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Research Article

Scrutinizing Mentor Text in Virtual EFL Writing Course: A Text Modeling Approach during ERT in Indonesia

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KEYWORDS

Argumentative essay;
 Mentor text;
 EFL Writing;
 Modeling approach;
 ERT.

ABSTRACT

Writing English argumentative essays has brought suffering and constraints for EFL university students since it requires relevant argumentativeness and knowledge of text genre knowledge and grammar and vocabulary mastery. Mentor text can be an effective scaffold for them to understand the essay. Little is known about university students' perspectives on writing an argumentative essay and the mentor texts given to them. To fill the void, this present study was carried out in a qualitative framework. Twenty-nine university students who attended and were exposed to four selected mentor texts during the virtual writing course voluntarily took part in this study by filling out the online questionnaire. The findings show that the students experienced and felt various positive and negative emotional expressions, such as challenge, difficulty, and enjoyment. The students perceived that the selected mentor texts were beneficial and very helpful for learning, understanding, and producing argumentative essays. Those mentor texts contain clear structure, effective thesis, and good writer's delivery so that the students can easily emulate and adapt them into their writing.

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INTRODUCTION

Writing English for academic purposes comes with struggles and constraints for most students at the university level (Basturkmen & von Randow, 2014; Ghorbanchian et al., 2019) because it requires knowledge of text genre, argumentativeness, vocabulary mastery, and grammar knowledge. In EFL writing contexts, the factors of writing difficulty can be tremendous and vary in the level of concepts, rhetoric, and linguistics (Mohamed & Zouaoui, 2014), such as writing mechanics (Alharbi, 2019), text organization, grammar and vocabulary (Ahmed, 2019; Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017). Particularly for argumentative essays as the essential genre in college academic writing

(Dornbrack & Dixon, 2014; Ka-kan-dee & Kaur, 2015), developing argumentative essay may lead the students to experience rhetorical constraints (Zhu, 2001), discourse problems (Al-Haq & Ahmed, 1994), cognitive problems and psychological problems (Rahmatunisa, 2014); for example, the students are not able to state a clear, effective thesis statement because of unfamiliarity with the text genre (Ka-kan-dee & Kaur, 2015). Another issue in constructing an argumentative essay is tailoring a claim and aligned rebuttal (Sundari & Febriyanti, 2021). Considering the great hindrance faced by EFL university students in developing this essay, the process of learning, understanding, and producing the essay should be immensely supported by a number of text samples so that the students can identify and notice the organization,

features, and structures of the essay as well as the way the writer composes the voice, tone and word choice on the essay. Such an essay serves as a model text to guide the students in writing. It is then called a mentor text.

In the context of writing instruction, a mentor text refers to a high-quality example of text type containing ideal features the students should observe and imitate (Ghorbanchian et al., 2019). The function of mentor texts is as models of how to write the targeted text (Pytash & Morgan, 2014) so that the students, as the readers of the mentor text, can see beyond what is told or taught in the text and notice how a text is written (Dollins, 2020). Mentor texts can be books, stories, poems, essays, and other writings that can be repeatedly looked back and read (Newman, 2012). Mentor texts benefit the students in developing essays in two ways: the structure of the essay and the writer's way of words (Ray, 2006 cited in Newman, 2012). Mentor texts provide how the writers have ordered the information; at the same time, they help the students to learn how the writers use language and particular writing techniques. Therefore, while reading the mentor texts, the students have a sense of being a writer and *read like a writer*, a term coined by Ray (2006 cited in Newman, 2012).

Providing mentor text in writing instruction is imperative as it can effectively scaffold students in their language learning and written language production. During essay development, the students require modeling and more modeling of the text to achieve the text requirement (Kane, 2012). Having been exposed to mentor texts, the students recognize how the text is crafted in terms of various features, such as complexity, depth, and sophistication (Liaghat & Biria, 2018), so that the student's writing product could meet the requirements of the essay assignment.

Scaffolding students in learning to write by providing mentor text prior to writing production can be regarded as a mentor text modeling approach (Liaghat & Biria, 2018). In writing sessions, student writers learn to write by emulating and modifying the writer's work in a mentor text. Grounded by the constructivism of learning theory, Alesandrini and Larson (2002 cited in Kane, 2012) proposed the framework of a mentor text inquiry approach to teaching writing skills. In applying this approach, the writing teachers/instructor should do the following phases:

1. Adopting a descriptivist versus prescriptivist stance to writing instruction
2. Choosing published texts as models for the genre (text type) the students should emulate
3. Setting the learning environment for the inquiry process

4. Designing purposeful scaffolding that leads the students to move from the current state to the targeted state (new understanding of writing)
5. Giving time for the students to explore texts, notice and identify language use and construction of language crafted by the writer of the mentor text, as well as provide opportunities for them to draft, revise, edit, and share their writings.

The body of research on mentor text and/or text modeling approach has shown that, as an approach, this has yielded positive results (Liaghat & Biria, 2018) and has functioned as a dependable source for managing writing task (Ghorbanchian et al., 2019). Moreover, university students perceived that mentor text makes them better writers for comparison essays (Irawati & Ariani, 2020). However, there was scarce literature on how EFL university students experience essay development accompanied by mentors' text and how they recognize it. Little we know to what extent and in what ways mentor texts scaffold the students during essay development, particularly for argumentative essays. To fill the gap, this current research was addressed to scrutinize the EFL university students' experiences in producing the argumentative essay and their perspectives of the mentors' texts provided. Then, this investigation was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do EFL university students perceive developing argumentative essays?
2. How and to what extent do the mentor texts provided scaffold them in understanding and developing argumentative essays during a virtual writing course?

METHOD

Research Design

Guided by a qualitative research paradigm to explore human perspectives and social behavior under certain real situations (Yin, 2011), this research aimed to scrutinize the attitudes of EFL university students on mentor texts provided to them in learning and writing argumentative essays during a virtual writing course. Moreover, the current investigation tried to examine how and to what extent mentor texts scaffold university students in gaining genre knowledge and developing text, particularly argumentative essay genre.

Research Context and Participants

The research site was at one private university in Jakarta, Indonesia. The English education department offered Academic Writing Course for 16 weeks. One of the purposes of the course is to enable students to develop argumentative essays. Since the outbreak of coronaviruses/COVID-19, the conducted course was via Google Classroom, called an emergency remote

teaching system (ERT) (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Hodges et al., 2020).

During the discussion and practice of argumentative essays, the writing tutor (first researcher) applied a modified modeling approach. She prepared four argumentative essays as mentor texts to guide the students in understanding the genre and developing the essay. The sources of text mentor texts in scaffolding EFL student-writers in writing an (argumentative) essay during a virtual writing instruction mentor texts in scaffolding EFL student-writers in writing an (argumentative) essay during a virtual writing instruction were student-made essays and internet sources which meet the generic structures and linguistic features of argumentative essay genre. All developed mentor texts were in 5-paragraph argumentative essay format (Oshime & Hogue, 2006), including 1 introductory paragraph, 3 body paragraphs, and 1 concluding paragraph. They followed a block-pattern style of argumentation in which the writer's arguments were in body paragraphs 1 and 2 and then followed by body paragraph 3 as a counterargument or rebuttal paragraph. The distributed mentor texts were in PDF format as materials in virtual class and uploaded before the synchronous sessions. The writing tutor discussed the structures and the features in the text during synchronous sessions via Zoom videoconferencing. The topics of mentor texts were related to ELT issues, as follows:

- a. Deductive grammar
- b. ASEAN Policy of English
- c. Studying Abroad
- d. NEST and Non-NEST

The participants were twenty-nine EFL university students who attended the course and stated their consent and agreement to participate in this study. To warrant research etiquette and anonymity, pseudo-names were applied. Then, the named participants were US1-US29. The demographical information of the participants is as follows.

Table 1. The Demographical Information of the Participants

Participants 29		
Gender/Sex	Male	31%
	Female	69%
Age	20-25 years old	10.3%
	26-30 years old	17.2%
	30-35 years old	17.2%
	Above 35 years old	55.2%

Data Collection and Analysis

In gathering the data to answer the formulated research questions, an online questionnaire was distributed to the students after they had completed and submitted the

assigned essay. The item division questions in the questionnaire involved into two parts: close-ended and open-ended. In the close-ended questionnaire, four items for four mentor texts to explore the students' perspectives of how the mentor text scaffold them in understanding and developing argumentative essay. It used Likert Scale items to declare help/scaffold, ranging from 1 to 5 (1: not helpful at all, 2: not helpful, 3: neutral, 4: helpful, 5: very helpful). In the second part, this followed close-ended item was an open-ended question as probing questions to provide a deeper description of how and to what extend the text scaffolds them, and the questions were like 'in what way/s does this mentor text X help you understand argumentative essay and write your essay? Which part/s of this mentor text do you learn the most?'. Additionally, the other two item questions were to investigate the students' experiences, including the process, the challenges, and the strategies they made on writing an argumentative essay in English and their perspectives of the most helpful mentor text in developing this text type. The formulated question was as 'reflect and describe your experience in writing an argumentative essay (the process, the challenges, the benefits, the future impacts on your writing ability, etc.)!'. Then, the final related item question was to the most helpful mentor text. The presented results from close-ended items were descriptively in percentages for data analysis. At the same time, the analyzed textual data from the open-ended item of the questionnaire were qualitatively in three stages of the qualitative analysis procedure that was proposed by Miles et al. (2014).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The present research was to scrutinize mentor texts in scaffolding EFL student-writers in understanding and writing an argumentative essay during virtual writing instruction. After providing four argumentative essays as mentor texts during virtual writing sessions and distributing an online questionnaire, the findings are presented in two sections based on the formulated research questions.

EFL University Students' Perspectives on Developing English Argumentative Essay

Concerning the students' perspectives in writing an argumentative essay, they stated various emotional expressions to describe their experiences in completing the assignment of writing an argumentative essay, from positive perceptions to negative perceptions. They revealed that developing argumentative essay was challenging (US1, US8, US13, US18, US20), an amazing experience (US2, U21), enjoyment (US3, US29), difficulty (US5, US15), abstractive (US25), time-consuming (US27) and brain draining (US28).

The students narrated the process of how they learned to get knowledge of argumentative essays and to write this type of essay, as in the following excerpt below.

I have to go through a long and winding road to make a 1500-word essay. I need to read many references quickly, try to absorb the meanings, and mend them from pieces of nowhere to become an essay. When I finished it, I said proudly to myself: yeay, I did it! I still can't believe it. (US2)

[at the] beginning, reading more articles, stating the arguments, navigating the sources related to the arguments, reading sources. Then, [I] make a scheme and outline. In the end, [I] try to write the essay and combine the source. (US5)

The students described the challenges and difficulties during the essay development process, as some students wrote below.

I find out that writing an argumentative essay is challenging because I have to do some kinds of searching for sources to help support my arguments. After that, I have to try to put my ideas so that I can produce a well-organized essay. (US1)

Writing an argumentative essay is not as easy as writing other topics. I need extra energy for thinking and reading. (US6)

It is a very challenging task for me to endure writing an argumentative essay... ups and down in doing it put me into the feeling that I should read much more, push myself to the limit, and give more time to do this. (US8)

This essay challenges me since it needs time and critical thinking to correlate our topic with the data sources by skimming, scanning, summarizing, and connecting our ideas through the wholeness idea. (US13)

The biggest challenge is finding reliable sources to support my standpoint. (US18)

I think the argumentative essay is challenging because we should stand the thesis statement that becomes controversial. We should be able to find many previous studies that can convince our thesis statement. (US20)

It is hard for me to find evidence and state my opinion due to a lack of vocabulary and less understanding of grammar. (US22)

Overall, the students felt various emotions concerning their experience writing argumentative essays, both challenging and enjoyable. They wrote that they faced difficulties and challenges during the essay development process, such as reading a lot, stating the

thesis, arguments, rebuttals, critical thinking, and finding sources.

These findings may support the previous research about the challenges in producing argumentative essays (Al-Haq & Ahmed, 1994; Rahmatunisa, 2014; Zhu, 2001). The constraints related to constructing thesis statements and arguments align with the previous study by Ka-kan-dee & Kaur (2015) found that most Thai university students struggle to formulate a clear, effective thesis statement in their argumentative essay. The structure/organization and features (arguments, evidence, and rebuttal) of argumentation make the students suffer in understanding and producing this genre.

Mentor Text as a Scaffold for Understanding and Developing English Argumentative Essay

The title of mentor text 1 was 'Deductive Grammar for Teaching English in Indonesia'. It displays the writer's thesis statement and arguments on the necessity of deductive grammar for teaching grammar, particularly in Indonesian teaching contexts. In scaffolding the students to develop the assigned essay, the majority of them found it very helpful (65.5%) and helpful (13.8%) for learning and identifying the structures and features of an argumentative essay. However, five students (17.2%) who stated this mentor text as neutral were noted to mention. The results can be seen in Figure 1.

See the mentor text 1. How helpful is this mentor text in helping you understand argumentative essay and write your essay?
29 responses

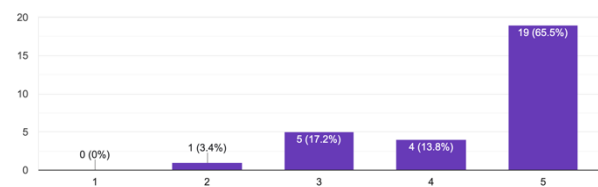


Figure 1. Students' Perceptions of Mentor Text 1

From open-ended questions, it was revealed that the students found this mentor text very helpful for several reasons, as some students described below.

This mentor text has taught me a clear idea of how a good essay should be, and what I learned the most is that any academic essay writing should have a thesis statement that becomes the main idea. (US1).

It clearly describes the parts of an argumentative essay. (US2)

By stating the clear thesis [statement] so that I know the perspective will be explained. In the conclusion

part, I learn more about how to state the conclusion. (US5)

Combining ideas through sentences. (US13)

This text contains the thesis statement, the first and second reasons, the rebuttal, and the conclusion. (US20)

On mentor text 2, it brings the argumentative essay with the title 'Should ASEAN change the policy of English as an official working language?'. This essay discusses the writer's standpoint of agreement on English as the official working language for the ASEAN community and the arguments. The students' perceptions of this mentor text were considered helpful and very helpful, with percentages of 27.5% and 62.1%, respectively, as displayed in Figure 2 below. Almost 90% of the students felt this mentor text help them understand and write the essay.

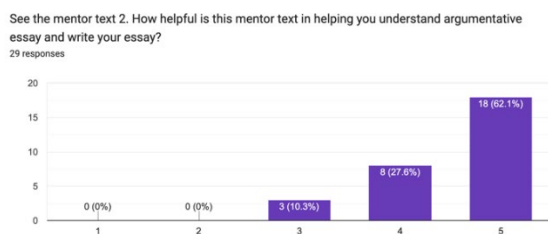


Figure 2. Students' Perceptions of Mentor Text 2

The students described how this mentor text 2 helped them learn and develop argumentative essays by displaying clear arguments, rebuttals, and evidence, as in the following excerpt.

This mentor text 2 gave me the idea that an argumentative essay should present a rebuttal statement, arguing the claim stated in the thesis statement. A concluding paragraph should include some suggestions or predictions. (US1)

How to make arguments in body paragraphs. In the first paragraph, [it is] how the writer states his/her opinion/topic sentence. (US2)

The text above is very helpful for students to understand how to make an argumentative essay by showing arguments and rebuttals... mentioned some evidence from experts (US4)

From the mentor [text] above, I have known that an argumentative essay should [be] supported by expert opinions or just definitions. (US5)

The neat arrangement of each paragraph gives me new insights into how to write structurally better. (US8)

The balance of support and rebuttal argument to build a good paragraph. (US13)

This also guides me through the outline construction before the actual writing. (US18)

For mentor text 3, it was a 5-paragraph argumentative essay under the title 'students who study abroad achieve tremendous success' taken from an internet source. Figure 3 shows the students' perceptions of how helpful this mentor text is. Most of them agreed that this mentor text helped them understand the features of argumentation and scaffolded them in writing these text types, with 24.1% helpful and 55.2% very helpful.

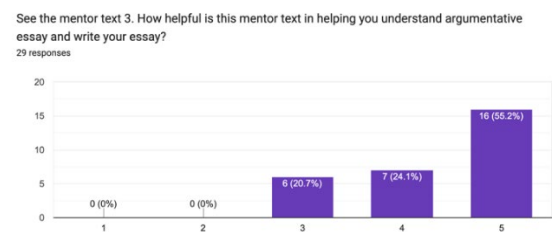


Figure 3. Students' Perceptions of Mentor Text 3

The students revealed how this mentor text 3 guides them in identifying and understanding argumentation by providing clear ideas and strong evidence with neat grammar, as in the following excerpt.

This mentor text 3 strengthens me that a good essay should always have a clear idea in each paragraph. z(US1)

A neat structure and grammar also help students be careful in expressing their opinions and rebuttals. The text is also helpful to be an example of statistical evidence. (US4)

The mentor [text] 3 explains the arguments [supported] by research findings. (US5)

How to give evidence in every argument. (US17)

Last, mentor text 4 had the title 'NEST vs. Non-NEST, who's better?' and argues the writer's point of view and belief that NEST teaches the target language better than non-NEST. The students found it helpful (31%) and very helpful (55.2%) to scaffold their learning and understanding of the argumentative essay, as displayed in Figure 4.

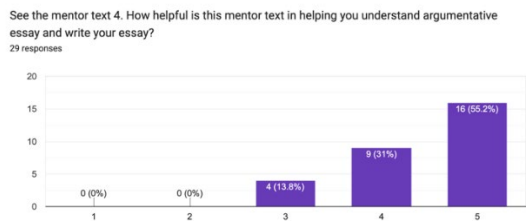


Figure 4. Students' Perceptions of Mentor Text 4

The students expressed that almost all parts of the essay on this mentor text 4 help them understand how to produce this text type, as in the narration below.

By giving some expert opinions and definitions. (US5)

The part about giving arguments. (US7)

More detailed evidence is needed in giving argumentation. (US8)

All of them are helpful. (US11)

The conclusion about the NEST. (US12)

The body of the paragraph. (US13)

To write the synonym in sentences. (US14)

By giving us some facts. (US23)

The parts; are thesis, arguments, rebuttal, evidence, and conclusion. (US24)

In the delivery, it is clear. (US28).

On the item question about the most helpful mentor text, mentor text 2 reached the highest percentage (44.5%) as the students followed it the most when constructing the argumentative essay. Figure 5 shows the comprehensive results.

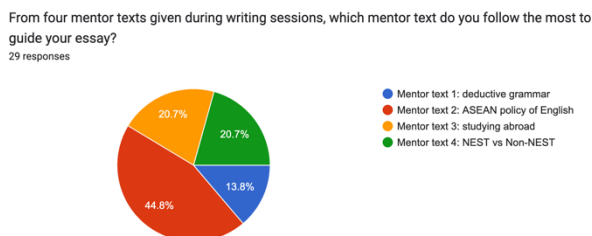


Figure 5. Students' Perceptions of all Mentor Texts

The last question on the questionnaire was to explore the students' expectations and opinions on the best mentor text to help them learn and practice argumentative writing. US20 expressed that 'a text should be in almost perfect text that includes all of the main points of the argumentative essay'. Other students also described the mentor text they

expect as learning material in more detail, as narrated by US1 below.

In helping to produce a well-organized argumentative essay, we need to give a very good example of mentor text which should include a clearly stated and well-formulated thesis statement, well-developed ideas, and supporting details in each body paragraph; last but not least, concluding sentence which concludes all the arguments and claims stated in body paragraphs. (US1)

Other opinions were also revealed about the feature of mentor text providing in learning argumentative essays. Here are the following narrations from several students.

The text fully gives arguments supported by a combination of expert opinion, research findings, [and] logical explanation. (US5)

Maybe giving bad examples will be helpful for us to understand and not make mistakes. (US2)

Two texts to compare. (US12)

A variety of argumentative essays would be beneficial. (US18)

Based on the data, it can be concluded that the mentor texts provided by the writing tutor/instructor during virtual writing instruction seemingly scaffold the students in learning, understanding, and producing an argumentative essay. This finding was consistent with the study by Irawati and Ariani (2020) that showed mentor texts scaffold university students to be better writers in the comparison essay.

These findings also revealed that the students identify and notice the structure/organization and features (thesis, arguments, evidence, rebuttal) of argumentative essays from mentor texts they read. Moreover, the students expressed that they learned a lot from the way the writers of mentor texts deliver the ideas in sentences, including word choices. As Ray (2006 cited in Newman, 2012) states, mentor texts can benefit the students in two aspects: the structure and the writer's way of words.

CONCLUSION

This present research was addressed to explore the student's experiences in producing argumentative essay dan their perspectives of mentor texts given to them during the essay development. After gathering the data, the findings show that students felt various emotional expressions, such as challenge, difficulty, and enjoyment at the same time of 4 mentor texts provided to them; all of them reached more than 80% as help and helpful mentor text in understanding and writing an argumentative essay.

Additionally, mentor text 2 has gained the highest score as the students prefer to follow this mentor text 2 to guide them in essay completion. The mentor texts can effectively scaffold students as they provide well-organized structure and clear ideas in a good sequence and guide the students to emulate and modify their writing.

The research findings can be considerations for writing teachers in preparing mentor texts for teaching argumentative essays. As this current research limits its investigation only to argumentative essays, for further studies, it is highly recommended to explore the students' preferences of mentor texts for other text-type.

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