



Debate as L2 Pedagogy: Enhancing Primary Students' Writing Ability through Debate Activities

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Abstract

This study reports the implementation of debate as a potential pedagogical tool in developing students' writing ability on argumentative texts among EFL primary school students. As many as 18 sixth-grade students (N=18) of one private school in West Java took part in this study. The study employed a pre-test and post-test design to assess improvements in writing fluency, lexical richness, coherence and cohesion. The results showed significant across all areas. Students' average word count increased by 109%, lexical complexity (type-token ratio) rose from 0.29 to 0.36. Furthermore, the use of cohesive devices increased by 76%. These findings hint great opportunity for English teachers to implement debate activities to foster deep learning and significantly enhance argumentative writing skills in young L2 learners.

Keywords: Debate; writing ability; argumentative writing.

Introduction

Argumentative writing (Khoiroh, 2023) is a critical skill in second language (L2) education, as Graham & Perin (2017) point out, it promotes critical thinking, logical reasoning, and effective communication. For primary school students who learn English as a second language (L2), mastering argumentative writing is particularly challenging due to limited linguistic resources, difficulties in organizing ideas, and a lack of exposure to structured argumentation (Zhang & Zhang, 2013). It is evident that argumentative writing has not been introduced in primary level in Indonesian English curriculum, however, for those schools which adopt and implement outside curriculum, the opinion writing skill become a final assessment of the level. While traditional writing instruction often emphasizes grammar drills and formulaic structures, such methods may fail to engage students or foster deep learning (Kinet Promoteur & Meunier, 2018) As a result, teachers and researchers are increasingly exploring innovative pedagogical approaches, such as debate activities, to enhance writing skills and promote active learning.

Debate has been widely used in language learning for its potential to improve language skills. It has also been shown to enhance oral communication and critical thinking skills (Zare & Othman, 2013). During the debate activities in the class, the students are encouraged to analyze multiple points of view, construct logical arguments, and use evidence to support their claims (Kennedy, 2009). Previous studies have demonstrated the benefits of debate in L2 learning. For example, Zare and Othman found that debate significantly improves students' critical thinking and oral communication skills. Similarly, Modarresi (Modarresi, 2021) showed that debate enhances vocabulary acquisition and syntactic complexity in L2 learners. These studies point up the potential of debate to foster not only speaking and listening skills but also higher-order cognitive abilities that are essential for effective writing.

Despite its recognized benefits, research on the use of debate to improve writing skills, particularly in primary education, remains limited. Most studies have focused on older students or on the impact of debate on oral communication rather than written expression. For instance, while Majidi et al. (Majidi et al., 2020) explored the role of debate in improving argumentative writing among high school students, little attention has been paid to younger learners. This gap is significant, as primary school students are at a critical stage of language development, and early interventions can have long-lasting effects on their academic success. Furthermore, existing research has not thoroughly examined how debate influences specific aspects of writing, such as fluency, lexical complexity, accuracy, cohesion, and coherence. Thus, this study aims to address this gap by investigating the use of debate activities to improve argumentative writing skills among primary school students. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following research questions “How do debate activities influence the fluency, lexical complexity, cohesion, and coherence of primary students' argumentative writing?”

Method

The study involved 18 sixth-grade students (aged 11–12) from a private school in Depok, West Java. All participants were pre-intermediate-level English learners with at least six years of formal English instruction. A pre-test and post-test design was used to measure changes in students' argumentative writing skills. The intervention consisted of a four-week debate program, during which students participated in weekly debates on age-appropriate topics such as about money, homework, recess

time, and zoo. The instruments used in this study included writing prompts, debate topics, and writing rubrics. The procedures of this study involved some steps. First, as for the pre-test, the students completed an argumentative writing task on a given topic. The topic was selected based on students' interests and curricular relevance. Over four weeks, students participated in weekly debates. Each debate session included preparation, argument delivery, and peer feedback. After four weeks, the students were administered to a second argumentative writing task. Finally, the students' written texts were collected and assessed using rubrics adapted from (Ellis et al., 2019), focusing on fluency, lexical complexity, cohesion, and coherence. As for the data analysis, Writing samples were scored for fluency (word count), lexical complexity (type-token ratio), accuracy (error-free clauses), cohesion (use of linking words), and coherence (logical organization). A descriptive statistics was conducted to compare pre- and post-test scores.

Result and Discussion

The results of the study are presented below, organized into three key areas: writing fluency, lexical complexity, and cohesion. Data from the pre-test and post-test are compared to assess the impact of the debate intervention on primary students' argumentative writing skills.

Table 1. Students' results of pre and post-test on writing fluency, lexical complexity, accuracy, cohesion and coherence.

Students	Word Count		TTR (Type-token ration)		Linking words	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Student 1	114	206	0.32	0.45	4	7
Student 2	106	180	0.34	0.40	3	5
Student 3	151	215	0.38	0.43	4	8
Student 4	71	142	0.26	0.31	3	4
Student 5	94	171	0.29	0.34	3	5
Student 6	76	164	0.31	0.44	3	5
Student 7	83	230	0.32	0.39	2	4

Student 8	73	196	0.29	0.36	2	4
Student 9	69	177	0.26	0.35	2	4
Student 10	72	176	0.32	0.41	3	5
Student 11	55	118	0.28	0.34	2	3
Student 12	75	124	0.29	0.34	4	4
Student 13	70	181	0.20	0.37	3	4
Student 14	58	122	0.27	0.32	3	6
Student 15	66	147	0.27	0.33	3	6
Student 16	89	167	0.26	0.29	3	7
Student 17	54	118	0.28	0.35	2	5
Student 18	57	116	0.21	0.28	3	5

1. Writing Fluency

Writing fluency, measured by the total word count in students' essays, showed notable improvement after the debate intervention. In the pre-test, the average word count across all students was 78.7 words, with individual scores ranging from 54 to 151 words. However, in the post-test, the average word count increased to 164.6 words, with scores ranging from 116 to 230 words. This represents an overall increase of 109% in writing fluency. For instance, Student 3 improved from 151 words to 215 words, while Student 7 demonstrated the most significant growth, increasing from 83 words to 230 words. These results indicate that debate activities encouraged students to express their ideas more freely and at greater length, likely due to increased confidence and improved critical thinking skills developed through structured argumentation. Other factors that contribute to the improvement of students' writing fluency are the brainstorming activities and teachers' feedback. Before every debate session, the students did brainstorming and did research by reading literature from the books and internet resources. This is important because the students acquired new vocabularies on the current debate motion. Teacher's feedbacks after each debate session also play an important role as the feedbacks provided the students to structure the talk correctly.

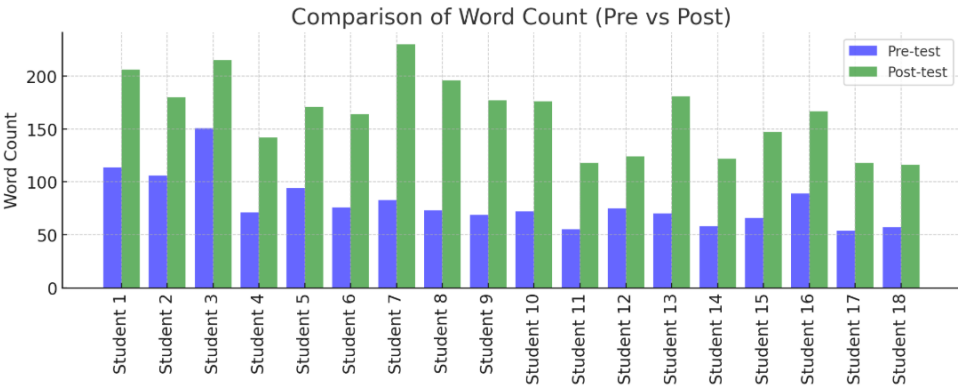


Figure 1. Students’ comparisons of word counts of the pre-test and post-test results.

2. Lexical Complexity

Lexical complexity, measured by the type-token ratio (TTR), also showed improvement, though the gains were more modest compared to writing fluency. The Type-Token Ratio (TTR) is a measure used to assess the lexical variation of a text. It provides information of how many unique words (types) are used relative to the total number of words or tokens (Asing, 2018). The average TTR in the pre-test was 0.29, with scores ranging from 0.20 to 0.38. In the post-test, the average TTR increased to 0.36, with scores ranging from 0.28 to 0.45. This represents an overall improvement of 24%. For example, Student 1 improved from a TTR of 0.32 to 0.45, while Student 13 showed the most significant growth, increasing from 0.20 to 0.37. These findings suggest that debate activities helped students diversify their vocabulary, likely due to exposure to new words and phrases during argumentative discussions. However, the relatively smaller increase in TTR compared to word count indicates that vocabulary development may require more time and targeted instruction.

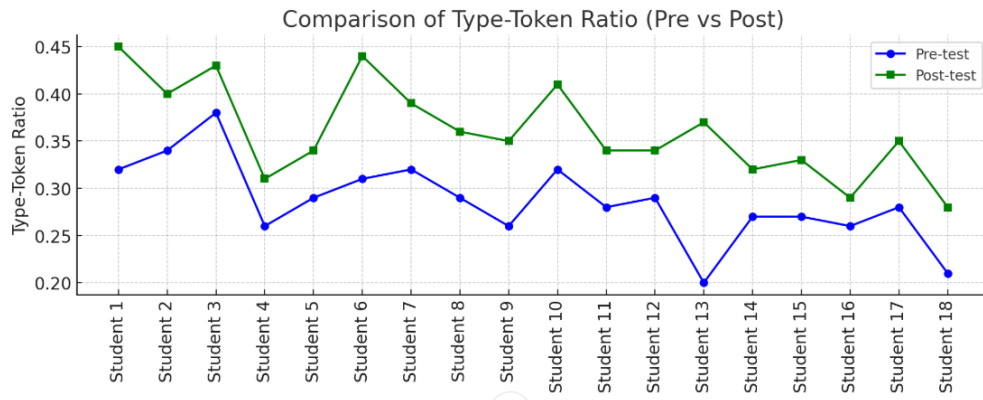


Figure 2. Students' comparisons of Type-Token Ratio of the pre-test and post-test results.

3. Cohesive Device

Cohesion measured by the number of linking words used in students' essays also improved significantly. In the pre-test, the average number of linking words was 2.9, with scores ranging from 2 to 4. In the post-test, the average increased to 5.1, with scores ranging from 3 to 8. This represents an overall increase of 76%. For instance, Student 3 improved from 4 to 8 linking words, while Student 16 increased from 3 to 7 linking words. There were frequent use of linking words used by the students in their essay. Those were and, firstly, because, also, but, however, therefore, and in conclusion. These results suggest that debate activities helped students better organize their ideas and create more coherent arguments. The use of linking words, such as "however," "therefore," and "in conclusion," indicates that students were able to connect their thoughts more effectively, resulting in essays that were logically structured and easier to follow.

From the explanation of described data (Table 1), the most significant improvement was observed in writing fluency which gained significant improvement at 109% in the post-test compared to the pre-test. This increase can be attributed to the interactive nature of debate, which encourages students to articulate their thoughts and defend their viewpoints. This finding supports the idea that debate fosters deep learning by encouraging students to actively engage with the material and think critically about their arguments (Kennedy, 2009). Additionally, the improvement in cohesion, as evidenced by the increased use of linking words, suggests that debate

helps students organize their ideas more logically and create more coherent arguments. This is particularly important for primary students, who often struggle with structuring their writing in a clear and logical manner.

While the study also found improvements in lexical complexity, the gains were more modest compared to fluency and cohesion. This suggests that while debate exposes students to new vocabulary and encourages them to use a wider range of words, vocabulary development may require more time and targeted instruction. For example, explicit vocabulary exercises or word banks could be integrated into debate activities to further enhance lexical complexity. This finding aligns with previous research, which has shown that vocabulary acquisition is a gradual process that benefits from repeated exposure and practice (Zhang & Zhang, 2013).

Despite its promising results, this study has several limitations. First, the small sample size (18 students) limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research could involve a larger and more diverse group of participants to validate the results. Second, the study was conducted in a single private school, which may not reflect the experiences of students in other educational contexts. Future studies could explore the impact of debate in public schools or in different cultural settings. Finally, the study focused on short-term gains, and it is unclear whether the improvements in writing skills will be sustained over time. Longitudinal studies are needed to assess the long-term effects of debate on writing development.

Conclusion

This study examines the potential of debate as an effective pedagogical tool for improving argumentative writing skills in primary students. The results of this study demonstrate that debate activities had a positive impact on primary students' argumentative writing skills. Significant improvements were observed in writing fluency, lexical complexity, and cohesion, with the most notable gains in fluency and cohesion. These findings suggest that debate not only encourages students to write more but also helps them organize their ideas more effectively and use a wider range of vocabulary. However, the relatively smaller gains in lexical complexity suggest that vocabulary development may require additional support, such as explicit instruction or targeted vocabulary exercises. Overall, the study underscores the value

of incorporating debate into the L2 writing curriculum to promote deeper learning and enhance students' writing proficiency.

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