

Enhancing Vietnamese Learners' Ability in Writing Argumentative Essays

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The contributions of genre-based approach to writing have been proved in many studies in different contexts. However, empirical evidence of effects of genre-based instruction on Vietnamese EFL learners is rare. This article reports the results of an experimental study investigating the effects of genre-based approach on Vietnamese learners' ability in writing argumentative essays. Twenty EFL students at a college in a Mekong Delta province of Vietnam participated in the study. Participants were divided into two groups, labeled as group 1 and group 2; each group was taught how to write argumentative essays by using genre-based approach at two different points of time. Participants' ability in writing argumentative essays was measured by three writing tests: pretest, progress test, and post-test. Participants' perception towards the use of genre-based approach in learning argumentative essays was collected via semi-structured interviews. Results indicated that participants from both groups significantly improved their writing performance after the study. Results from the interviews showed that participants held a positive attitude towards the contributions of genre-based approach to their ability in writing argumentative essays.

Key words: genre-based approach, Vietnamese cultural impact, argumentative essays, learners' perception

INTRODUCTION

Being proficient in English has been given much attention in Vietnam due to the increasing demands of higher education, employment, business and overseas studies. Almost all jobs require candidates' English proficiency, and work promotion has considered English proficiency as a criterion (Nunan, 2003). As English plays an important role in one's life and career, more people take courses towards international certificates in English. Among the four skills in standardized tests, writing remains a popular way to evaluate learners' proficiency in English, especially for academic purposes (White, 1987). However, according to recent test results from the Educational Testing Service (ETS), writing has been the most problematic to Vietnamese test-takers. This could be explained in terms of the low quality of English language teaching in Vietnam (Hoang, 2010), particularly the challenge of teaching EFL writing (Nguyen, 2009). Causes of the low quality in teaching writing, especially in teaching argumentative essays, should be examined in light of current approaches to teaching English writing, the roles of teachers and learners in EFL writing classes, the impact of Vietnamese culture and testing and assessment on learners' EFL writing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Current Approach to Teaching EFL Writing in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam

In most academic writing classes in the Mekong Delta, the teacher provides learners with a topic and a related model text. The teacher picks out sentences from the model texts for learners to study grammatical structures; how and what to write are seldom discussed. The communicative purpose and audience of the texts seem to be ignored. The teacher does not focus much on the content of the model texts, but focuses more on the language

form. Learners use neither writing strategies nor the knowledge of the writing process when they produce their own writing texts. Such a teaching approach results in learners' failure in producing a written text unless the topic for writing is similar as the one they had been taught by their teacher. Many learners do not pay attention to the communicative purpose and audience of their writings; they just want to produce a text free of grammatical mistakes. When coping with writing argumentative essays, learners cannot handle the tasks due to their lack of knowledge of what and how to write. As a consequence, in writing classes, what learners can produce is mostly an imitation of the model text given by their teacher with the similar topic.

The Roles of Teachers and Learners in EFL Writing Classes

The teacher is considered the center of writing classes in many settings in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. Interaction is commonly one-way, from the teacher to learners. The teacher provides knowledge and learners play the roles of knowledge receivers and imitators, without many pair work or group work activities. This results in the passive learning attitudes among learners. The teacher does not provide learners with discovery tasks to stimulate their participation and to integrate all the receptive and productive skills in the classroom activities. Learners are supposed to re-produce what they have been provided with to produce texts of similar topics.

The Impact of Vietnamese Culture on Learners' Writing Argumentative Essays

Cultural aspects of the setting where EFL writing is taught to some extent create certain challenges for learners (Grabe & Kaplan, 1997). In writing English argumentative essays, writers need to take a position, predict the readers' opinion, clarify their position, take other possible stances into consideration and be able to argue against the opposing positions (Driver, Newton & Osborne, 2000), which pose challenges to Asian people. In many Asian cultures, people are affected by Confucian philosophy in which people

tend to reach consensus, just address public opinions and attempt to develop agreement among community members (Hinkel, 2002). These thoughts and behaviors are against western argumentation which requires writers to formulate a personal claim, arguing ability and rebuttals. It becomes clear that different cultural value systems, according to Wu and Rubin (2000), result in differences in writing argumentative essays. For instance, in China, learners basing on collectivism prefer compromise to argument; North Americans, on individualism, tend to defend, challenge and attack when establishing a position and arguments. Affected by Confucianism for more than 2,000 years, Vietnamese people tend to be compromising rather than arguing. One of the strongest influences of Confucianism on Vietnamese linguistic politeness (Hy, 1990; Nguyen, 1956) is the concept of *lễ-respectfulness for others* (Pham, 2011). This concept focuses on the idea that people are un-equals, and to be polite, people should communicate in a way which reflects social hierarchy. In hierarchical relationship, people tend to be cautious in expressing ideas especially to superiors and expressing ideas directly is considered as impolite. Living in such a philosophy of living, Vietnamese tend to avoid objecting and reacting by not stating straight forward to the main point in their argumentative writing. As a result, their writings are less or even not persuasive due to the lack of argumentative characteristics.

Assessing Learners' Writing Ability

In Vietnam, many EFL teachers focus on the correction of learners' grammatical errors rather than communicative discourse when they assess learners' writings, even if these grammatical errors do not affect the meaning conveyed. Learners who make grammatical mistakes will not earn high scores even though they have good ideas. In contrast, learners who do not make any mistakes with grammar could get better scores although their writings do not seem to be communicative. For these reasons, learners tend to focus on grammar in their writing as they expect their teachers to give them

good scores. However, focusing solely on grammar correction is not very helpful, even harmful in judging learners' writing (Truscott, 1996) since a quality piece of writing is more than just grammatically correct.

Teaching learners how to write argumentative essays successfully is a challenging task for many English teachers in Viet Nam. To achieve this aim, teachers should help learners acquire essential knowledge and skills such as knowledge of the mechanics of writing, command of the language system, knowledge of appropriate writing processes and understanding of the context and content of the genres of writing (Tribble, 1996). To Martin (1984) and Swales (1990), genres consist of communicative events. In second language writing pedagogy, genres are relatively stable in social interaction and text types including report, exposition, explanation, and debate are essential for students to learn to be able to compose texts on these genres (Knapp & Watkins, 1994).

Since the 1980s, considerable attention has been paid to the genre-based approach as a potential method to improve the qualities of writing instruction. The genre-based approach underlines that writing is a social activity (Hyon, 1996; Hammond & Derewianka, 2001). In light of Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development, knowledge is best constructed when learners have opportunities to get involved in meaningful communication with their classmates and teachers; learning to write in such a method can help student writers receive positive reinforcement on their knowledge of linguistics, content and ideas in the composing of texts. More importantly, The genre-based approach focuses on the significance of exploring the social and cultural context of language use in writing which is shaped by key features defined as *field* – the social purpose of the text, *tenor* – the relationship between participants of the event, and *mode* – the medium of communication (Derewianka, 1990; Hammond & Derewianka, 2001; Hyon, 1996; Kern, 2000; Thompson, 2004; Xin, 2001).

The genre approach emphasizes both knowledge about the context and content of a piece of writing (Tribble, 1996) and it is believed to be able to make a positive contribution to the success in teaching and learning writing

argumentative essays. The aim of this study was to examine the effects of the genre-based approach on Vietnamese EFL learners' ability in writing argumentative essays. It was hypothesized that genre-based instruction would have positive impacts on learners' ability in writing argumentative essays and learners would hold positive perceptions towards the contribution of the genre-based approach in teaching and learning how to write argumentative essays.

Using the Genre-based Approach in Teaching Argumentative Essays

Characteristics of Argumentative Essays

To provide learners with insights into the nature of a written argument and help them be able to produce a quality text, Seyler (2008) suggests five basic characteristics of an argument: *purpose*, *arguable issues*, *evidence*, *audience*, and *recognition of topic's complexity*. Understanding characteristics of an argument helps learners produce an effective argument focusing on the audience. As Brannan (2006) states, "writers can connect with an audience by showing that they are part of it, understand what readers need to know, and share in their beliefs and concerns" (p. 419). Writers also have to take their stand on an arguable issue and convince the audience through reasoning and evidence by giving a logical presentation of ideas (Wiener & Eisenberg, 1987). In addition to drawing the reader's interest by establishing a reasonable purpose for the writing, the writer has to understand the audience's characteristics in order to construct the most effective evidence because "no matter how brilliant, any argument rejected by its audience is a failed argument" (Lannon, 2003, p. 289). Last but not least, recognizing an argument's complexity can help writers understand that there may be more than one 'right' position for a meaningful and memorable argument to be produced.

It becomes clear that the five characteristics of a good argument are useful

guides for learners to produce an effective argumentative text. As Miller (2005) argues, the application of the genre-based approach has been effective for teaching writing and can help learners find ‘the answer’ to their writing difficulties. Therefore, in order to help learners remember and manipulate the characteristics of an argumentative essay, the genre-based approach is applied in this study.

Contributions of the Genre-based Approach to Learners’ Writing Argumentative Essays

EFL or ESL learners commonly experience problems in writing due to their inadequate understanding of how texts are organized (Ballard & Clanchy, 1993) and what specific demands are for a given kind of text (Kern, 2000). For these reasons, using genre-based approach to teaching writing provides solutions to mentioned problems in learning writing by making learners be aware of the structure and purpose of different text types, assisting them to analyze these features, and then replicating the features in their own production.

Considered as “a framework for language instruction” (Byram, 2004, p. 234), the genre-based approach to writing instruction is identified as a teaching and learning cycle by Hammond, Burns, Brosan and Gerot (1992). In this cycle of teaching and learning, there are four stages and each stage has a different purpose in terms of the writing process. In stage 1, *building knowledge of field (genre)* activates learners’ schema on the topic on which they will be writing through activities like listening, speaking, reading, information gathering, and note taking. In stage 2, *modeling of text* gives learners an opportunity to examine the purpose, overall structure, and linguistic features of the target text they are going to write. In Stage 3, *joint construction of text* is a form of collaborative writing with the instructor playing a key role in scaffolding learners’ writing by providing the input about the nature of a text type. In stage 4, *independent construction of text*, learners withdraw from the scaffolding of the earlier stage and write final

texts on their own or within groups (Derewianka, 1990). Getting engaged in these stages, learners are aware of the writing process and learn writing strategies which contribute to building an effective piece of writing. Writers also become more accomplished and autonomous thanks to their analysis of the shape and structure of their texts, and make proper linguistic choices in their writing.

Various studies investigated the effectiveness of the instruction and use of genre-based approach on argumentative essays. Studies by Flowerdew (2000), Krisnachinda (2006), Malakul and Bowering (2006), Swami (2008), Zare-ee (2008), Ahn (2011), and Luu (2011) explored the impacts of the genre-based approach on academic writing with different types of writing such as recount, report or letter writing. These studies have demonstrated the contributions of the genre-based approach to success in writing instruction. Genre-based instruction not only helps learners improve the quality of written texts, but enables them to achieve better insights into academic writing. Specifically, researchers using the genre-based approach in teaching academic argument writing as Kongpetch (2003), Udomyamokkul (2004), Ferreira (2007), and Promwinai (2010) showed that learners gained better control over the organization, logic in the argument, thesis construction and language features in their argumentative essays.

Kongpetch (2003) conducted a 14-week study with 45 juniors majoring in English at Khon Kaen University in Thailand on the effects of the genre-based approach on learners' expository essay and their attitudes to the genre-based approach in learning expository writing. The results showed that the genre-based approach had a significant positive impact on the learners' factual writing, showing gains in the control of generic structures and language features of the exposition. Most of the learners expressed positive attitudes of the genre-based approach: helping them write systematically and produce expository texts appropriate to English conventions.

In Udomyamokkul's (2004) experimental study, the difference of the genre-based approach and the process approach in helping learners control the argumentative essay was examined. Fifty-five students from Suranaree

University of Technology in Thailand participated in this study. The 12-week study revealed that participants in the experimental group gained higher scores on *claims and rebuttals* to counter-arguments compared to that of the control group although both groups were equivalent in their final draft performance as shown by the holistic gain scores.

Ferreira (2007) examined the impact of the genre-based approach on learners' writing argumentative texts with the participation of six ESL first year students in a North American university. Despite a short two-week period of instruction, the findings showed that participants improved their argumentative writing on the level of *organization, argumentation, and thesis construction*.

Promwinai (2010) investigated how a low-rated and a mid-rated writer employed ideational, interpersonal, and textual resources to respond to theoretical knowledge of the argumentative text (i.e., field, tenor, and mode). Two Thai tertiary learners registered in English for Academic Purposes preparation course in Australia within 15 weeks participated in the study. The results demonstrated that both writers were capable of controlling the generic structure of the argumentative essays regardless of their English proficiency.

The current literature thus reveals a positive strong interaction between the genre-based approach and efficacy in learning and teaching academic writing, as well as a positive attitude among students towards this approach. It has been observed that genre-based approach was successfully applied for various purposes of writing such as recount writing, letter writing, scientific report writing, argumentative essays, among others. in different learning contexts from primary to tertiary education at different English levels of proficiency. Regardless of the amount of instruction time, the implementation of the genre-based approach as a writing pedagogy shows effectiveness in raising students' awareness of *noticing generic features and register variables* (field, tenor, and mode) of a text. However, key features of argumentative essays as *audience awareness and purpose* (writers' awareness of readers and purpose of the text), *content* (ideas conveyed in the text), *organization* (the structure of the text) and *language resources* (writers'

ability in using appropriate language) have not been well researched, especially in the Vietnamese context.

In settings as the Mekong Delta of Vietnam where writing pedagogy is still lagged behind developments in the field, few studies have been conducted on the application of the genre-based approach to academic writing, namely argumentative essays. Empirical evidence gained from an experimental study on genre-based instruction could provide policy-makers, curriculum developers and classroom practitioners with insights into a potential pedagogy to teaching writing. For this reason, the current study was conducted to examine the impacts of the genre-based approach on learners' writing argumentative essays. This study attempts to find out the answers to the following questions:

- (1) What are the effects of the use of genre-based approach on learners' argumentative essays?
- (2) What are participants' perceptions towards the genre-based approach in teaching and learning writing argumentative essays?

METHOD

Design

An experimental qualitative and quantitative study was designed to investigate the effects of the use of genre-based approach as the independent variable on learners' performance in writing argumentative essays, the dependent variable. The researcher employed the randomized switching replications design. Stockburger (1996) confirmed that a replication design is more likely to result in "significant and real effects" as it reduces the chance of variance between individuals skewing the results (p. 166). Table 1 illustrates the randomized switching replications design used for this study.

TABLE 1
Design of the Study

Groups	Pre-Test	Intervention	Progress Test	Intervention	Post-test
G1	X	Genre-based	X	Process-based	X
G2	X	Process-based	X	Genre-based	X

As indicated in Figure 1, two pre-post treatment-control designs were combined, i.e., the implementation of the treatment is replicated. In phase 1, the treatment was implemented for group 1 (G1) while group 2 (G2) in phase 2. In phase 1, the process-based approach, the currently implemented approach to teaching writing at the college where this study was conducted, was used for group 2 and in phase 2 for group 1. Writing lessons developed in light of process-based approach followed the stages of generating ideas, organizing ideas, drafting the text and editing the text.

Participants

Twenty second-year teacher students in a teacher training college in the Mekong Delta of Viet Nam participated in the study. They were divided into two groups. Their ages ranged from 20 to 22, consisting of 19 females and one male. They finished the 450-score TOEFL PBT class and were following the 550-score TOEFL- PBT course to meet the requirements for the program. Participants attended the intervention program and took pre-test, progress test and post-test. Twelve participated in the semi-structured interviews. From each group, two with the highest scores, two with the average scores and two with the lowest scores in the writing post-test were invited in answering questions in the interviews. They were labeled as *condition high*, *condition average* and *condition low* respectively.

Materials

A series of six two-hour writing lessons were designed by the researcher in light of genre-based approach to use in the study. The theoretical framework

for these writing lessons was adapted and compiled from Feez's (1998) genre-based model. Classroom activities for each lesson plan were developed by the researcher. The six lessons followed the four stages of the genre-based approach were instructed in the procedure as follows.

In *building up the field knowledge*, the instructor focused on the content and language of the argumentative text which was used as a model for analysis. During this stage, learners and the instructor cooperatively built up a shared knowledge of the field by taking part in brainstorming, watching videos, exploring meaning from pictures or group presentation. These activities made students aware of the importance of searching ideas, setting up a shared experience and cultural context before writing. This initial exploration helped prepare students for the next stage, *modeling of the text* (Rothery, 1996).

Long and Richards (1987) confirmed that "even when writing in our own language we often need to refer to a model for guidance" (p. 262). Therefore, in this case *modeling* could give the students a whole picture of an argumentative essay through the model texts. In this stage, students were guided to analyze and discover the purpose, generic structures, linguistic features, and form and function of an argumentative essay by the instructor's questions and discovery tasks. The instructor also provided the students *Glossary of terms for the 'to argue' purpose* to help them understand the language features of an argumentative essay. Getting involved in these tasks, students could understand the nature of an argumentative essay and reconstruct it. Since the genre-based approach is concerned with studying a particular text type, the selection of the text used plays an important role for the success of the learning activity. Derewianka (1990) argued that for modeling purposes, selected texts should clearly demonstrate the key features of the genre and they should include factors as the level of the confidence and motivation of students, prior knowledge of content, degree of linguistic knowledge and skill, extent of cultural knowledge, and the degree of familiarity with the text type (Chaisiri, 2010; Kongpetch, 2003; Nunan, 1999). In this study, 'Damaged Earth' and 'Uniform Wearing' were used as main

topics for the selection of input model texts. These topics might be of interests to students because the former is related to environmental protection, a global issue, and the latter is relevant to their life.

The third stage, known as the *joint construction* stage, aims to show learners how an argumentative essay is produced by illustrating the process of creating an argumentative text considering content, structure, and language. Specifically, the instructor guided learners how to complete the *argument map* with ideas they were going to use in their writing, and produced the first draft. The learners then read and evaluated their own essay by using the 'written argument checklist.' Before redrafting the essay, the learners were asked to join in 'peer review' in order to read and evaluate their peers' writing. The peer review activity could be helpful to students since they had a chance to go over their friends' essays, to correct and avoid the mistakes that their friends made, and more importantly they could learn ideas, writing styles from their peers.

In the final stage, *independent construction*, learners worked independently and wrote their own texts. This stage aims to provide learners with opportunities to reflect on what they have learned, put all ideas into written form, and thus produce a well-structured essay (Martin, 1992). Accordingly, after getting all the required exposures in the previous stages, the students produced their own essays by choosing their own topic, drafting, editing and getting the feedback from their peers and instructor. The researcher also held an "instructor-learner conference between drafts to support learners, while they are creating, what areas need to be worked on" (Long & Richards, 1987, p. 276). After getting comments from the instructor, learners were given a list of error correction symbols, and asked to work in groups to discuss and edit the essays. In this case, learners have another chance to become readers and evaluators of their peers' essays.

The lessons designed in light of the genre-based approach focused on the purpose and the audience of the argumentative text. Being exposed to a genre-based writing practice with the instructor, learners could take control over the communicative purposes, potential readers of their essays, structure,

and language features of text types in a particular communicative purpose, thereby enhancing their writing skills.

Instruments

Three writing tests and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data for this study. Writing tests were used to measure participants' ability in writing, and the interviews investigated participants' perceptions towards the contribution of genre-based approach to learners' ability in writing argumentative essays.

The three writing tests were administered to *check* and *compare* participants' English writing proficiency before, in-between, and after the study between and within the two groups. Topics of the tests include 1) Higher education: opportunities for all or only good students, 2) The value and weaknesses of computers in life, 3) Ways of escaping stress in modern life. These topics also relate to the mentioned umbrella topic, student life in order to stimulate the participants' interests to do the tests. The participants had 30 minutes to do the tests; participants were required to produce at least 300 words within the time limit. Participants from the two groups who received the genre-based instruction at two different points of time were arranged to take the tests on the same time and date to ensure that the writing tests were taken in the same conditions. Participants were not allowed to use dictionaries, textbooks or prepared notes during the test time. The pre-test, the progress test, and the post-test were scored by the analytic marking scheme Assessment Tools for Teaching and Learning scoring rubrics (Glasswell, Parr & Aikman, 2001). Seven scoring criteria in the scoring rubrics related to audience awareness and purpose, content, organization, language resources, grammar, spelling, and punctuation were used to evaluate participants' writing ability. The first four criteria in relation to the gist of the text were labeled as *deep features* of the text and the last three related to technical characteristics of the text, *surface features*. The seven criteria have the same weight, ranging from 1 (least proficient) to 6 (most

proficient).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain insights into participants' perceptions of the implementation of the genre-based approach in teaching and learning argumentative essays. Four participants who gained the most, four, at an average level, and four, the least in the writing tests were chosen to be interviewees. The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese language to ensure that the interviewees could understand the interviewer's questions and produce elaborative responses.

Procedures

The 12-week study was separated into two phases of six weeks. Two days before the course, the pretest was administered to the two groups. In the first phase, the genre-based instruction was implemented to the first-phase experimental group (group 1) with two-hour session every week. At the same time, the process-based instruction was applied to group 2. Two days after the first phase, both groups took the progress test. In the second phase, the genre-based instruction was used to group 2 and the process-based approach was conducted in group 1. Two days after the 12th week, both groups took the post-test. One week after the post-test, the semi-structured interviews were conducted for 12 members from both groups.

RESULTS

Results gained from the three writing tests were subjected to SPSS 16.0 to evaluate participants' writing ability. *Descriptive Statistics Tests* were calculated to observe the frequency, mean scores, and standard deviations of the three tests. In addition, *Independent Samples t-Tests* were computed to compare the mean scores gained by participants for the three tests between the two groups. Finally, *Paired Samples t-Tests* were performed to compare the mean scores on the three tests as well as on the four deep features before

and after the study within the two groups.

Participants' Writing Performance Between the Two Groups

Table 2 reports the descriptive statistics of the results on participants' writing performance in the three tests.

TABLE 2
Descriptive Statistics of the Pretest, Progress Test and Post-test of the Two Groups

Writing test	Group (N = 10)	Min	Max	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Pre-test	Group 1	1.5	3.0	2.25	.49
	Group 2	1.5	3.0	2.30	.54
Progress Test	Group 1	3.0	4.5	3.40	.57
	Group 2	2.0	3.5	2.95	.55
Post-test	Group 1	3.0	4.5	3.55	.55
	Group 2	3.0	5.0	4.20	.67

As indicated in Table 1, the mean scores of the pretest of group 1 ($M = 2.25$, $SD = .49$) and of group 2 ($M = 2.30$, $SD = .54$) were observed to be low in the six-degree scale. The mean scores of both groups from the progress test show that group 1 ($M = 3.40$, $SD = .57$) gained higher than the average and more than group 2 ($M = 2.95$, $SD = .55$). For the post-test, the mean score of both groups were rather high ($M = 3.55$, $SD = .55$ and $M = 4.20$, $SD = .67$ respectively) in the six-degree scale.

The *Independent Samples t-Test* was run to analyze and compare the mean scores in the participants' writing performance between the two groups. The results reveal that the participants' writing performance of the two groups were at the same level before ($p = .830$) and in-between ($p = .089$) the study. These results from the progress test indicate that both genre-based and process-based instruction affected participants' ability in writing argumentative essays in the same way. In other words, it does not matter by which approach the participants were taught, the participants' writing ability

was the same at the end of the first phase of the study.

However, after the study the participants' level of writing performance in group 2 was better than that of group 1 ($p = .03$). Participants who were taught with the process-based approach in the first phase and the genre-based approach in the second phase of the study gained more in terms of their ability in writing than those who started learning with the genre-based approach in the first phase and with the process-based approach in the second phase.

Participants' Writing Performance Within the Two Groups

The *Paired Samples t-Test* was run to compare the mean scores of the participants' writing performance before and in-between, in-between and after, before and after the study within the two groups. For group 1, the mean scores of the participants' writing performance in-between and after the study were higher than that before the study ($p = .00$). However, the mean scores of the participants' writing performance in-between and after the study were the same ($p = .08$). The results support the conclusion that participants' writing ability was better off as a result of the effect of genre-based instruction whereas no such effect of process-based instruction was observed on group 1's performance in writing argumentative essays.

For group 2, the mean scores of their writing performance in-between and after the study were higher than that before the study ($p = .00$). Similarly, the mean scores of the participants' writing performance after the study were better than that in-between the study ($p = .00$). These results indicated the contribution of genre-based instruction into enhancing participants' writing ability.

In this study, the results from statistical tests showed that the genre-based approach to teaching writing benefited learners whether it was experimented in the first or second phase of the study. The results also indicated that it was more beneficial for learners to develop their writing ability if writing lessons started with process-based and were followed with genre-based instruction.

Participants' Writing Performance on the Deep Features

The *Paired-Samples t-Test* was performed to *compare* the mean scores on the four deep features before and after the study within the two groups. After the research, writing ability of the two groups in terms of their audience awareness and purpose, content, organization and language resources was better than that before the research. The mean scores on the four deep features of the pretest and post-test of the two groups are illustrated in Figures 1 and 2. The two figures indicated that the participants, even coming from a culture which has been influenced by Confucian philosophy of living, improved their ability in writing key characteristics of argumentative essays if opportunities to learn how to do it were created for them.

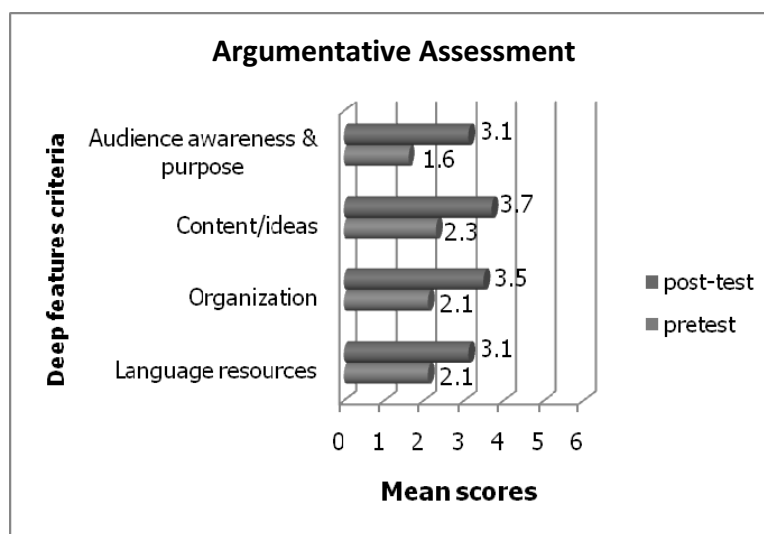


FIGURE 1
Mean Scores on the Deep Features of the Pretest and Post-test-Group 1

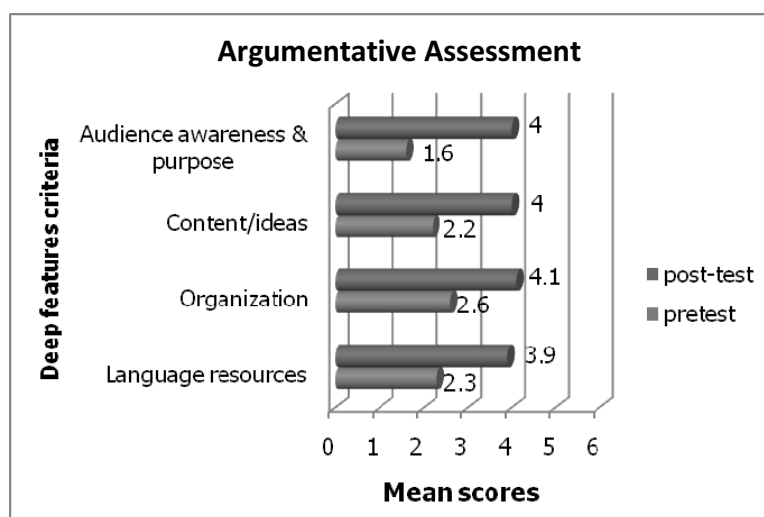


FIGURE 2

Mean Scores on the Deep Features of the Pretest and Post-test-Group 2

Participants' Attitudes Towards the Application of the Genre-based Approach in Teaching and Learning How to Write Argumentative Essays

This study focused on finding out learners' perception towards the use of genre-based instruction. As a result, the six-question interview aimed to investigate the participants' perceptions towards the use of genre-based approach in teaching and learning argumentative essays. The participants' responses revealed the strong influence of the genre-based approach on their writing argumentative essays. The results on the participants' perceptions of the usefulness of the three teaching stages: *building knowledge of the field, modeling of the texts, and joint construction*.

... I recognize my weak points through analyzing model texts, I am also aware of the audience, and write to convince them (*Loan from condition high*)

Participants indicated that the four stages of lessons supported them in generating, refining ideas, and analyzing the structure of the argument in the texts in terms of both content and language.

Regarding the benefits of the four teaching techniques, *revising the first draft, peer review, redrafting, and instructor-learner conference*, the interviewees showed that these techniques helped them identify the shortcomings of their writings and their peers' writings.

... I feel satisfied when the instructor helps me correct my writing and I can see my mistakes.... (*Phuong from condition average*)

In comparison with the writing approaches they had studied, the participants showed better attitudes towards the genre-based approach.

... This approach is scientific because it helps me understand characteristics of the writing task, helping me improve my ability in organizing ideas, compared to the previous one (*Au from condition high*)

All interviewees perceived that this approach was useful as it helped them know how to write, have better ideas, know the purpose of the writing and write faster with efficacy.

... I know how to organize ideas, use linking words appropriately and identify the main content that I need to include in my essay (*Vy from condition average*)

When given an offer to participate in other writing courses using the genre-based approach, all respondents revealed their eagerness to further explore the approach for other purposes.

... I recognized that my writing was improved compared with that in

the past. Therefore, taking part in more courses will gradually help me consolidate knowledge, and learn how to write an effective argumentative essay.... (*Trinh from condition low*)

When the participants were asked to provide other general comments towards the genre-based approach, all of them preferred learning writing by this approach and found the stages and techniques applied in the lessons very useful for the development of their writing ability.

... I like this approach as it is practical and focuses on the main points of the genre. I can produce my own essays thanks to the writing strategies learnt in class (*Vy from condition average*)

The results from the interview indicated that regardless of the ability in writing argumentative essays, after the study, participants demonstrated a strong positive attitude towards the implementation of the genre-based approach in their EFL argumentative writing class. All participants preferred this kind of approach to other approaches due to its effectiveness in improving their writing ability.

DISCUSSIONS

The results from this study indicated that the genre-based approach helped participants enhance their ability in writing argumentative essays. The results were consistent with studies by Kongpetch (2003), Udomyamokkul (2004), Ferreira (2007), and Promwinai (2010): students gained better control over the organization, logic in the argument and language features in their argumentative essays. In this study, the participants improved their writing performance due to their control over the four important features of argument, namely *audience awareness and purpose, content, organization, and language resources* while composing the text. The results from the post-test

revealed the participants' awareness in incorporating these features into their argumentative essays. The reasons for the awareness of deep features could be explained by the implementation of the stages and techniques embedded in the genre-based approach. This is in line with Hammond et al.'s (1992) assertion that each of the four stages in the teaching and learning cycle has its own functions in supporting learners in their writing. The stages and the techniques applied could create opportunities for the participants to develop their own writing through self-exploration and discussion with friends and the instructor. This is well reflected in Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development, which proposed that knowledge is best constructed when students take part and negotiate with peers and teacher in meaningful activities.

The results from the interviews revealed that the participants' positive perceptions towards the implementation of the genre-based approach and the contribution of stages in the teaching and learning cycle to their writing argumentative essays. Their positive perceptions could be explained by the progress they made in their writing performance. Regardless of the writing results participants gained, participants indicated benefits of the genre-based approach compared to other approaches which had been used in their writing classes. The implementation of the genre-based approach assisted them in understanding the purpose and the organization of the target genre they are about to write, thereby resulting in an increase in their confidence and belief in their own writing ability. This finding is well supported by Flowerdew (2000), Kongpetch (2003), and Swami (2008). These studies had indicated that the genre-based approach helps students take control over the generic structures and language features by providing them with opportunities to use the language in real writing situations and improve their confidence in writing. The participants in this study also expressed their interest in using this approach and were eager to further explore the approach for other purposes of writing.

Participants' ability in writing argumentative essays and their positive perceptions of the genre-based approach to learning and teaching

argumentation support the conclusion that genre-based instruction is beneficial to improving participants' ability in writing argumentative essays and helping them have positive look on their learning to how to write.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of the study pointed out that with different time of treatment, genre-based participants from group 2 who received process-based instruction in the first phase and genre-based instruction in the second phase significantly improved their writing performance while those in group 1 who received the genre-based instruction in phase 1 and process-based instruction in phase 2 did not make much progress in their writing. The results of the present study confirmed the significantly positive improvement of participants in writing argumentative essays in terms of *awareness of the audience and the purpose of the text, the content of the text, the organization of the text, and their language use*. After the experiment, the participants became more confident in their writing ability and indicated their optimistic viewpoint on the implementation of genre-based approach in teaching and learning writing argumentative essays.

Five major implications for second language writing pedagogy are identified from the results of the study. First, it is evident that the instructor helps students become better writers through a number of significant tasks such as *demonstrating* and *supporting*. The instructor needs to be highly supportive, frequently available, and well prepared to help students overcome difficulties (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983).

Secondly, the instructor should take into consideration writing strategies within the various stages of the writing process in order to guide and help students feel ready to compose and express their ideas. As Shaughnessy (1977) points out, "Instruction in writing must begin with the more fundamental processes whereby writers get their thoughts in the first place and then get them underway" (p. 245). The instructor should provide students

interesting tasks to help them become involved in the topic. Taylor (1981) claims that the writing assignment is compelling enough when giving students an opportunity to strongly get involved in the topic and always have some ideas to write about.

Thirdly, the instructor should use students' errors as authentic teaching resources. The instructor may offer students revision 'checklists' and 'peer help worksheet' to encourage students to work together on their peers' writing and respond to each other's ideas. According to Klassen (1991), correcting the essay provides an interesting activity for students to do since "it is more fun for them to correct other students' errors than their own" (p. 136).

Fourth, writing lessons with the application of the genre-based approach should consist of many meaningful and purposeful activities and many different writing tasks giving students chances to get involved in. Essay tests cannot test all aspects of the learning process (White, 1994). In this case, portfolio assessment is reliable and more suitable because it has specific and clear criteria to facilitate teachers and students to do the final evaluation. Teachers can have effective assessment due to the comprehensive record of how students can make progress during a whole writing course. The portfolio recording the process of learning helps students much engage in self evaluation (Campbell, 1998), and contributes to their writing skills (Aydin, 2010).

Fifth and finally, the positive attitudes from the participants are very beneficial for the teachers in motivating them to keep using the genre-based approach in their writing classes. However, the critical issue in implementing genre-based teaching is the selection of input texts to be appropriate to their students' needs, interests, and proficiency level (Triastuti, 2011). To face this challenge, as Triastuti suggested, teachers need to learn the process of materials evaluation and adaptation in order to enable them to present suitable input texts.

The study achieved its research aims. However, the number of participants was small, just ten for each group, which affected the external validity of the

study to some degree. Another limitation of this study was that no data on how Vietnamese culture influenced participants' written products was documented. Therefore, how culture affects Vietnamese EFL learners compose argumentative essays deserves a research in a larger scale.

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