ESP Malay Learners Critical Thinking Skills: Presenting Arguments and Counter Arguments

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Abstract: Presenting about controversial topics and issues is one of many activities conducted in English for specific purposes (ESP) classroom whereby students are required to present their arguments supported by acceptable reasons while also being able to challenge others views. Both skills, if developed well can have positive impacts on the speaker and the audience. This pilot study is aimed at investigating the relationship between the argument skills and counter argument skills among ESP Malay students. Participants of the study were UiTM Pahang diploma students in their fifth semester. The data was taken from students' speaking assessment marks for argument and counter argument skills in presenting arguments in their Introduction to Critical Thinking (BEL313) course. The data collected were analysed using SPSS *version 18 for Windows* to provide indicators that reflect the relationship between argument skills and counter argument skills of these students. The study revealed that there was a fair connection between the skills of argument and counter argument. The findings suggest further development of both skills is essential and beneficial where later in live they will encounter many more issues and disputes to evaluate and differentiate between what are relevant and irrelevant to them.

Keywords: Argument skills, Counter argument skills, Persuasiveness

1. Introduction

Promoting critical thinking in higher education students is essential as it can prepare them to become individuals who can think well. Instead of just accepting information passively, students are expected to sort the information that comes their way using this higher order thinking skills. Critical thinking skills in classroom instruction often involve skills like identifying main issues and assumptions in argument, recognise important relationships, deduce conclusions from information provided, evaluate evidence, etc. Such skills if developed well enable students to function effectively in their environment be it academic, everyday life or at the work place later. Hence, this study hopes to examine the critical thinking skills of presenting arguments and counter arguments among university ESL Malay learners.

2. Literature Review

Whether we do realise it or not, we do encounter arguments in many daily issues and disputes. For university students and working people, it is important to know how to make an effective case, to make a good argument (Hillocks, 2010). McComas & Abraham (2004) contend that critical thinking requires students to engage in higher order thinking skills such as evaluation and analysis instead of simply recalling information. Hence, critical thinking class teaches students to use higher order thinking to analyse and evaluate information that they encounter daily and to decide appropriate actions for or against it.

In critical thinking, to successfully argue about controversial issues or statements is to provide supporting evidence to prove a stand with the purpose of convincing people to think or act in certain ways (Mayfield, 2010). Argumentation as highlighted by Bassham, Irwin, Nardone and Wallace (2011) should be based on standards like clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, depth, breadth, and fairness. The type and quantity of evidence chosen also play important roles to convince the audience. Solid evidence like facts is more convincing compared to using techniques that appeal to emotion. The use of several persuasive strategies increases the persuasiveness of an argument which tends to be more influential and acceptable to the audience.

In addition, an argument is incomplete without a counter argument, a viewpoint that opposes the main argument put forward. Counter argument is a part of good persuasive strategy because it shows that arguments on both sides of an issue are considered (Willingham, 2007). A good thinker has to be sensitive to weaknesses in the arguments to be able to counter argue position of others. Counter arguments also provide opportunities to refute the opposition and show why one's position is the right one to have. Similar to the technique of presenting an argument, refutation also requires a balanced and reasonable ways in its supports. Thus, critical thinking encourages the development of skills of giving good arguments and counter arguments to support the speaker's opinions.

Moreover, classroom activities that support critical thinking have reported success in different areas. For example, VanTassel-Baska, Bracken, Feng, & Brown (2009) reported findings of an increase in reading comprehension and reading assessment scores. In writing, the skills of critical analysis enable writers to produce successful arguments in writing many forms of documents like letters and essays (Mayfield, 2010). Arend (2009) further demonstrated that there was a positive response in critical thinking in online threaded discussion.

Van Gelder (2005) further suggests that critical thinking can be obtained by providing students opportunities to develop the skills by making them practice in various contexts and situations. However, critical thinking skills like any other skills develop over time (Halpern, 1998) and take a lot of practice. Therefore, this study investigates the relationship between the critical thinking skills of presenting arguments and counter arguments among university ESL Malay learners.

3. Methodology

The sample of this study was made up of seventy-five students enrolled in the BEL313: Introduction to Critical Thinking course. They were the fifth semester students from the Faculty of Business Studies. Student performance in a speaking assessment carried out in the classroom was filed for analysis. The speaking assessment involved a group presentation of a controversial topic selected by each group. Students were assigned to groups of four whereby two students presented their arguments to support the topic and the other two students presented their arguments to oppose the topic. The data involved individual scores received for argument and counter argument skills in the presentation of the selected topic. Scores for argument and counter argument skills were: very poor (1), poor (2), fair (3), satisfactory (4) and, excellent (5). Statistical processing of the data by means of a Software Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) *version 18 for Windows* included the computations of Descriptive Statistics and Pearson's correlation coefficients, which indicate whether there is a correlation between the two skills and their statistical significance. The findings are presented below.

4. Results & Discussion

Table 1 indicates that 57 of the 75 students (76%) were female. This analysis highlights the point that the group of students that registered into the course was mostly female students. Further analysis was later carried out to determine whether gender was related to the argument and counter argument skills.

Table 1. Frequency table for gender

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	18	24.0	24.0	24.0
	Female	57	76.0	76.0	100.0
	Total	75	100.0	100.0	

The result of the descriptive statistics in Table 2 show that both the minimum and the maximum scores for both argument and counter argument were the same, the mean for the counter argument score was higher (3.36) than the argument score (3.09). However, the standard deviation for the counter argument score was higher (.650) than the argument score (.701). Therefore, the students' overall performance was better in the counter argument skill compared to the argument skill as reflected by the higher mean and lower standard deviation.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Argument	75	2	4	3.09	.701
CounterArgument	75	2	4	3.36	.650
Valid N (listwise)	75				

Table 3 below shows a correlation coefficient of .370 when argument and counter argument were compared. This shows that they were moderately correlated in a positive direction. Table 3 also indicates that correlation coefficient of .370 is significant at the 0.01 level. This suggests that there is a fair relationship between argument and counter argument skills.

Analysis also show that the correlation coefficient between argument and gender (.030) and counter argument and gender (-.267) is low, indicating a weak relationship. Table 3 also indicates that correlation coefficient of -.267 is significant at the 0.05 level. Thus, findings indicate that gender does not influence argument and counter argument skills of the students.

Table 3. Argument and counter argument correlations

	Minimum	Argument	CounterArgument	Gender
Argument	Pearson Correlation	1	.370**	-.267*
	Sig. (2-tailed)			
	N	75	75	75
CounterArgument	Pearson Correlation	.370**	1	.030
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001		.795
	N	75	75	75

Gender	Pearson Correlation	-.267*	.030	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.021	.795	
	N	75	75	75

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

In summary, after conducting a statistical analysis on the scores, it was found that students had performed significantly better on the aspect of counter argument skill than the argument skill. It was also found that there was a relationship although fair between both skills; students showed the ability to argue and counter argue in the presentation of their argument. As critical thinking skills develop over time (Halpern, 1998), one semester performance in speaking may not be sufficient to assess the skills.

However, it can be deduced that taking the course appeared to have helped develop the students' ability to recognize, construct, and evaluate arguments as shown in the findings of this study. The results also suggest that critical thinking teaching and learning activities carried out have fairly strengthened students ability in speaking about issues like other skills as observed by VanTassel-Baska, Bracken, Feng, & Brown (2009) on the improvement of reading and Mayfield (2010) in writing. Besides, students who are given opportunities to apply the critical thinking skills in different contexts (Van Gelder, 2005) will be even more successful to think well for themselves. A good thinker will then continue to seek true information to enable him to deal with multiple daily issues intellectually and appropriately.

5. References

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