

L2 Learners' Argument Building for MA Essay Assignments: Analysis Through the Knowledge-telling Strategy

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Abstract

For academic essay assignments in postgraduate education, second language (L2) students must be aware of critical reading and argument construction in an academic debate, as well as the academic audience and the purpose of the essay for knowledge transformation. Despite the need for L2 postgraduate students' awareness of academic argumentation, little research has been conducted on this theme, as many research studies have focused on L2 learners' awareness and representation of writing practices and strategies, not critical reading and argumentation. In particular, studies have not addressed the cognitive process of less successful L2 learners, which is defined as a knowledge-telling model. Researchers have not suggested implications as to how to provide teaching and facilitation for L2 postgraduate students who enter the academic community as novice academic writers. To address this issue, the present study examined two less successful L2 learners' awareness and processes of their reading and academic argumentations for Master of Arts essay assignments. The author analysed interviews with the two participants based on Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis and Bereiter and Scardamalia's knowledge-telling model. The results suggested that the two less successful L2 learners selected information relevant only to their previous experience for argument building and were unaware of academic debates when they assessed their selected review articles, both of which are characteristics of the knowledge-telling approach. The author argues that the L2 students who prepare to undertake postgraduate programmes should be encouraged to raise awareness of critically evaluating research studies in an academic debate. Such awareness raising can be conducted both in pre-sessional English for Academic Purposes contexts as well as in the course content of postgraduate programmes.

Keywords:

L2 learner, argumentative essays, critical reading, academic argumentation, cognitive processes, knowledge-telling, knowledge transforming

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1. Introduction

In university education, particularly in the postgraduate level of the humanities and social sciences, argumentative essays are frequently used as academic assignments (Grabe & Zhang, 2013; Wingate, 2012). Both first language (L1) learners and second language (L2) learners engage in writing argumentative essays using the strategies of academic literacy and critical evaluation of literature to satisfy academic course requirements in their essay assignments. Argumentative essays are defined not merely as involving reading and writing skills but rhetorical awareness and the use of critical reading and writing strategies to tailor the structure and content of essays to an academic audience (Carey & Flower, 1989; Grabe, 2009; Wallace & Wray, 2011). The academic audiences of argumentative essays are not only course tutors but also academic researchers. As a result, the writers of academic argumentative essays need to critically review the relevant knowledge and evidence in a scholarly debate and build an argument, which can contribute to knowledge transformation within an academic community. In summary, both L1 and L2 learners in postgraduate programmes need to recognise the two stages for organising their essays: They should be aware of the academic debate and critically evaluate the relevant literature to construct a persuasive and sound argument. Subsequently, they should develop the argument through the application of structure, language, signposting, style, and referencing, presenting it in a coherent manner. Concerning the need to review literature and construct an argument in academic essays, Ryshina-Pankova (2014, p.283) claims that 'In fact, what makes academic argumentation special is that it requires one to argue for one's position by explicitly engaging with other perspectives on the issue voiced in the past'. Similarly, Wingate (2012) suggests that argumentative essay writing requires L2 postgraduate learners to analyse and evaluate content knowledge from sources, establish their positions in the academic debate, and

present their position in a congruent manner.

As mentioned above, postgraduate students must employ representations, engage with academic argumentation, and utilise critical reading of scholarly literature to build arguments in academic debates. These academic argumentation and critical reading strategies are defined as the knowledge-transforming approach and are essential for writing practices at the presentation stage. The awareness of academic argumentation for knowledge transformation in an academic community is particularly important for L2 postgraduate students because L2 students learn their language skills through English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts before they study abroad in content-based programmes in the UK, the US, and other countries.

Despite the need for the awareness of academic argumentation and critical literacy, however, L2 students, who tend to focus on the development of their English language proficiency in EAP courses under skill-based EFL contexts, frequently lack an awareness of critical reading and the construction of an academic argument in scholarly debate. Li (2019, p.7) describes the difficulty inevitably experienced by many L2 learners as follows:

For many L2 learners, it is difficult to identify the voices of the authors when doing an academic reading or to make their own voices 'visible' in their writing. Lack of a critical voice and an inability to identify it usually has something to do with students' language proficiency but, more importantly, also criticality. In EAP courses, especially regarding academic reading and writing, there are widely recognised issues regarding promoting the criticality of students.

With regard to this issue of L2 students' preparation for postgraduate study, Li (2019, p.7) summarises the challenges of EAP courses in EFL contexts: 'Critical thinking ultimately becomes a challenge for many students given that they have never studied it in their prior learning'. While acknowledging L2 postgraduate learners' challenges of increasing awareness about criticality and academic argumentation, little research has explored the cognitive processes of less successful L2 students' awareness, use of critical reading strategies, and academic argument construction for university essay assignments.

Many studies of task representations concerning L2 postgraduate students' academic argumentative writing have focused on their interpretations of writing practices. Some researchers have investigated the techniques of L2 master's students, such as text borrowing, citing, and referencing, by examining the learners' written text and conducting discourse-based interviews (Harwood & Petric, 2012; Jomaa & Biddin, 2019; Petric &

Harwood, 2013; Petric, 2012; Shi, 2011, 2012a, 2012b). Other researchers have examined L2 postgraduate learners' representations of audience and the use of writing strategies for argumentative essays (Cabrejas-Penuelas, 2008; Ma, 2018; Negretti, 2017; Wong, 2005). The problems faced by L2 master's students while reading to write for academic argumentation have not been fully investigated yet.

The present study attempts to address this research gap by examining the cognitive characteristics of reading and academic argumentation of two less successful L2 postgraduate learners. These learners were each provided an assignment to write argumentative essays in the autumn term course of a Master of Arts (MA) programme in TESOL (Teaching English to the Speakers of Other Languages) at a UK university. The cognitive characteristics were analysed using the knowledge-telling model. The research questions of the study were as follows:

RQ1: What were the two less successful L2 postgraduate students' cognitive characteristics of reading and argument construction? How did they become aware of their strategies, plan arguments, and read their selected sources for their arguments?

RQ2: How did the two less successful L2 postgraduate learners' cognitive processes match the cognitive processes of the knowledge-telling model?

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

The participants were six L2 postgraduate students enrolled in TESOL or English language teaching MA programmes at a UK university. The author observed one of the MA TESOL modules, 'Second Language Learning Principles', through the autumn and winter terms. As they agreed to participate in the interviews, the author investigated the reading-to-write strategies for their argumentative essay assignments for the MA course. The two interview sessions were held in November 2017 and February/March 2018, respectively. Among the six learners, four learners were not particularly successful in their writing assignment, passing with a C grade. Two other learners, on the other hand, received A grades on the assignment, with distinction-level scores between 70–80. Their argumentative essays were based on arguments that were thoroughly supported through careful argumentation and references to literature.

After the initial review of the data, the two less successful participants were identified

for the present study. They all had advanced English-language proficiency, but they were not aware of the critical reading and academic argumentation required for argumentative essays. Learner 1 was a female student from Japan and had several years of teaching experience as well as office work experience of more than 20 years. Learner 2 was a female student from China and had 7–8 years of teaching experience.

2.2 Master of Arts (MA) Course and Assignment

Learners 1 and 2 were pursuing an MA in TESOL, and the topic of the assignment was *Second Language Learning Principles*. The main purpose of the assignment was to critically review competing theories related to their topic and to refer to their teaching experiences and other evidence while presenting their arguments.

2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Two 40-minute interviews were arranged with both Learners 1 and 2: one in November 2017 and the other in February/March 2018. Cohen's (2014) approach to semi-structured interviews was applied to record learners' retrospection of their reading-to-write strategies and argument construction processes. During the first interview, the author asked the two participants about their perceptions of reading-to-write tasks in the beginning stage of the MA course. The two participants had submitted their assignments in early January and had received feedback and grades in late January. The second interviews, therefore, were conducted in February/March and explored the participants' actual reading-to-write activities and argument construction for completed assignments. The participants were both asked to explain how they used their selected key source texts for their MA assignments.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach of thematic analysis was used to analyse the findings of the semi-structured interviews.

(1) Familiarisation with the data

Through the interviews with six postgraduate L2 learners, two were found to be successful, while the other four were less successful. The author initially conducted the coding of the four L2 learners' data: two more successful and two less successful learners. Then, he proceeded with the categorisation of these codes, performing a comparative analysis of the characteristics between the successful and less successful learners.

(2) Generating the initial codes

After coding the relevant data, the author combined the codes with similar meanings; the combinations were defined as categories. The categories found in the first interviews included prior experience in higher education, a pre-sessional course, MA learning, and an awareness of critical reading and writing. The categories from the second interviews consisted of understanding reading-to-write strategies, planning an argument and source text selection, and reading and assessing a selected review article.

(3) Searching for themes

After organising the categories, the author analysed the similarities and differences between the categories and summarised them as higher-level themes. The four cognitive themes were: awareness of critical reading and writing, planning an argument and source text selection, reading a selected review article, and assessing the review article to construct an argument.

(4) Reviewing the themes

In analysing the learners' data in the second-cycle coding analysis, the two less successful learners' categories and themes were reviewed. The three key themes were evident in the two less successful L2 learners: planning an argument and source text selection, reading a selected review article, and assessing the review article to construct an argument.

(5) Defining and naming themes

After reviewing the selected themes of the two less successful learners, the author evaluated their cognitive processes through the model of a knowledge-telling strategy.

To conduct the thematic analysis of the two less successful L2 learners, the knowledge-telling model, a framework of analysis on essay writing by less successful learners, was applied. The model was suggested by Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987), and it is illustrated in comparison with the knowledge transforming strategy.

The knowledge-telling model begins with the stage of a writer building a representation of a given assignment. The writer locates topic and genre identifiers, proceeding with memory probes. When the appropriate content is retrieved from his or her memory, the writer begins to write, and builds the representation of his or her text. In contrast, the model

of knowledge transforming is comprised of the interaction between a content knowledge space and a rhetorical knowledge space through the writer's metacognitive strategic information processing so that the writer attempts to write, monitor, and edit his or her essay content, structure, and language based on the needs of his or her target audience. In an academic setting, a learner using the knowledge-telling model may proceed with their writing based on their long-term memory and experience rather than a critical reading of source texts. However, a learner who applies the knowledge transforming strategy may attempt to contribute to knowledge, as he or she critically reviews the literature, recognises researchers' academic debate, and builds an argument that helps transform the existing knowledge. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987, p.9) suggest the characteristics of the knowledge-telling strategy as follows:

Knowledge telling provides a natural and efficient solution to the problems immature writers face in gathering text content without external support. The solution is efficient enough that, given any reasonable specification of topic and genre, the writer can get started in a matter of seconds and speedily produce an essay that will be on topic and that will conform to the text called for.

3. Results

The participants' interview data are the focus of this section, and they were divided into three major themes: (1) planning an argument and source text selection, (2) reading a selected review article, and (3) assessing the review article to construct an argument. The author uses abbreviations, including RE (Researcher), LN1 (Learner 1), and LN2 (Learner 2) in the extracts below.

3.1 Learner 1/Data from Interviews

Learner 1 attained the required International English Language Testing System (IELTS) score (total band score above 6.5) for entry into the MA programme without a pre-sessional course. She was motivated to learn through the programme and actively participated in each module of the MA programme. She stated that she should have deep knowledge through reading, and she used both skimming and intensive reading depending on her reading needs. However, she was not sure about the requirements of the new academic community of practice in the UK, and she did not mention use of critical reading and academic

argumentation for MA essay assignments. The key themes of the interview data include her planning of an argument, source text selection, reading of a review article, and assessment of scholarly literature review, as follows.

(1) Planning an argument and source text selection

When she was asked about her argument construction for the essay assignment, she explained that her argument was based on explicit protocol policies that comprise specific teachers' roles in actively facilitating student motivation.

Extract 1

RE: Your argument was that teachers can motivate a student in secondary school context in Japan. Would you repeat the argument, you know, how to motivate? Your argument was that teachers can....

LN1: It will be easier for you to understand my ideas presenting the clear protocol policies [...] the first one is to treat students seriously and the second is to pay attention to students, recognise them, help their success within reach, treat failure or success, and carefully praise them. Praise words may hurt students. The last is to have an effective listening skill, that means, teachers need to listen to students' voice [...] and by being listened by teachers, students can have self-esteem and confidence.

The author asked Learner 1 how her argument was built through academic researchers' theories from source texts, and she replied that she relied mostly on a book published in 1980 by one teaching practitioner. Furthermore, the argumentation was made through her experience, not through critical reading and evaluation of scholarly literature.

Extract 2

RE: Did you evaluate and give a critical evaluation of that (academic researchers' theory), so that you can present the recommendations in a way that can suit Japanese context?

LN1: I did not pick any theories supporting my choice, as I picked up his policies, but let me say I choose it through my experience though it is not long one, but through my age and through my experience who has two sons and looking at various classroom contexts.

Learner 1 also explained that the book she used was very useful for herself and for future

teachers because it includes practical suggestions, not theoretical evaluation and implications:

Extract 3

LN1: Even though nearly 30 years have passed since publication, but basic ideas are still active, I think. Still teachers can use in the present context. So, I wanted to point that out. As I told you before, there is a basic principle in teaching to students we need to be aware of and using the policies he took, in my essay, would make my essay interesting and useful for readers and future teachers and for me, myself.

(2) Reading a selected review article

During the second interview, Learner 1 was requested to bring key source texts that she had selected for the assignment and to explain how she read them. One was a review article by Lamb (2016). She provided a summary, but she did not refer to the theoretical background or researchers' academic discussion.

Extract 4

LN1: There is an argument that any good teachers are motivators of learning. For example, in one classroom, students with high motivation who prepare for high-stakes examination, skilful teaching can achieve their goals as efficiently as possible. [...] And in other educational contexts, students have less motivation and good teachers can work to produce reasonable results to enhance their motivations.

(3) Assessing the review article to construct an argument

Learner 1 brought the Lamb's review article to the interview, as it was one of the key texts in the MA course. She believed it was a suitable supporting article for Dornyei's motivation theory. However, she did not notice that the review article includes various researchers' perspectives that are different from the Dornyei's theory and researchers' academic discussion.

Extract 5

LN1: And I took (the review article of)language teaching by Professor Lamb, because it was published last year and I wanted to take a recent article on motivation if I can find

any different perspective on motivation, but mostly I think it is a supporting article for the recent Dornyei's very popular theory.

3.2 Learner 2/Data from Interviews

Like Learner 1, Learner 2 achieved the required IELTS score (total band score above 6.5) for admission to the MA programme and did not attend a pre-sessional course. She willingly learned and tried to raise her awareness and understanding of theories in TESOL and actively engaged in the classroom activities of each module in the MA programme. She believed she should read various articles to inform her contribution to knowledge in the field of TESOL. However, like Learner 1, Learner 2 was not fully aware of the academic culture of the course. She emphasised knowledge acquired through reading instead of the application of critical reading, argumentation, and writing for essay assignments. The key themes of the interview data below were her planning of an argument, source text selection, reading of a review article, and assessment of scholarly literature review.

(1) Planning an argument and source text selection

In response to the question about source text selection, reading, and writing an assignment, she explained that she would need to synthesise useful information from selected source texts, like sewing a cloth, to complete an assignment.

Extract 6

RE: What do you think of important things you have to do in the reading stage for the purpose of writing an assignment?

LN2: It's the first step reading before writing the assignment. Reading comes definitely the first step, [...] you have to detect only the useful ones that could be put together. Just like a cloth, you have to find them one by one and sew them together and make it a complete assignment.

Regarding the issue of the necessity of the use of critical review of scholarly literature, Learner 2 referred to the steps of selecting and reading source texts for writing, suggesting that students need to find patterns across many research studies. However, she did not mention the need to critically evaluate the literature and use it to transform knowledge.

Extract 7

RE: One of the important points is to try to critically evaluate the literature. What do you think about the evaluation criteria concerning critically evaluating the previous studies?

LN2: I think for any major of arts (like Master's in Arts), you have to rely on the previous research studies. You can't make something out of nowhere. There are a lot of research studies already done by many researchers, so we have to read their works and find some patterns.

Learner 2 defined language chunks as one of the key issues in her previous teaching experience and presented an argument to highlight the need to recognise the theory about chunking. She aimed to present the theory as 'a useful method' in her essay assignment, using a knowledge-telling strategy.

Extract 8

RE: What is your claim, argument or suggestion that you make (in the assignment)?

LN2: Okay. Simple, I'm trying to highlight the importance of chunking, both learning chunks and teaching chunks in classroom context. I think it's the context I used to teach. [...] I think it also deals with the problem of many Chinese students because in China students memorize English words word by word. [...] Chunking is something I learned here. I want to use this method.

(2) Reading a selected review article

In the second interview, Learner 2 was requested to bring selected key source texts that she had applied in the assignment and describe how she read them. Learner 2 identified a review article by Jiang (2000) as one of the most valuable sources. She gave her attention to the content related to her previous experience, rather than researchers' academic discussion, as described below.

Extract 9

LN2: I think it provided something very useful and explains the process of the presentation of the lexical the vocabularies in our mind. It also explains why the phenomenon of fossilisation happens because of L1 transfer, that's a problem I used to struggle with. [...] It's called fossilisation. This article answered my question. It is also

very useful when I referred to it in my essay.

(3) Assessing the review article to construct an argument

Next, she was asked how she assessed the usefulness of her two selected source texts. She considered that a review article explains a model to deal with the problems of student vocabulary learning. She did not critically evaluate researchers' literature indicated in the review article.

Extract 10

LN2: Because my key point is about chunks and phrasal verbs is type of chunks, so I needed to draw on this paper and the next one is the model. It explains why some students have difficulty memorizing new English words because mediation of L1 plays a part. It somehow inhabits their acquisition of L2. So, I relied on these two articles.

4. Discussion, Implications and Conclusion

The results of the two less successful L2 learners indicated that at the beginning of the MA programme, neither were fully aware of the critical reading and writing required for argumentative essay writing in the MA TESOL course at the UK university. Planning for their argument construction and source text selection included the assessment of assignment topics in relation to their previous teaching experience and the attempt to read various research articles suggested in their MA course reading lists. However, they did not critically evaluate the researchers' theories in the source texts they had read. Instead, they tried to find 'right answers' to the problems they encountered through their previous teaching contexts as teachers. Learner 1 found one practitioner's protocol policy in a book for teachers to motivate students, and this suited her beliefs and previous experience she had gained in Japan. Although she read various research articles and theories, she wanted to present the protocol policies as the appropriate instruments to motivate students, instead of critically reviewing literature and constructing an argument. Learner 2 similarly stated she found one article that she thought would suit her approach of teaching chunks in her Chinese context. She thought that the article answered her question, and as a result, she relied heavily on limited knowledge from selected sources. The two learners' reading and assessment of the selected review articles indicated that they were not aware of the academic researchers'

debate in these articles. Learner 1 thought the articles were explanations of the approach to motivating students in different educational contexts and that her chosen article merely supports Dorney's theory. In fact, the author of the article introduces the development of various researchers' viewpoints and discussion based on Dorney's theory. Learner 2 considered that the review article shows the model of teaching chunks, not various researchers' viewpoints and debate. The two less successful L2 learners' cognitive processes of reading and argument construction seem to follow the knowledge-telling model suggested by Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) as well as the similar frameworks suggested by Carey et al. (1989), Carey and Flower (1989) and Wallace and Wray (2011).

Two pedagogical implications are suggested for practitioners. First, EAP teachers should raise L2 learners' awareness of academic assignment essays and teach critical reading for argument construction before they begin to undertake content-based academic programmes. Second, academic tutors in content-based courses should support L2 postgraduate learners' awareness of audience and purposes of academic essays and assist students' planning, source selection, and critical literature review for argument construction. In particular, both EAP teachers and content tutors can facilitate L2 learners' level of engagement with academic argumentative writing so that they might develop their identity as academically engaged writers.

This study has two limitations. Firstly, it was exploratory in nature and, therefore, focused on two selected learners out of six participants; thus, the findings cannot be generalised to other learners in different educational contexts. Secondly, the study focused on an analysis of two participants' learning before, during and after one module of an MA course in the autumn term.

Nevertheless, the model of L2 learners' awareness of reading and academic argumentation using the knowledge-telling model helps clarify the problems of less successful L2 postgraduate students. The present study provides explicit implications for teachers in EAP contexts to help L2 learners prepare for their postgraduate programmes in terms of planning, source text use, and engagement with critical literature reviews for academic argumentation.

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APPENDIX

Criteria for marking this assignment

- 1 Demonstration of a range of relevant reading and understanding of issues raised in the module
- 2 Ability to summarise and inter-relate sources critically, and to relate theoretical considerations to practice in L2 learning and teaching
- 3 A reasonable balance between depth and breadth of discussion of the chosen topic
- 4 Coherence of assignment, especially overall organisation and division into sections and paragraphs
- 5 Presentation, especially correctness of referencing and bibliography, and quality of writing

The marking criterion of argumentation (ability to summarise and inter-relate sources critically, and to relate theoretical considerations to practice in L2 learning and teaching) is divided into the following key elements:

- Summarises sources accurately and appropriately
- Evaluates claims made in the literature in relation to teaching issues, activities and materials
- Shows an ability to integrate and inter-relate material from different sources in relation to specific points in the discussion
- Provides a critical evaluation/analysis of the materials read
- Links theoretical discussions to practical points in L2 teaching/learning (e.g by giving examples)

(Extracts from the MA TESOL Second Language Learning Principles Assessment Sheet)

