and mind mapping formed part of the pre-writing stages in the AL course, the responses of Barbie and Ntosh suggest that greater attention should be given to these stages.

Buehl (2011) proposes collaborative brainstorming, which allows students to recognise the limitations of their own thinking and learn from one another simply through the sharing of ideas. As such, creating spaces for dialogue and discussion throughout the argumentative-writing process is important, especially for EAL students. Such oral-language opportunities can support students in managing the complexities of academic writing (Hadaway & Young 2006). These steps, together with unpacking the essay topic, including, for example, explanations of key words or phrases (Wingate 2015), are crucial in helping students begin the writing process and better meet the required expectations. They may also contribute to building students' self-confidence.

Use of exemplars and model texts

While the methods discussed above may help students identify gaps in their knowledge and develop a clearer understanding of the topic, students are still required to write their essays according to the appropriate academic conventions for constructing a claim, sub-claims, and counter-arguments. These tasks require more sophisticated linguistic skills, with which many students in the module reported difficulty.

Wingate (2012) suggests that, in order to model writing effectively, a research text and/or exemplar on the topic could be used to demonstrate different arguments, evidence, counter-arguments, as well as the appropriate register and discourse markers. Modelling both content and form is especially important for EAL speakers, as it helps them acquire the language of argumentation and develop as academic writers. Since not all students may have exposure to academically informed discussions or come from communities that engage in the forms of argumentation expected in higher education, reading for writing becomes essential (Buehl 2011).

Integration of reading and information-literacy support

Students should be able to conduct research, distinguish relevant from irrelevant information, and synthesise information from different sources. These are skills with which students often struggle (Pineteh 2014), and similar challenges were expressed by participants in the AL course. Embedding information literacy within the course may therefore provide a more intentional way of developing students' research skills. Information-literacy skills 'enable students to become research-oriented, hold critical approaches to knowledge, be critical thinkers, consider things from different perspectives, develop their own ideas and defend and share these in an ethical manner' (Bharuthram, Mohamed & Louw 2019). Closely related to researching and writing, is reading (Shanahan 2016). Reading skills and strategies should therefore also be integrated throughout the course, as good reading skills will enable students to engage more critically with the information they encounter in their research.

Conclusion

This research attempted to understand first-year students' perceptions of writing the argumentative essay, with the intention of improving pedagogical practices in an AL module. The findings highlight that positive student engagement with course materials (lecture slides, notes, worksheets, guidelines, etc.) does not necessarily result in task enjoyment and/or enhance students' overall experiences of the task but is influenced by factors such as the perceived level of difficulty and emotional aspects. Additionally, task enjoyment also appears to depend on factors such as the relevance of the topic and the learning that occurred, which may have contributed to a more enriching and meaningful learning experience for students.

The findings further highlight the significant challenges students face when engaging in argumentative writing. These challenges include an understanding of the topic, the level of preparedness from prior schooling, the sensitivity of the topic, the structure and organisation of the essay, as well as information-literacy challenges. Of note is that, while these challenges may have served as stumbling blocks for some students, other students embraced them, indicating that writing the essay helped them to develop their writing, critical thinking, and analytical skills.

Importantly, while there may be some differences in students' levels of preparedness, it is also possible that some of these difficulties arose from shortcomings in the course structure and teaching practices. This highlights the importance of careful planning and the scaffolding of each stage of the writing process, as well as the provision of opportunities for students to practise the different argumentative requirements with explicit support, both through dialogue and writing, as discussed above. The significance of these practices cannot be overemphasized.

Finally, this study was limited to a relatively small cohort of first-year students at a single higher education institution and may therefore not fully represent student experiences across institutions. To address this limitation, further research could include a broader sample of students from the module itself and/or from different institutions. Future studies could also incorporate interviews or focus-group discussions with participants, which would allow for deeper probing of responses as well as the triangulation of data. Despite these limitations, this study makes a valuable contribution to the literature on argumentation by foregrounding student voices and informing pedagogical practices within the AL course.

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CRediT authorship contribution

Sharita Bharuthram: Conceptualisation; Data curation; Formal analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Project administration; Resources; Software; Supervision; Validation; Visualisation; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The author confirms that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article and its listed references.

Disclaimer

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