The Effect of Writing Prompts on Developing Argumentative Essays of Iranian University Students of English

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the effect of prompts as themes on developing argumentative essays that represent an important genre of academic writing. Thirty Iranian Master's students of English Language Teaching and Literature took part in three consecutive test sessions arranged in this research. In each session, the students were divided into two groups: one provided with a writing prompt as a theme and the other without any prompts. The compositions were then rated and examined to find the possible effect of writing prompts on the students' scores and the quality of their argumentative essays. At the same time, the relationship between the students' scores and the organisation of the essays was checked based on a model of argument structure. The results revealed that writing prompts did not have any remarkable effect on the students' scores and the quality of their argumentation. However, regarding the elements of the model, a strong positive relationship was detected between the scores and the frequency of occurrence of elements. Further research is needed to identify features which are likely to influence writing performance and improve argumentation.

Keywords: Academic writing, writing prompts, argumentative essays, Toulmin's model

1.   Introduction

The Essay Writing course at Shahid Chamran University is designed for all students who have to write exams or coursework in English or who want to intensively engage in other activities of the discourse community to which they belong. In any academic context, for non-native speakers of English, the writing demands of their courses can be very challenging. As a result, students need to become familiar with different genres of academic writing to perform effectively in their written communication. The most common genre that undergraduate students have to write in is argumentative essay writing in which the writer argues to defend or motivate his/her position. Argumentative writing requires students to adopt a particular point of view and try to convince the reader to adopt the same perspective or to perform a certain action (Nippold, Ward-Lonergan & Fanning, 2005; Soleymanzadeha & Gholamib, 2014). The rhetoric of this type of writing requires the writer to investigate a topic; collect, generate, and evaluate evidence; and establish a position on the topic in a concise manner (Baker, Brizee & Angeli, 2013). The argumentative essay is the most common genre that undergraduate students need to master, particularly in the arts, humanities, and social sciences (Hewings, 2010). Thus, the development of an argument is regarded as a key feature of successful writing by academics across disciplines (Lea & Street, 1998).

This paper reports on research into the use of argumentative elements in the light of writing prompts as themes in essays of Iranian EFL students and argues that despite a strong relationship between the scores of students and their argumentative structure observance, the writing prompts hardly affected the quality and organisation of the students' argumentative essays.

The well-known Toulmin's model utilised in this study for assessing the quality of argumentation requires students to make a claim (claims), support the claim with data and evidence (grounds), connect the data or evidence to the claim (warrants), provide correct and relevant sources of warrants (backings), and evaluate the constraints of solutions (rebuttals) (Toulmin, 1958). An overview of the relevant studies indicates that Toulmin's model has often been used as (a) a framework for analysis in argumentative writing in first language (L1) contexts

(e.g., Crammond, 1998; Nussbaum & Kardash, 2005) and (b) an instructional heuristic to teach argumentative writing in both L1 and L2 (second language) contexts (e.g., Varghese & Abraham, 1998; Yeh, 1998). In this area of enquiry, Crammond (1998) explored the differences between American student writers of three grade levels and expert writers in terms of the uses and complexity of arguments presented in their persuasive essays. The results of her application of Toulmin's model of argument structure to the essays showed that the majority of the students used a basic argument structure to organise their essays, including claims, data, and warrant; while expert writers used relatively more warrants, rebuttals, and qualifiers than student writers, whose uses of these elements progressed with each subsequent grade.

Another study (McCann, 1989) required the students of three grade levels to write in response to a topic that demanded an argument in support of a proposition, and the frequency of occurrence of the argument elements used by high- and low-scored students was also examined. The results showed that the high-graded students scored significantly higher than the low-graded students in terms of overall writing quality and in stating claims and using warrants, counter-arguments and rebuttals.

Research on argumentative writing suggests that most L2 studies have focused on instructional strategies designed to help improve writing quality (Ka-kan-deea & Kaur, 2015; Varghese & Abraham, 1998), critical thinking skills (Stapleton, 2001), and organisational structures of writing across different languages (Gholami, Rafsanjani Nejad, & Looragi Pour, 2014; Hirose, 2003; Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2008). Failure to follow the canonical form of an argumentative text might be indicative of cross-cultural differences in the rhetorical structure of an argument, unawareness on the part of learners of the structure of an argument, inadequate linguistic resources available to learners, or a combination of all these factors. This range of factors suggests a need for further research in the field of teaching English for academic purposes (EAP) in order to provide deeper understanding of L2 university students' needs, specifically in the area of argumentative writing, especially since this aspect of academic research is

of great importance for students' careers. Research in this area should provide specific pedagogical implications on how to help learners write more effective argumentative papers in English.

In the majority of papers written by students as a partial requirement for the courses that they should pass at the tertiary level, students will need to make claims and use evidence to support their claims. Their ability to do so will separate their papers from those of students who see assignments as mere accumulations of facts (Bailey, 2006). Thus, the structure of the essay demonstrates students' ability to make claims and to cajole readers into accepting those claims. Ge and Land (2003) have suggested that the use of cognitive tools such as prompts can improve the quality of argumentation, and that prompts as scaffolding devices can help students to perform their best in the writing assignments. A writing prompt is basically one sentence or a collection of sentences depending on what type of essay and how long an essay the requester is seeking. The purpose of such an essay prompt is to inspire a response in the form of an essay, which will assess the test taker's writing performance, reasoning abilities, and analytical skills. Prompts provide hints, suggestions, and reminders for enacting a role (Ge & Land, 2004). Research in this area has attempted to investigate the effects of prompt variations on the scores and textual features of the essays. In his review of a large body of literature on this issue, Huot (1990) identifies three areas where studies examined the prompt as a means of observing its effects on ratings and written products: (a) *discourse mode* (e.g., Cumming et al., 2005), *(b) rhetorical specification* (e.g., Brossell, 1983; Hult, 1987; McAndrew, 1982; Smith et al., 1985), and *(c) the wording and structure of writing prompts* (Brossell & Ash,1984; Greenberg, 1981). Other studies have addressed the syntactic and rhetorical structures of writing prompts on students' writing (e.g., Smith et al., 1985) or examined the effects of essay prompts on the high and low rated examinees' writing performance as compared to native essays (Wu, 2013). These studies have shown that high-rated students outperform low-rated students in terms of utilisation of the writing prompt regarding lexical choices and the use of background materials. The present study also examines the effect of syntactic and

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rhetorical structures of prompts as themes on students' writing performance and the results show the outperformance of high-rated over low-rated students in terms of their argumentative structure observance irrespective of whether or not they use prompts. Thus, the structure and lexis of a prompt may have a considerable impact on the sophistication of the whole essay.

Studies designed to investigate prompt-based effects on the features of argumentative essays both at micro- and macro-structure levels of discourse are still very sparse. There is a need for researchers and language teachers engaged in this area to know how prompts might foster writing performance. This becomes more urgent considering the number of postgraduate students and their need to publish in scholarly journals. By examining the prompt-based writing performance of a sample of Iranian university students, our research is designed to improve our understanding of the role of a writing prompt theme in the quality of an argumentative essay, and this knowledge, as a consequence, may help teachers and instructors to draw effective plans to enhance the quality of students' writing performance.

2.   An Analytical Framework of Argumentation

The model of argument structure developed for the purposes of the present study is a revised version of Toulmin's (1958) scheme proposed by Ramage, Bean, and Johnson (2012). This model combines Toulmin's language with Aristotle's concept of the *enthymeme.* The word *enthymeme* comes from the Greek *en* (meaning *in*) and *thumos* (meaning *mind*), suggesting that listeners or readers must have an assumption, belief, or value in mind that allows them to willingly supply the missing premise. Based on the definitions suggested by Ramage, et al. (2012), a *claim* of the essay is the position the writer wants his/her audience to accept, that is in the form of *thesis statement* or a one-sentence summary answer to the question or topic of the essay.

The system used for analysing arguments in this study adds a few key terms from Toulmin's scheme. The first term is *warrant* that actually turns an

enthymeme into a complete and logical structure. Toulmin (1958) derives this term from the concept of *warranty* or *guarantee* to support the idea that the warrant is the value, belief, or principle that the audience has to hold if the soundness of the argument is to be guaranteed. But the argument structure needs more than claims, reasons, and warrants. The other elements that make arguments authentic, via giving body and weight to them, as Toulmin (1958) called them, are *grounds* and *backing*. He defines *grounds* as the supporting evidence such as facts, data, statistics, causal links, testimony, examples, and anecdotes which cause an audience to accept the writer/speaker's reason. In many cases, *claim*, *reason*, and *grounds* are required for successful arguments. In such conditions, the *warrant*, as the unstated assumption behind the reason, remains safe. But if the audience has the chance to question the warrant, the writer needs to back it up by providing an argument in its support (*backing*) to persuade readers to accept the warrant (Ramage et al., 2012).

Toulmin (1958) indicated that in many other cases a resistant audience would try to refute an argument by disputing the reasons, grounds, warrant, or backing. The possibility of these conditions induces the writer to raise doubts over his/her argument by providing one or more statements as *rebuttal*. The final component of the argument model, used to limit the force of claim and indicate the degree of its probable truth, is *qualifier*. If there are exceptions to the warrant or in case of existence of weak grounds, the writer is required to qualify his/her claim. In the model of argumentation proposed by Ramage et al. (2012), *qualifier* was considered as a sub-component and omitted from the logical structure of argumentation. In order to be congruent with this version of Toulmin's model the scheme applied by the present study omits this element as well.

3.   Methodology

3.1.   Participants

The participants of this study were 44 Iranian Master's students (males and females), majoring in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) and English Literature studying at Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz. Thirty-nine students in the first classroom session, 35 in the second session and 30 in all three classroom sessions were present; the overall number of attrition was 14. This means that 14 students could not be tested because they failed to attend all three sessions. The participants were studying in the first, second, or third semester at the time when this study was conducted and their participation was on a voluntary basis. It should be noted that the participants' major was not considered as a variable in this study because both majors (TEFL & English Literature) offer similar courses to their Bachelor students including English essay writing courses that cover different types of essay writing (e.g., expository, argumentative, etc.). Thus, since participants were Master's students of a specialised degree and had already passed courses in English language proficiency during their undergraduate programme, they were expected to be roughly equivalent in proficiency.

Furthermore, all the participants were from the same L1 background (Persian) and no criteria for age and gender were assigned. In a separate orientation session, the participants were informed about the administration of the experiment. In each session, they were divided into two randomly equal groups, one provided with a writing prompt (prompt-group) and the other without any prompts (non-prompt-group), to examine the relationship between writing prompts and the organisation of a well-developed argumentative essay. That is, each participant in the two groups had the opportunity to write a prompt-included and a prompt-free essay.

3.2.   Topic Selection and Administration

The topics were selected from argumentative topic samples provided in the writing tasks of authentic examination papers from Cambridge University (ESOL examinations, IELTS tests 1-9, 2000-2013). Before the first test session, the students were provided with 30 argumentative topics from which they were asked to choose three to five on which they preferred to write. We could then select the three most frequently chosen topics for writing in three sessions. The selected topics were:

- It is better for children to begin learning a foreign language at primary school rather than secondary school.
- As most people spend a major part of their adult life at work, job satisfaction is an important element of an individual's wellbeing.
- Visitors to other countries should follow local customs and behaviour.

Different types of writing prompts have been described in the literature. In some studies, question prompts were used in composition tests (e.g., Crossley, Varner & McNamara, 2013; GE & Land, 2004). In other studies, a whole reading text or an essay was used (e.g., Qin & Karabacak, 2010; Brown, Hilgers, & Marsella, 1991) and the examinee was asked to read it carefully and answer the questions at the end of the passage in the form of a five-paragraph essay. In a few other studies, themes, as short as single sentences or as long as five sentences, were used (e.g., Polio & Glew, 1996; Weigle, 1999). Prompts-as-theme types have advantages over other types of prompts. First, unlike question prompts, themes do not force the writer to find a logical answer to a question and also to develop this answer into a complete well-formed essay. Second, in comparison with reading text prompts, themes need much less time to read and reflect on. The writing prompts of the present study were *themes* associated with the topic to give students some general ideas or generalisations about the essay. These themes did not confine the students to using them at the beginning or at the end of a particular paragraph, as thesis statements do. Students could paraphrase, modify, or use the

exact wording of the prompt wherever they wanted to. The three writing prompts of this study were selected from a sample of prompts provided in writing task 2, or the sample essays provided in the answer part of the series *Cambridge IELTS 1-9* as follows:

- Primary pupils are very receptive to learning a new language. They are willing and able to mimic pronunciation without the inhibitions and self-consciousness of older students. They enjoy playing with the language and pick it up very quickly.
- Nowadays, people's lives considerably depend on their income; salary seems to be the most impressive element defining their happiness with their job. Additionally, without any doubt, to have a good time at work is not possible without having a friendly work environment.
- There are people who think that the best way to know another country is to follow its cultural differences. It is also reported that people who have lived in a country for a long time prefer it, because they learn the culture and people's habits.

The writing test was administered in three sessions during three consecutive weeks. After providing students with sheets of paper including an instruction and a topic or a topic with a writing prompt, they were informed of the procedure. The time allotted for each session was 40 minutes. Each student in each group was assigned a number (e.g., S1, S2… S30). In the first session, individual students were provided randomly with either a topic alone or a topic in addition to a corresponding writing prompt. In the other two sessions, the participants who had not received a prompt were provided with prompts (marked by their previously assigned number) to ensure that every participant could make use of prompts. The participants were required to take part in three writing tests to have at least one and at most two chances to utilise writing prompts. All the participants had the chance to use the prompts in one or another test session. Collectively, 90 compositions were returned to the raters of which 47 compositions included writing prompts and 43 were prompt-free compositions.

3.3. Holistic and Analytic Scoring

Three raters were involved in the scoring procedure including one of the researchers of the study and two colleagues who were taught how to score the

essays following the rating scales adopted for the study. The essays were copied and mixed in a random order. In order to prevent any biased scoring result, any trace of the students' identities and the instruction including the presence or absence of writing prompts were covered by sticking papers on which only the code number of students was written. The sticking papers were then removed for the purpose of revealing the students' identity and status in prompt- or non-prompt-groups.

To assess the overall quality of the participants' argumentative essays, their writings were scored based on two scales: first, a *holistic rating scheme* proposed by Hyland (2003, pp.241-242) that involves the assignment of a single score to the whole essay based on an overall impression of it (see Table 1 below), and second, an *analytic rating scheme* proposed by Anderson (as cited in Hughes, 1989, pp. 91-93) that assigns a separate score to each aspect (grammar, vocabulary, mechanics, fluency, and form) of an essay (see Table 2).

Table 1 Holistic rating scheme

Score	Descriptors
86-100	**Outstanding work:** Excellence in correct selection of content, overall coherence, internal cohesion, linguistic accuracy and appropriate tone and style
71-85	**Very good work:** Mostly successful in selection of content, good overall coherence, logical and connected ideas, limited syntactic variety, a sprinkling of grammatical errors, occasional lapses in tone and style; mainly through inappropriate selection of vocabulary.
56-70	**Satisfactory work:** Good overall coherence but faulty places for cohesion within sentences, limited variety of structures/vocabularies and more than a sprinkling of grammatical errors.
41-55	**Marginally satisfactory work:** Relatively poor linkage of ideas, overall coherence and local cohesion but comprehensible, frequent grammatical mistakes and frequent lapses in tone and style.
26-40	**Unsatisfactory work:** Inadequate and poor in relevant points.
1-25	**Very unsatisfactory work:** Consistently poor and incomprehensible.

Table 2 Analytic rating scheme

Mark	Grammar
6	Few if any noticeable errors of grammar or word order.
5	Some errors of grammar or word order which do not, however, interfere with comprehension.
4	Errors of grammar or word order fairly frequent; occasional re-reading necessary for full comprehension.
3	Errors of grammar or word frequent; efforts of interpretation sometimes required on reader's part.
2	Errors of grammar or word order very frequent; reader often has to rely on own interpretation.
1	Errors of grammar or word order so as to make comprehension virtually impossible.

Mark	Vocabulary
6	Use of vocabulary and idioms rarely (if at all) indistinguishable from that of educated native writer.
5	Occasionally uses inappropriate terms or relies on circumlocutions; expressions of ideas hardly impaired.
4	Uses wrong or inappropriate words fairly frequently; expression of ideas may be limited because of inadequate vocabulary.
3	Limited vocabulary and frequent errors clearly hinder expression of ideas.
2	Vocabulary so limited and so frequently misused that reader must often rely on own interpretation.
1	Vocabulary limitations so extreme as to make comprehension virtually impossible.

Mark	Mechanics
6	Few (if any) noticeable lapses in punctuation or spelling.
5	Occasional lapses in punctuation or spellings which do not, however, interfere with comprehension.
4	Errors in punctuation or spelling fairly frequent; Occasional re-reading necessary for full comprehension.
3	Frequent errors in spelling and punctuation; lead someone to obscurity.
2	Errors in spelling or punctuation so frequent that reader must often rely on own interpretation.

| 1 | Error in spelling or punctuation so severe as to make comprehension virtually impossible. |

Mark	Fluency *(style and ease of communication)*
6	Choice of structure and vocabulary consistently appropriate; like that of educated native speaker.
5	Occasional lack of consistency in choice of structures and vocabulary which does not, however, impair overall ease of communication.
4	'Patchy', with some structures and vocabulary items noticeably inappropriate to general style.
3	Structures or vocabulary items sometimes not only inappropriate but also misused; little sense of ease of communication.
2	Communication often impaired by completely inappropriate or misused structures or vocabulary items.
1	A 'hotch-potch' of half-learned misused structures and vocabulary items rendering communication almost impossible.

Mark	Form *(organization)*
6	Highly organised; clear progression of ideas well linked; like educated native writer.
5	Material well organised; links could occasionally be clearer but communication not impaired.
4	Some lack of organisation; re-reading required for clarification of ideas.
3	Little or no attempt at connectivity, though reader can deduce some organisation.
2	Individual ideas may be clear, but very difficult to deduce connection between them.
1	Lack of organisation so severe that communication is seriously impaired.

For the purpose of ensuring intra-rater reliability, 20 randomly selected essays were rated by one of the researchers twice with an interval of three weeks, and then the Spearman Rho correlation coefficient, which is used to correlate ordinal data, was administered using IBM SPSS Statistics 21 software. The correlation indices were 93% in terms of holistic scores, 84% for analytic scores, and 82% agreement in relation to the holistic level of argumentation, which indicated high

intra-rater reliability. To check the level of consensus between the raters (three raters in the present study), the Pearson matrix of correlation for ranked order data and a Fisher Z transformation for correcting the distortion inherent in using the Pearson matrix for ordinal data, were used. The total obtained values were 78% in terms of holistic scores, 77% for analytic scores, and 77% in regard to the holistic level of argumentation, showing an acceptable agreement between the raters. Subsequently, in a further session, the raters negotiated the discrepancies after rating the essays to ensure the maximum reliability of the scoring process. To be prepared for the analysis, the average of sets of scores by the raters was calculated as the final score assigned to each composition.

3.4.   Argumentative Structure Coding

To meet the aims of the present study, six elements were codified in the argumentative essays including *claim, reason*, *grounds, warrant, backing,* and *rebuttal*. These elements were introduced to raters and explained as the logical structure of an argument. The coding of the essays followed the scoring to avoid any biased effect on the codification process. The obtained scores were thus covered by sticking papers, the essays were mixed again and scrutinised to find and mark the elements of an argument. The raters were then required to specify the holistic level of argumentation as classified by Erduran et al (2004, p. 928). Based on this classification, rebuttals are considered as essential elements of arguments of better quality and demonstrate a higher level of argumentative abilities (see Table 3).

Table 3 Levels of argument

Levels	Components
Level 1	Argumentation at this level consists of arguments that are a simple claim versus a counter-claim or a claim versus claim.
Level 2	Argumentation at this level consists of claims with data, warrants, or backings, but do not contain any rebuttals.

Level 3	Argumentation at this level consists of a series of claims or counter-claims with data, warrants, or backings with the occasional weak rebuttal.
Level 4	Argumentation at this level consists of a claim with a clearly identifiable rebuttal.
Level 5	Argumentation at this level displays an extended argument with more than one rebuttal.

4.   Results

4.1.   Writing Prompts and the Quality of Argumentative Essays

In order to examine the effect of writing prompts on the quality of an essay, the average score obtained by each student on each essay was calculated based on the holistic and analytic rating schemes. The essays were divided into (1) those provided with a writing prompt (the prompt-group) and, (2) those with no prompts (the non-prompt-group). The two groups were then compared to investigate any possible effects of prompts on the scores.

Results of *Shapiro-Wilk* tests of normality demonstrated that 1/3 of obtained scores was normally distributed and the rest was not normal. That is, the distribution of the scores was matched with the main assumptions of non-parametric tests as proposed by Hatch and Lazarton (1991): (1) the data was rank-ordered and not normally distributed and (2) the sample size was small. Subsequently, the descriptive statistics along with *Mann-Whitney Test* were run using *IBM SPSS Statistics 21* software to find out whether the differences between the groups in the essays are statistically meaningful.

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Table 4 Results of descriptive statistics of holistic/analytic scores

		Holistic scores		Analytic scores	
		N	Mean scores	N	Mean scores
1st comp.	P	17	83.7847	17	25.6859
	NP	13	86.7692	13	26.2308
2nd comp.	P	17	83.6859	17	26.1276
	NP	13	84.8200	13	25.0262
3rd comp.	P	13	80.2438	13	24.9746
	NP	17	86.7647	17	25.6571

P= prompt-group; NP= non-prompt-group; comp. = students' composition

As shown in Table 4, in all three compositions, the mean score of the non-prompt-group is slightly higher than that of the prompt-group. In other words, those students who were not provided with prompts excelled in comparison to those who received prompts.

Table 5 Results of Mann-Whitney U test of holistic/analytic scores

	Holistic scores		Analytic scores	
	Mann-Whitney U	Exact Sig.	Mann-Whitney U	Exact Sig.
1st comp.	77.500	.170	101.000	.711
2nd comp.	98.000	.621	77.000	.170
3rd comp.	71.000	.103	75.000	.145

comp. = Students' composition; Sig. value= .05

The values of the three compositions were higher than .05, and therefore the difference in the holistic/analytic scores assigned to the compositions of the groups was not borne significant (Table 5 above). Accordingly, writing prompts did not have any positive effects on the quality of students' compositions.

4.2. The Students' Scores and the Argumentative Structure of an Essay

The essays were analysed based on the frequency of elements of argumentation suggested in the scheme as proposed by Ramage et al (2012). To judge the correlation between the frequency of occurrence of elements (nominal data) and the students' holistic and analytic scores (ordinal data), the two sets of scores had to be coordinated. Therefore, the average of rank-ordered scores was re-coded into categorical sets of scores using SPSS 21 software. Then the non-parametric Phi correlation coefficient was calculated to find any possible relationship between the students' essay scores and their argumentative organisation (see Table 6).

Table 6. The correlation between holistic/analytic scores and the occurrence of argumentative elements

Correlation		Holistic scores	Analytic scores
		Phi values	**Phi values**
Claim	1st comp.	1.474	.991
	2nd comp.	1.636	1.324
	3rd comp.	1.432	1.199
Reason	1st comp.	1.424	.811
	2nd comp.	1.174	.886
	3rd comp.	1.122	1.202
Grounds	1st comp.	1.060	.929
	2nd comp.	1.019	.587
	3rd comp.	1.033	.900
Warrant	1st comp.	.752	.625
	2nd comp.	.747	.379

	3rd comp.	.613	.556
Backing	1st comp.	.380	.426
	2nd comp.	.793	.816
	3rd comp.	.670	.676
Rebuttal	1st comp.	.685	.616
	2nd comp.	.835	.778
	3rd comp.	.723	.347

Phi correlation values indicated a positive relationship between students' holistic/analytic scores and the occurrence of argumentative elements in each composition, ranging from a moderate to a very strong correlation. In other words, those students who obtained higher analytic/holistic scores used more argumentative elements in their essays.

4.3. Writing Prompts and the Organisation of Argumentative Essays

To examine the effect of prompts as themes on the organisation of essays, tables of frequencies for prompt- and non-prompt-groups were prepared. The difference between the frequency of argumentative elements in the two groups, in more than 90% of the data, being less than 5, was not statistically significant (see Table 7). That is, writing prompts did not significantly affect argumentation in the compositions.

Table 7 The descriptive statistics of argumentative elements

Elements	Groups		Mean
Claim	1st comp.	P.	3.5894
		N.P.	3.2954
	2nd comp.	P.	4.6571
		N.P.	4.3069
	3rd comp.	P.	3.4992
		N.P.	4.6765
Reason	1st comp.	P.	3.4024
		N.P.	3.3585
	2nd comp.	P.	3.1671

		N.P.	3.2046
	3rd comp.	P.	2.0262
		N.P.	2.2159
Grounds	1st comp.	P.	1.7159
		N.P.	1.3592
	2nd comp.	P.	1.6671
		N.P.	1.7569
	3rd comp.	P.	1.2054
		N.P.	1.4318
Warrant	1st comp.	P.	.5782
		N.P.	.6669
	2nd comp.	P.	.7741
		N.P.	.6408
	3rd comp.	P.	.6154
		N.P.	1.1176
Backing	1st comp.	P.	.2059
		N.P.	.6800
	2nd comp.	P.	.5588
		N.P.	.4100
	3rd comp.	P.	.5515
		N.P.	.7453
Rebuttal	1st comp.	P.	.7453
		N.P.	.4615
	2nd comp.	P.	.5106
		N.P.	.6923
	3rd comp.	P.	.5646
		N.P.	.6271

Comp. = students' composition; P. = prompt-group; N.P. = non-prompt- group

5. Discussion

The results of the present study prompted several observations regarding the effectiveness of prompts on students' essays and the ways in which high-scored students organise their essays in comparison to generally low-scored students. Firstly, as indicated by the results of the *Mann-Whitney U* tests, writing prompts have no correlation with the quality of students' essays. Secondly, as revealed by the *Phi* values, a positive relationship was obtained between holistic/analytic

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essay scores and the use of the argumentative elements in each composition. Thirdly, it was found that writing prompts did not have any significant effects on the use of the elements of argumentation in the essays. Some of the issues raised by these findings are discussed in more detail below.

In total, 47 essays were provided with writing prompts, of which 28 students applied the prompt in their writings and 19 individuals ignored it entirely. The prompt was used in the essays variably as outlined below:

- They merged the topic with the prompt in the beginning of the first paragraph, e.g.:

1*. It has been suggested that children are better to begin learning a foreign language at an early age [topic]. In their early ages, they would be more receptive to language and will enjoy playing with it.* **(S5)**

- They used the topic as a claim in the beginning of the first paragraph and used the prompt as statements or reasons to support the claim, e.g.:

2. Some researchers believe that it is better for children to begin learning a foreign language at primary school **[topic]** since they are **more receptive than older learners** to learn a language…… it is easy for primary pupils to speak a foreign language naturally since they can imitate a foreign accent more effectively than older learners, primary pupils are more willing to **mimic pronunciation without inhibitions and self-consciousness** of older learners. **(S8)**

- They made limited use of the prompt's components in scattered sections, e.g.:

3. *…… Having a* ***good time at work*** *is dependent upon having* ***a friendly work environment*** *and good colleagues…… people's lives in general and* ***happiness*** *in particular depends on their* ***income*** *…….* **(S9)**

- They used one or more sentences of the prompt as the triggering point and continued the prompt by adding supporting statements, e.g.:

4. ***Nowadays, people's lives considerably……. is not possible without having a friendly work environment [prompt]****. It is the feedback that people receive in order to achieve satisfaction from their job. In addition to have a friendly work environment, pressure is another important factor which influences job satisfaction.* **(S2)**

- They elicited ideas from the prompt and used the exact wording or paraphrased sentences of the prompt to generate new ideas and discuss the topic, e.g.:

5. *…… people who believe that **the best way to know another country** is to follow the visited country's **customs and behaviours**, respect the target country's **cultural differences**. They are mostly interested in learning about new cultures and traditions…….*

Evidence indicated that the use of prompts did not enhance the quality of the essays because the same problems still persisted: the essays were mostly short in length and included syntax and lexical errors. Lots of irrelevant examples, personal opinions and experiences and less frequent use of academic words were characteristic of these essays. Lack of overall coherence, internal cohesion and appropriate tone and style was likewise evident. There was relatively weak linkage of ideas, and the opinions were presented carelessly in most of the samples. A variety of narrative and unsupported opinions were found in some of the essays. The elaborate expression of ideas was limited, most probably owing to inadequate vocabulary knowledge. The organisation of some of the essays was fragmented, and it was relatively difficult to deduce connections between individual ideas.

On the other hand, several possibilities for explaining the lack of assistance provided by the prompts can be offered:

1. The students might have had difficulty narrowing the topic into the specific content area of the prompt. It seemed that focusing on the prompt hindered their creativity. When spending time to write on the prompt, they might have found it difficult to return to the initial idea on which they intended to write. Thus, they might have preferred to ignore the prompt material entirely and focus on the topic alone.
2. The time factor might have changed the writing process; they might have felt pressed to take the normal steps in writing an essay, and thinking about the prompt might simply have wasted their time.
3. There is no evidence that if students utilised a prompt, they would display their best writing skills. The students' best writing depends on a variety of factors besides a prompt. Prompts might not necessarily motivate and guide the students through writing a well-developed composition.

Regarding the types of argumentative markers applied by the students and utilisation of the elements of the argumentative essays, the analysis of the argumentative elements revealed that:

- The frequency of occurrence of *claims* ranged from 1 to 10, and all the essays contained at least one claim. Linguistic patterns such as *I think*, *I believe*, *in my opinion*, *in my point of view* significantly marked the existence of *claims*, e.g.:

6. ***I think*** *there should be a balance between adjusting and following the host countries' lows and the visitors' interests.* **(S8)**

- The frequency of occurrence of *reasons* ranged from 0 to 8, and a maximum of three reasons for any single claim was observed. Expressions like *because, since, for that reason* and *for one thing* were used to identify *reasons, e.g.:*

7. *Children at primary school will have more pleasure to learn any language especially a foreign language* **[claim]** *since there are many techniques for teaching young children* **[reason]** *…… (S4)*

- The frequency of occurrence of *warrant* ranged from 0 to 2 and since this element was almost always unstated or implied, no particular linguistic marker distinguished it in the essays, e.g.:

8. *Each country has its own specific cultural and local customs and behaviour* **[warrant]** *…… Before visiting a country for the first time, it is better to do some research to get familiar with the general patterns of its cultural and social behaviour* **[claim]** *……* ***Because*** *some kinds of behaviour might be considered normal in a country, but might not be accepted or even considered as abnormal in another country* **[reason]** *…… (S27)*

- The frequency of occurrence of *grounds* ranged from 0 to 5, specified by *for example*, *for instance* and *statistics show*s, e.g.:

9. *Following local customs and behaviour is necessary for the people who visit other countries for better learning their culture* **[claim]***, because the best way to learn a country's culture is to follow its culture* **[reason]**. ***Statistics show*** *that 90 percent of the people who learn the culture of another country are those who persistently try to learn its culture* **[grounds]**. **(S11)**

- The frequency of occurrence of *backings* ranged from 0 to 4 and a maximum of two backings were used for any single *warrant*. Like *grounds,* linguistic markers accompanying backings were *for example, for instance* and *statistics show.* If examples and evidence supported claims and reasons, they were considered as *grounds*; however, where examples were mentioned as evidence to support warrant, they functioned as *backings,* e.g.:

10. *Nowadays, parents want their children to start learning a foreign language as early in their life as possible* **[warrant]** *…… Children can learn a new language better before puberty* **[backing1]** *…… Learning a foreign language enhances mental development* **[backing2]** *…… Learning a foreign language early can be funnier for children* **[backing3]** *……Children can learn a foreign language better before age 12, the age of puberty* **[claim]** *…… before puberty, the brain is elastic and more receptive to learn a new language* **[reason]** *…… (S17)*

- The frequency of occurrence of *rebuttals* ranged from 0 to 2, marked by expressions like *however*, *although*, *despite*, and *even though*, e.g.:

11. *Educational system can be regarded as the best domain for providing students with needed material in language learning* **[warrant]**…… **Although** *different countries have various policies for language learning, this process goes on willy nilly* **[rebuttal]**…… *it is best to begin learning a foreign language at primary school* **[claim]**…… **Since** *this is the best age to learn a language* **[reason]**…… **(S13)**

The features of the essays marked by the illustrative excerpts lead to a number of conclusions: *Claims* and *reasons* are necessary to pose an argument without which an argument structure is left incomplete or nonsensical. *Warrants* and *rebuttals* are mostly used implicitly by the students and the absence of explicit linguistic forms should not be interpreted as a deficiency. *Grounds* and *backings* present additional information to support reasons and warrants. They are considered as optional elements of an argument structure whose absence or presence does not interfere with the process of argumentation. Regarding the level of students, high-scored students in the present study outperformed others in offering and interpreting reasons, grounds, and backings; they were also proficient in recognising and responding to potential opposition. This superiority was, nevertheless, not highly remarkable. The analysis of the high-scored essays showed the students' explicit claims and conclusive statements of their position in answering *why* or *how* questions. Their papers demonstrated an adequate development of evidence to support their claims. In other words, high-scored students observed the prominent elements of a well-formed argument structure including comprehensive reasons, grounds and backings. On the other hand, low-scored students were less effective in writing a well-formed argument. Their compositions marked their difficulty in producing some of the features of an argument including rebuttals, reasons, and backings. The low-scored essays mostly contained uncorroborated claims or a limited number of proper reasons and grounds.

Comparing the results of the present study with the previous research in this area leads us to several conclusions. Notwithstanding the different contexts

of the two studies, the results of McCann's (1989) study and those of the current study were relatively similar. Like McCann's high graders (9th and 12th graders), high-scored students of the current study were more efficient in the overall quality of argumentation. Likewise, regarding individual argumentative features, high-scored students, like McCann's high-graders, made stronger claims and warrants and supported them with logic and adequate reasons, grounds as well as backings. At the same time, the study produced results which corroborate those of Crammond (1998). Considering low-scored students of the current study as less proficient than high-scored students, the lower frequency of occurrence of argumentative elements, especially warrants and rebuttals, indicated the incapability of low-scored students in presenting arguments. On the other hand, an increase in the scores entailed a rise in their ability to pose a logical argument. The low-scored students used a basic argument structure to organise their essays, including claims, data, and warrants. On the other hand, high-scored students used relatively more warrants and rebuttals. These findings implied that the students had a rich reservoir of argument knowledge, but their limited linguistic proficiency hindered their success in strengthening their claims by explicit use of warrants and rebuttals. Therefore, they supported their claims by basic structures of reasons and grounds.

Regarding the quality of argumentation and the frequency of occurrence of the argumentative elements, the analysis indicated that both groups applied the six elements of an argument with a relatively similar frequency of occurrence. Practically, the overall quality and argumentative organisation of the essays with writing prompts demonstrated no noticeable distinction from those with no prompts. There are possible explanations for these findings: It might be very difficult for the students to handle several tasks simultaneously. Thinking about the prompt, narrowing down its content area, and trying to perform the best writing, and at the same time applying the elements of argumentation in such a manner that indicates a well-structured argument might pose serious challenges to the students' academic writing ability. Moreover, it is worth noting that the overall quality of the argument was not merely related to the application of the

argumentative elements, probably because most of the university students were already good at presenting basic elements of argumentation (*claims* & *reasons*). On the other hand, although the essays with *rebuttals* were more persuasive than the essays without rebuttals, convincing arguments typically might not be those including *rebuttals*. The effective argument might include putting forward strong claims, offering and interpreting reasons and grounds as well.

6.   Conclusion

This study set out to determine the effects of writing prompts on developing the argumentative essays of Iranian university students of English. While the results indicated that the application of argumentative elements by high-scored students was considerably superior to those used by low-scored students, the study also revealed the insignificant impact of prompts on the argument structure of the essays written by the participants of this study. It was shown that contrary to the previous research which had found support for the effectiveness of this type of scaffolding technique for various tasks such as writing (Scardamalia, Bereiter & Steinbach, 1984) and knowledge construction (King & Rosenshine, 1993), the writing prompts did not induce the students to make use of scaffolding devices to improve their writing quality.

Taken together, the results of this study suggest that the richness of an argument is affected by the students' linguistic repository; practically, high-scored students were more successful in observing the argument structure. A caveat that needs to be noted is that time limitation and personal features such as mental fatigue and reluctance to spend time sitting and writing an essay are environmental factors that may partly explain these results. However, current research was not specifically designed to evaluate these variables.

Our finding in this report may offer several understandings of academic writing in terms of composing a good piece of argumentative writing. First, the study implies that investigating research on writing prompts is promising and pedagogically useful, because it seems to shed light on the challenging issue of how prompts inspire the writers' performance as reported in the literature. Second,

students come to university with partial concepts of an argument and inappropriate schemata to write in the expected argumentative genre; therefore, the instruction they receive at university should address argumentation sufficiently. It is likely that writing courses only inadequately stress primary elements of an argument: claim, reasons and grounds.

It is worth noting that with a small sample size, caution must be applied, as the findings might not be transferable to similar contexts. This calls for more inclusive studies to make more valid generalisations about writing prompts on the students' scores and the quality of their argumentation. Further research needs to be done to establish whether other kinds of prompts including question, text-based reading and listening prompts as well as picture mediated prompts can be recommended. Likewise, the genre-based investigation of textual argumentation suggests research for further study in EAP contexts. Move analysis of argument structure is also suggested as offering an extra area of research by which teachers can help students comprehend text structure and gain proficiency in making meanings effective. Teaching in EAP contexts needs to combine approaches to improving the outcomes of student writing, as it seems conclusive that focussing on any one approach will not necessarily provide desirable outcomes.

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