

What's Your Point?

Developing Arguments in Research Papers by EFL Writers

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Abstract

This paper details a collaborative research project which was designed to give students studying English as a foreign language skills for writing research papers in English. As part of this project, students practiced forming arguments and collecting and paraphrasing information from various sources to use to support their arguments. The information collected by individuals was made available to all of the participants for use in writing their own research papers. The effectiveness and usefulness of the project is discussed then followed by suggestions for improvement.

Keywords: EFL, composition, arguments, collaborative research

Complexity and pitfalls of writing research papers

Among the more difficult assignments that learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) can be given is that of writing a multi-paged research report. From beginning to completion, writers are required to perform a variety of tasks: formulate a thesis and divide it into subtopics, collect supporting information and organize it into an outline, paraphrase the information and synthesize it into the paper, attribute the sources used, and revise multiple drafts of the paper. For learners who have never carried out such a project, each step along the way can seem like an insurmountable operation. It not only calls on all of their linguistic skills, but places a heavy burden on their cognitive abilities as well.

Instructors can significantly lower the difficulty of the assignment by preparing students to carry out each task. To ease topic selection, students can be given the option of choosing one from a list of acceptable research topics. Since careful consideration of the breadth and depth of a topic and its appropriateness for a paper of 4 to 5 pages in length is crucial, giving writers a research proposal assignment will require them come up with concrete ideas about what they will write. To aid students in finding information relevant to their topics, instructors can provide lists of sources, such as books, magazines, journals, or websites. Students would also benefit by learning how to distinguish between websites which provide reliable and unbiased information from those that are less beneficial for doing research. In order to integrate information

taken from sources into the research paper, the ability to paraphrase is a necessary skill. Therefore, it is important that students are exposed to examples of paraphrases and given thorough instruction in how to do it on their own. After students have completed their first draft of the paper, peer reviewing can be done first then followed up by writing conferences with the instructor.

Summary writing is a useful way to teach students to truly understand the key information in a given text. By extracting the most important information and putting it in a summary of an article, students can then use that information in their own research papers. Writing summaries of a variety of articles about one subject area is a valuable way for students to get adequate exposure to the content area which they are going to write about. Used this way, the activity can be of great value to writers not only for language practice, but also for building necessary background knowledge.

One problem, however, can arise when the writing of summaries is connected too closely with the process of writing a research paper. It is quite easy for EFL writers to turn their paper into a sort of book report whereby, over the course of several paragraphs, they simply summarize the information from an article, usually in exactly the same order as it was presented in the original article. If the learner has managed to successfully paraphrase the information and cite the source, she believes that she has accommodated the requirements of the assignment. However, if these kinds of summaries are used in

a research paper, what is often left out is the writer's own claim or point that she needs to make. In such cases, the supporting information taken from an outside source is not actually being used to 'support' anything which has come from the writer of the paper.

Learners often fail to see that they have not actually made a point. Perhaps it is easy for them to miss this necessary step when they are mainly focused on collecting and paraphrasing information for use in their paper. Learners need to be taught how to make a clear argument and support it with facts, data, examples, and expert opinions. This is an important skill for any writer to learn, but it is especially so for EFL writers who are attempting to write an academic paper for the first time. One way to enable students to do this is to heighten their awareness of how other writers make and support arguments by closely reading and analyzing a variety of texts which are related to the topics they will be writing about. The current paper will outline one such activity that was designed to help learners identify the main points that writers make and see how those arguments are supported.

Seminar on American society

The course in which this project was carried out was a seminar on American society and history at a women's junior college in Japan. The students were second-year English majors. Being a typical year-long course at a Japanese junior college or university, classes are held only once a week for 90 minutes. Throughout the course, students read various articles about issues in the United States which, while quite familiar to Americans are often unfamiliar if not completely unknown to Japanese students. Examples of these topics are voting rights, marriage equality, undocumented immigrants, and raising the minimum wage. The texts that students read for this argument and support activity concerned the larger issue of gun control in the U.S., with a more detailed examination of why more and more states are allowing people to carry concealed handguns. Readings came from book excerpts and online newspaper articles. The articles were usually edited in order to make them easier for the students to read. In addition, readings were accompanied by definitions or explanations of key terms and concepts about the specific topic and the American socio-political world in general. Students read the articles and answered content questions outside of class, then in-class discussions served to aid students' comprehension of the article and fill in gaps in their overall knowledge about the topic.

Much effort was taken to build up their schema about a topic area with the sole purpose being to prepare them to write a research paper on a related topic.

When students write an outline, their first products often lack much detail. They follow a standard outline format which includes a thesis statement, main points that make up the body, and supporting topics. The main points are divisions of the topic that the writers will write about. For these, it is enough to write a short phrase; however, when planning the supporting topics for the outline, students must write complete sentences which could be used as topic sentences for each paragraph. This requires the students to think of the specific content they will write in each body paragraph. The difficulty in writing an outline like this is that writers must have a fairly extensive knowledge of the topic already. Japanese students who are asked to write a research paper about a 'social issue' in the United States usually have only a vague idea of the topic and significantly lack the cultural / historical / political knowledge about a multifaceted issue such as gun control. On top of this, they are also required to have opinions and make arguments about the issue. Doing all of this in a foreign language can seem to be an almost insurmountable task. As much as possible, a variety of readings on the topic are read and discussed before students are asked to choose a topic and write an outline for a research paper.

Connecting support and arguments

The project described here is one step in taking information and turning it into topics that can be written about in a research paper. Over the course of several weeks, students read about and discussed the many sides of gun control in the U.S., such as different interpretations of the Second Amendment, reasons why people want to have guns, existing gun control laws, and various ways in which firearms can be purchased. Following this, students were given an example topic which could be used as the basis for one section of a research report on guns in America. Below is one example:

TOPIC EXAMPLE

Even though there has been a large number of mass shootings in the U.S. recently, no effective new guns laws have been enacted.

This example topic sentence served to show students a statement which would then need to be proven with supporting

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information taken from multiple sources to explain how many shootings and give reasons for why no new laws have been made. To do this, several types of supporting information were given to the students. The examples were paraphrased and provided with citations. Two of these are given below:

SUPPORT EXAMPLE (1)

Mass shootings happen every day in the U.S. The Mass Shooting tracker reports that, in 2015, there were 372 mass shootings in the U.S. The result of these shootings was that 475 people died and another 1,870 were wounded. Each person who died or was wounded in these shootings had friends and family who were affected by these terrible incidents (Franklin).

SUPPORT EXAMPLE (2)

The NRA, which has thousands of lobbyists, has repeatedly blocked gun control proposals. Their efforts help keep ammunition and gun companies in business. The result of the NRA's strong influence on conservative politicians is that President Obama has not been able to pass new gun control laws. So Obama decided to use his executive powers to increase background checks (Mosendz).

These examples served to show what type of information could be used for support as well as reinforced the necessity for having clear arguments in the topic sentence. The above examples were also carefully chosen to show students that nothing should be taken for granted. Just writing that "there has been a large number of mass shootings in the U.S." does not explain exactly what a "large number" is, nor does "recently" specify exactly when these shootings happened. Therefore, the first example was chosen to show what kind of data can be used to concretely explain a quantity or time period. Whereas the second example gives one explanation for why new gun laws are difficult to pass as well as illustrates one president's attempt at a solution to political feet dragging.

All in all, students were provided with a total of five examples of support just for the one topic sentence. Even though some of the examples touched on the same information to some degree, this served to show students that using multiple sources for support makes one's argument quite strong and serves to convince a reader of the validity of that argument. After reading sound supporting information, it would be difficult for an open-minded reader to disagree with points that

the author wishes to make.

Using support to develop arguments

Finding support for arguments is the essence of doing research. But the major impetus for creating this project was the perceived need to help students come up with an argument in the first place. Students were fairly competent at gathering information, but they often just wrote up what they had read in an article without making any clear points which needed support. To help students begin to form arguments, some sentences which were related to one topic and could be used to support a main point were taken from an article concerning one U.S. state which allows students and staff to carry handguns on public university campuses (see Pesta). The paraphrased sentences were grouped around a central theme which they could then be used for support when writing a hypothetical paragraph. Students were asked to think of what the main point was and write a topic sentence for a paragraph that would contain that supporting information. Below is an example set of sentences:

Topic sentence: _____

- Some U.S. college students think that carrying a gun is not good protection.
- A survey showed that many university students do not want guns on campus.
- If guns are allowed, students think campus gun deaths will increase.
- People should not be able to carry guns just because they are afraid of being shot.

Each of the sentences states facts or opinions written in the article. Through the process of paraphrasing, the statements have been made even simpler. All of the sentences could be used to make the argument that there are some university students in the U.S. who oppose the idea of carrying guns on campus. To an American, this is not too difficult to imagine. However, to Japanese junior college students who perhaps only know about the infamous 'gun culture' in America, this point might come as somewhat of a surprise.

In order to develop students' ability to develop arguments from facts, they were given six sets of related sentences such as those above. At first, students read only the sentences on the handout, thought of the arguments they would support, then wrote topic sentences that contained their main points. Students compared the sentences that they had written and

discussed the different types of main points that could be made from each list of information. Later, they read the original article and compared their ideas with how the author expressed the points in the article. It was not important whether or not their sentences were the same as the original author's ideas. (In fact, these were often impossible to find as repeated main points are often only implied in newspaper articles.) Rather, the ability to find or construe a main point from the provided information was the goal of this activity.

This same activity was repeated with sentences taken from other articles. It was beneficial in that it helped to make students aware that they needed to write topic sentences which contained a clearly stated point. This argument would then be supported with information taken from sources. This is the fundamental function of doing research. However, students often tend to put most of their effort into doing the research and yet fail to actually make a point to support it with. By lifting the burden of gathering various sources of information (as was done in this activity), students are able to concentrate more on forming an argument. Naturally, students cannot be given all of the source information that they would need to complete a research paper, but this type of exercise provides a framework for composing solid paragraphs that have clear main points and adequate supporting details. Additionally, since students would actually be writing a research paper on the general topic of gun control, these exercises provided them with sources of information which they would later be able to incorporate into their papers.

Student collaboration in research

The next and final activity focused on collecting information from various sources which would then be used to support arguments assigned to the students. The information collected by the whole class would also be relevant to the papers that each student would write later on. Students were given a list of different topics and each was assigned one of the topics. Subsequently, each student collected information to support the point made in the sentence which she had been assigned. Each topic was sufficiently narrow so that it could be developed into one or more paragraphs in a research paper. The topics were chosen to reflect the kinds of points one would include on an outline of a research paper on gun ownership in the U.S. They included both reasons for why people oppose carrying or owning guns, as well as reasons used by people who support carrying or owning guns. Below are some examples of these

topics:

TOPICS RELATED TO GUN OWNERSHIP IN THE U.S.

- Someone with a gun is more likely to shoot someone or be shot.
- Keeping a gun in the home could cause accidental shootings.
- Having a gun is a good form of self protection.
- If someone knows you have a gun, they are less likely to attack you.
- The police cannot be depended on for protection.
- The NRA uses its power to influence politicians.
- It is too easy to purchase a gun in the U.S.

As each point would need proof to convince a reader, students were asked to find information which would support the argument written in the sentence they has been assigned. A requirement of at least two types of support information from each source was set. Students were instructed to make note of the details needed to cite their sources such as author, date of publication, publisher, and since students would be using the internet, the URL and date they viewed a website. In order to synthesize the information taken from the articles into a research paper, it needed to be paraphrased as well (c.f. SUPPORT EXAMPLES 1 and 2).

Due to the problems mentioned above concerning how students often misuse summaries, this assignment purposely avoided summary writing and focused instead on taking out only the relevant information that would be used to support the argument which they had been assigned. Students would need to read and understand the whole article, but also scan it for the most useful facts, data, or opinions. In order to check the quality of their paraphrases and overall usefulness of their sources, students were asked to hand in copies of the articles that they used.

With each student collecting information about a specific topic related to gun ownership in the U.S., a great body of information was collected. In order to make it available to everyone, students wrote up the paraphrased information that they had collected along with the argument that it supported, and distributed this to the other students in class. Each handout contained a topic sentence with the argument in it, followed by eight 2-3 sentence paraphrases of supporting information. In class, students gave short presentations of the information that they had collected. This was followed by some discussion to

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clarify anything that was might have been hard to understand (perhaps due to the quality of the paraphrases). Suggestions were also made about what other type of information might be useful (or better) to support a particular argument. Similarly, if a website was used that was not especially valid (e.g., a blog), or biased in some way (e.g., the NRA website), comments were made about whether or not this information should be used, or if it were found to be useful, how to best inform the reader about the source of the information. On the whole, students were able to collect useful information which could be used to support the arguments they had been assigned. Paraphrasing is a skill that needs much practice and refining and this project gave students ample opportunities for doing that.

Benefits and areas for improvement

The main aim of this argument and support activity was to get students to understand the need for making a clear point and supporting it with relevant facts. In addition to teaching this crucial knowledge set, this project was also conceived as a collaborate research assignment. Because all of the students were researching and writing about the same topic (gun ownership in the U.S.), it was possible to design this activity as one that would ease the burden of collecting and paraphrasing relevant supporting information. The result of each individual student's fact finding efforts created a large pool of research that all of the students in class were able to draw from when writing their papers.

Having become familiar with the general topic by doing this project, students found it easier to write their outlines and thesis statements. Then, as students began writing their papers, they had a large collection of information to use. It was up to each student to decide which of her classmate's collected information she might wish to use. Students were also encourage to collect additional information when necessary. Even though all of the students were writing about the same general topic, each individual student wrote about it from a different angle, having different points which to argue and support. Throughout the writing process, students were able to focus more on making clear arguments in the body of their papers because the burden of starting research completely from scratch had been significantly lessened by the collaborative research done by everyone. The resulting research papers contained clear arguments which were supported by quite a wide variety of relevant information.

However, one problem did emerge. In a sense, the root

of the problem was that students did exactly what they had been asked to do, which was to use the research that their classmates had produced during the collaboration phase. For various reasons, this often proved to be a source of mistakes in the final papers.

Since the sources of information collect during the collaboration phase were clearly attributed, all students could readily access the original articles in order to check the accuracy of the information or collect more details if necessary. The problem was that they quite often just did not do this. Rather than going to the original article and reading it for themselves, most students relied exclusively on the research that their classmates had done. This meant that if any original information had been poorly or mistakenly paraphrased in the original student's work, these same mistakes tended to appear in other students' early drafts as well. This could have been avoided if each student had read the original article and paraphrased any useful information on their own, but most students did not take the time to do this. In addition, if any students had gathered information from a less-than-reliable website, other students tended to simply use the untrustworthy or biased information rather than looking for a better source. While these problems were discussed in class for their presentations, students may have forgotten that a particular source should not be used.

Due to the design of the collaborative research project, all students were provided with a ready pool of ready-to-use information. The fault with it was that, due to the lack of any editing of students' individual research results, any problems or mistakes went directly into the early drafts of their research papers. Obviously, this step should have been added at some point in the activity. Students' sources and paraphrases needed to be checked and revised before this information was distributed to the whole class. In the end, any problems such as these were taken care of when each student revised her research paper.

Conclusion

Despite the potential problems of this collaborative research project, the positive outcome was that students were able improved their ability to make clear points and support them with relevant information. They were also given opportunities for developing their ability to paraphrase supporting information and synthesize it into their research papers. Reading various texts related to one general topic

allows teachers to first build students' schema about unfamiliar subject areas. This is necessary for any content area, but it is especially critical when students are dealing with topic areas which are historically and culturally unfamiliar. By then having students work together to collect more information about the same topic area, each individual's effort can benefit all of the participants. The sum total of the gathered information enables students to focus more on forming clear arguments by reducing the tremendous task of doing research completely on one's own.

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