



Pseudo-Integration Strategy vs. Refutation Strategy in Argumentative Writing: An Analysis of the Iranian EFL Context

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Introduction

Argumentative writing is one of the most significant types of writing for students in higher education so much so that Crowhurst (1990) related academic successes to the degree of argumentative writing skill among students; therefore, argumentative writing has been the subject of extensive research (e.g., Chapple & Curtis, 2000; Ferretti, Lewis, & Andrews-Weckerly, 2009; Lea & Street, 1998; Nimehchisalem, Abbasi, Ebrahimzadeh, & Kalajahi, 2015; Nussbaum, 2008). The results of these studies have perpetuated various aspects of this multifarious writing skill. For example, Lea and Street (1998) note that the cognitive load of argumentative writing should be in accordance with the cognitive ability of the students. Also, Chapple and Curtis (2000) highlight that students need to have critical thinking skills to be able to argue in writing.

Although previous research has perpetuated that argumentative writing plays a significant role in the academic success of the students in any context, there exist a number of problems with regard to this issue in the context of Iran. The first issue is that argumentative writing in the Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context is understudied (Rahimi, 2009). Indeed, the number of studies dealing with argumentative writing in Iran are so scant that one cannot draw a conclusion about the effectiveness of argumentative writing instruction in Iran. The few studies that have focused on argumentative writing in Iran (e.g., Nimehchisalem et al., 2015) report that Iranian EFL learners do not have sufficient argumentative writing skills. In addition, as reported by Ketabi and Torabi (2017) writing is among the last skills which are dealt with in classes, and this reduces the language learners' writing skills. The main consequence of this problem would thereby reveal itself after the learners get admission to institutes of higher education where they need to publish academic articles and essays in which argumentation plays a

significant role.

To this end, the researchers in this study focused on two types of argumentative writing strategies, i.e., the refutation strategy and the pseudo integration strategy. The researchers wanted to find out whether or not instruction on these strategies could have an effect on task achievement of the language learners in terms of argumentative writing. In addition, they wished to find out which writing strategy is more effective than the other in the Iranian EFL context. Moreover, the researchers wished to discover the main challenges to argumentative writing in an Iranian EFL context.

The researchers opted for task achievement in writing, as scant research has dealt with this issue. Task achievement is a broad concept and can be defined based on the writing task given to the learners. While some writing tasks may require the learners to consider the audience in writing, others urged them to write a certain number of words. Considering that Iranian EFL learners should, in most cases, take the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) before they get admission to institutes of higher education, task achievement was sought in this study as it is defined by The Common European Framework of References (CEFR).

It should be mentioned that knowledge regarding the challenges of Iranian EFL learners in argumentative writing is significant, as it can be used to amend the teaching and learning processes in the Iranian EFL context. In addition, this study gives the readership the opportunity to delve into aspects of argumentative writing both from the learners' perspective (qualitative) and the analysis of quantifiable data.

Research Questions

- Q1: What are the effects of pseudo-integration strategy instruction on task achievement of Iranian EFL learners in argumentative writing?
- Q2: What are the effects of refutation strategy instruction on task achievement of Iranian EFL learners in argumentative writing?
- Q3: Which of the two strategies (pseudo-integration strategy vs. refutation strategy) has a greater effect on Iranian EFL learners' task achievement in argumentative writing?
- Q4: What are the challenges Iranian EFL learners perceive with regard to argumentative writing?

Review of the Related Literature

Argumentation has always been the core of academic activities. Previous research reveals that researchers have endeavored to increase scientific literacy of the learners through argumentation. For example, Kirschner, Buckingham-Shum and Carr (2012) note that arguments should be visualized to be understood. They suggested preparing an argument map prior to writing. By doing so, the writers can see various aspects of the argument and discuss what is necessary. Others such as Storch (2005) suggested collaboration in writing to help learners benefit from other proximal zones of learning. This can also aid the writers to consider aspects which they may miss if they write in isolation.

Van Gelderen et al. (2004) note that learners in the process of second/foreign language learning have to deal with a wide range of linguistic features which may be totally different from their L1. As a result, more attention to learning argumentative writing is required in the second language (L2). It seems that not only is attention to collaboration and construction of knowledge required, but also learners should be instructed on how to write in the second or foreign language. As a result and by building on previous research, the researchers in this study aimed at teaching two often used argumentative strategies to the learners, i.e., pseudo-integration strategy vs. refutation strategy.

Pseudo-Integration Strategy vs Refutation Strategy

Pseudo-integration Strategy and Refutation Strategy differ in the approach the authors take to write the essay. In Pseudo-integration, the authors formulate a position after discussing both sides of the argument (for and against) (Nussbaum, Winsor, Aqui, & Poliquin, 2007). To use the refutation strategy, the authors conclude without addressing the counterarguments which were raised. However, some arguments are restated due to their significance. Thus, while using the refutation strategy, the readers see supporting arguments, examples and explanations being restated (Nussbaum, 2008). The refutation strategy is when the arguer should attempt to find counter arguments and then try to refute them. Henkemans (2000) explains refutation in the following manner:

By showing that the other party's criticism regarding his argumentation is unjustified, the arguer has indeed successfully defended his standpoint. By refuting an argument for the opposite standpoint, he can only make his opponent withdraw this standpoint, which is of course, not sufficient to relieve him of the obligation to defend his own standpoint. (p. 132)

Some studies have investigated the effect of these strategies on argumentative writing. Studies as old as Bricker and Bricker (1974) acknowledge that teaching strategies such as integration or rebuttal can be an effective approach to argumentation, as instruction equips learners with strategies to write. Nussbaum, and Schraw (2007) conducted a study with 84 undergraduate students and concluded that an appropriate approach to argumentative writing is to discuss the counter arguments as well. They came to the conclusion that both refutation and counterargument are among significant argumentative writing strategies. Ferretti et al. (2009) argue that unless educators teach standards of argumentative writing to learners, learners are incapable of effective argumentative writing.

Task Achievement

As most literature dealing with writing centers on linguistic features such as cohesion, coherence, choice of words, and communicative success, little research exists on task achievement. However, task achievement is a significant issue in writing so much that the CEFR has mentioned task achievement as a criterion to assess writing.

Task achievement refers to the ability of the writer to expand an essay in the desired way to justify the argument and content the reader (McCarter, 2008). The writing tasks in this study were two argumentative writing essays from the IELTS. In the IELTS, test takers must be able to write 250 words. On the other hand, they should be able to argue over to topic in a way that results in a justified conclusion.

Method

Conceptual Framework

Of interest to the researchers in this study was to explore the challenges Iranian EFL learners perceive with regard to argumentative writing and to know which strategy (refutation or pseudo-integration) has more effect on Iranian EFL learners' task achievement in argumentative writing. The researchers designed a model to implement both refutation strategy and pseudo-integration strategy based on the guidelines for scoring argumentative writing by Ferretti et al. (2009). They also made use of the CEFR, as one of their rubrics is task achievement. Based on these sources the following issues were taught to the participants:

- a) Developing opinions (introducing ideas, and supporting them)
- b) Using argumentative discourse (with a focus on refutation and pseudo-integration)

- c) Using cohesive devices
- d) Dealing with errors in argumentative writing

Research Design

The design of the study is mixed-methods. It has a quantitative section that gauges the effects of the pseudo-integration strategy vs. refutation strategy on task achievement of participants in academic writing. It also has a qualitative section which explores the challenges Iranian EFL learners perceive with regard to argumentative writing. The main philosophical paradigm in the study is pragmatism; due to the mixed-method design used.

Participants

This study was conducted at a language institute in the city of Tabriz, Iran. The center has over 600 language learners and has aimed at finding a suitable approach to improve the writing skill of the language learners. A total of 120 learners were studying at the intermediate levels in the center. The researcher accorded focus to intermediate learners, as: 1) argumentative writing requires a high cognitive load which makes it difficult for elementary learners, 2) advanced learners in the center were limited in number. A power analysis revealed that 24 participants were required in each of the groups in this study. Therefore, the researchers administered the NELSON language proficiency test to 79 participants among the intermediate learners and by considering 1 standard deviation above and below the mean score opted for 51 participants for the study. These participants were all female language learners whose age ranged between 18 and 29; thus, they were considered adult EFL learners.

Procedure

The researchers began the study by administering the consent forms to the participants so as to assure ethical research. Next, the participants were homogenized through administering the NELSON language proficiency test. The NELSON test was designed by Fowler and Coe (1976) and includes 50 multiple choice items. After selecting 51 participants, an argumentative IELTS writing (task 2, academic module) was administered to the participants as both the homogeneity test and the pretest. Using the results of the writing test, the participants formed two groups for the study. i.e., group I (refutation strategy) with 25 participants and group II (pseudo-integration) with 26 participants.

The study was conducted over one academic semester in the center (14 sessions). In experimental group I, the refutation writing strategy was practiced with the participants for 12 sessions. To conduct the study, the standards of task achievement in writing as stated by Ferretti et al. (2009) were taken into account. The participants were taught how to find counter arguments and how to refute them. In every session of the class they were given a topic and were asked to practice the refutation strategy. In the experimental group II, the pseudo-integration strategy was instructed for 12 sessions. They were instructed on how to argue over both sides of the argument and how to hold a position in the argument. Both groups received instructions on cohesive devices. The classes were conducted collaboratively, and participants worked in groups of 2 and 3.

Data Analysis

Before all, the normality of distribution was checked for the scores by using ratios of skewness and kurtosis. It should be mentioned that task achievement was scored using the Ferretti et al. (2009) scoring scale. The raters were asked to score the written essays out of 40 so that the difference between scores could be observed statistically. Table 1 depicts the distribution of scores.

TABLE 1
Distribution of Scores, All scores

	NELSON	Pretest	Posttest- Integration	Posttest- Refutation
N	79	51	26	25
Skewness	.201	.811	-0.912	.523
Std. Error of Skewness	.344	.365	.533	.499
Kurtosis	.545	.267	0.762	.411
Std. Error of Kurtosis	.653	.091	.817	.816

Ratios of skewness and Kurtosis were within ± 1.96 ; therefore, based on Strevens (2009) it can be concluded that the scores represented a normal distribution.

Reliability of Scores

As two raters were involved in scoring the essays in this study, inter-rater reliability should have been checked in the first place between the raters to make sure the data could be used in further analysis of the study. The results of interclass correlation (single measures) revealed that there was a significant agreement between the two raters who rated the subjects in terms of the writing ($\alpha = .811$, $p = .000$) (Table 2). Had a single rater rated them two times (average measures), the intra-rater reliability would have been $\alpha = .854$ ($p = .000$).

TABLE 2
Intra-class Correlation Coefficient; Posttest of Writing

	Intraclass Correlation	95% Confidence Interval		F Test with True Value 0		
		Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Value	df2	Sig
Single Measures	.811	.765	.901	21.17	49	.000
Average Measures	.854	.811	.884	22.17	49	.000

Having made sure that there is interrater-reliability between the raters, the reliability of scores was checked for all tests in the study using KR-21 as the reliability index ranged between 0.801 and 0.84 for all tests, it can be assumed that the tests were reliable.

Research Question 1

In order to answer research question 1, a paired samples t-test was run between the pretest and posttest scores of participants in experimental group I (Pseudo-integration strategy instruction).

TABLE 3
Paired Samples T-test; descriptive Statistics of Pseudo-Integration Group

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest	24.12	25	3.009	1.733
Posttest	29.76	25	3.534	1.004

Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics of two tests. As can be observed, the pretest scores ($M=24.12$, $SD= 3.009$) are considerably lower than posttest scores ($M= 29.76$, $SD= 3.534$) for the participants in the pseudo-integration group.

TABLE 4
Paired Samples T-test; Inferential Statistics of Pseudo-Integration Group

Paired Differences					t	df	Sig.
Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
			Lower	Upper			
5.64	5.177	1.911	3.154	7.165	2.99	24	.002

The results of paired samples t-test ($t(24) = 2.99$, $sig = .002$) [3.154, 7.165] shows that the difference between the pretest and posttest scores of the pseudo-integration-group participants has been significant; therefore, the first null hypothesis is rejected, and it is assumed that the pseudo-integration strategy has significant positive effects on the task achievement of Iranian EFL learners in argumentative writing.

Research Question 2

In order to seek the answer to research question 2, a paired samples t-test was run between the pretest and posttest scores of the participants ($n=25$) in the experimental group I (refutation strategy).

TABLE 5
Paired Samples T-test; descriptive Statistics of Refutation group

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Posttest	30.12	25	2.876	.755
Pretest	25.97	25	3.101	.798

As observed in Table 5, the posttest scores of the participants in refutation group ($M = 30.12$, $SD = 2.876$) is higher than the pretest ($M = 25.97$, $SD = 3.101$).

TABLE 6
Paired Samples T-test; Inferential Statistics of Refutation Group

Paired Differences					t	df	Sig.
Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
			Lower	Upper			
4.15	3.254	1.110	3.778	5.109	3.79	24	.000

As observed in Table 6, the results of a paired samples t-test ($t(24) = 3.79$, $sig = .000$) [3.778, 5.109] reveals that the difference between the two sets of scores (pretest and posttest) is significant; therefore, the second null hypothesis is rejected and it is assumed that the refutation strategy has a significant effect on task achievement of Iranian EFL learners in argumentative writing.

Research Question 3

In order to answer research question 3, a between subject test was used to compare the effects of pseudo-integration strategy vs. refutation strategy. To do so, an independent samples t-test was used. Table 7 shows the comparison of the two tests' mean score.

TABLE 7
Independent Samples T-test; Descriptive Statistics

Pair 3	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pseudo-Integration	26	29.76	3.534	.787
Refutation	25	30.12	2.876	.767

As can be seen in Table 7, the participants in pseudo-integration strategy group ($M = 29.76$, $SD = 3.534$)

had rather a lower posttest score than the refutation group ($M=30.12$, $SD= 2.876$).

TABLE 8
Independent Samples T-test; Refutation vs. Pseudo Integration

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.			Lower	Upper
.498	.411	-.475	49	.564	-.36	1.112	-1.19	2.01

As observed in Table 8, the results of the independent samples t-test ($t(49)=-.475$, $sig=.564[-1.19, 2.01]$) reveals that the difference between the two groups is not significant; therefore, the third hypothesis was supported, and it can be assumed that there is no statistically significant difference between the posttest scores of the participants in two experimental groups.

Research Question 4

To find the answer to research question 4, 12 participants were interviewed. The researchers made use of a qualitative content analysis approach as suggested by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) to analyze the data.

The interview data collected from the participants was transcribed and the researchers extracted the main themes from the interview transcriptions. These themes were next analyzed to find out which ones were relevant to the study. Those categories which were irrelevant were disregarded, and the results were reported based on the relevant information. By probing into the challenges the participants mentioned, the researcher attempted to discover the reason for the challenges. Table 9 lists the challenges perceived by the participants in argumentative writing classes.

TABLE 9
Argumentative Writing Challenges for Iranian EFL Learners

Challenge	Reason	Respondents' Reply
Insufficient instruction on argumentative writing	Focusing on descriptive writing	They teach us how to write about graphs and processes more.
Insufficient argumentative writing opportunities	Paragraph development is over emphasized	We are asked to develop paragraphs. Argument has not been part of our course.
Vocabulary	Vocabulary instruction is not part of the course	In our writing class, we usually receive feedback on our mistakes. Our teacher doesn't teach vocabulary.
Anxiety	Highlighting mistakes	I feel nervous not because I don't practice because I don't know how to write.
Teachers' limited knowledge of argumentative writing	Inappropriate instruction	Our teacher says answer <i>wh</i> questions about the topic. Now I know I should have a strategy in writing

Discussion and Conclusion

This study revealed that the Iranian EFL context is suffering from teachers' limited knowledge about argumentative writing, lack of instruction on argumentative writing strategies, lack of opportunities to write argumentative essays, and learners' anxiety and limited knowledge of vocabulary. It was also observed that instruction on pseudo-integration and refutation strategies can increase learners' argumentative writing skill; however, the effect of these two writing strategies on task achievement of the learners was not statistically significant.

Vocabulary is among the main challenges of argumentative writing (Zhu, 2001), and this issue is, to a great extent, related to the use of cohesive devices (Liu & Braine, 2005). Insufficient vocabulary can affect learners' written discourse (Al-Haq & Ahmed, 1994). In congruence with Zhu (2001), this study revealed that vocabulary was among the main challenges of Iranian EFL learners in argumentative writing. However, as cohesive devices were considered as a rubric in assessing the participants' argumentative writing, it was observed that instruction on argumentative writing strategies and relevant cohesive devices can affect learners' scores. Moreover, the learners expected the teachers to inform them of cohesive devices and the required vocabulary to write argumentative essays. They also expected the teachers to explicitly teach argumentative writing strategies. As a result, they assumed that the teachers had insufficient knowledge to teach argumentative writing. Loewenberg, Ball, and Forzani (2009) also acknowledge that the lack of teachers' knowledge is a challenge for both teachers and the learners so much so that it can affect their identity.

In this study, it was observed that ambiguity of argumentative writing strategies had resulted in anxiety in the learners. Griffiths (2003) also states that ambiguity is a serious parameter in learning languages and affects strategy use of the learners. Though learners have different levels of ambiguity tolerance, it can result in anxiety and lack of self-confidence among them (Chapelle & Roberts, 1986). This issue was observed in the current study as the learners' reported that they felt anxious as the argumentative writing strategies were ambiguous for them.

One of the challenges mentioned by the respondents in this study was that in their conventional classes, they were not given enough practice time. Learners are usually asked to deal with all language skills in their language courses and there remains little time to practice the writing skill. Ketabi and Torabi (2017) also note that writing is a neglected skill in the context of Iran and most of the attention is accorded to the speaking skill. Finally, the findings of this study are in line with Nimehchi Salem et al (2015) who stated that the Iranian EFL context suffers from argumentative writing problems and found it to be, to a great extent, related to inappropriate instruction of writing strategies.

Pedagogical Implications

Teacher trainers and language teachers are among the main cohorts of educators who can benefit from the findings of this study. Teacher trainers should focus on language teachers' knowledge of writing strategies in teacher-training courses, and language teachers should equip themselves with knowledge towards argumentative writing strategies. Language teachers should emphasize the use of cohesive devices and instruct vocabulary items for argumentative writing.

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