

Using Debates and Reading Tasks to Enhance Candidates' Performance in GRE Argument Writing Tasks

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the connection between debates/frameworks and reading tasks and GRE essays. The GRE writing component tests candidates' abilities in writing two types of essays — issue and argument. In both these essays, candidates are required to present their arguments very clearly or critique the topic given using suitable examples. This article explains how debates and reading activities can help them sharpen these skills and improve their writing performance in GRE writing tasks. After a 30-hour intervention period using debates and reading activities related to identifying parts of an argument based on Toulmin's argument model, most learners seemed to show a marginal improvement in their writing with stronger claims, counterarguments and evidence.

Keywords: Toulmin, GRE, Debates, Reading, Argumentative writing

Introduction

The Graduate Record Exam (GRE) is a widely recognized testing system used to test the numerical, logical and verbal abilities of candidates applying for postgraduate admissions in universities abroad. The writing component of the GRE exam is considered to be a challenging one, wherein candidates are expected to produce two tasks, namely, the issue essay and the analytical essay. While the former requires candidates to analyze an issue and develop an argument with ample examples to support/refute the argument, the latter requires them to evaluate the argument, its many ramifications and intricacies. This implies that the candidates should understand the parts of an argument, its underlying premises, judge the logical soundness of claims and finally present his /her argument with solid claim/s and ample evidence - all this within a budgeted time limit of 30 minutes each. Therefore, we presume that unless students develop a sufficient understanding of the

composite parts of an argument, differentiate its disparate parts and strengthen their skills in developing each part, it is unlikely that they develop their responses and emerge with a coherent argument essay.

Grabe and Kaplan (1996), Siregar et al. (2021), and Zhang and Cheng (2021) acknowledge that argumentative writing is one of the most challenging writing tasks and requires complex cognitive and linguistic skills (Nippold & Ward Loneran, 2010). It further involves student's knowledge about writing, applying strategic behaviours, and the mastery of skills (Wijekumar, Graham, Harris, Lei, Barkel, Aitken, et al., 2019)

Extensive research has been done on teaching argumentative writing (Chapple & Curtis, 2000; Ferretti, Lewis, & Andrews Weckerly, 2009; Lea & Street, 1998; Nimehchisalem, Abbasi, Ebrahimzadeh, & Kalajahi, 2015). Researchers have used several approaches and methods to teach argumentative writing: the scaffolding method (Dixon, Carnine, Kameenui 1993), genre-

based approaches (Ramos, Cathleen, 2019), collaborative writing techniques (Ghuffron, M. Ali 2015), self-regulatory strategies Arifin, Samsul (2013), rhetorical strategies (Khairuddin, Zuleika et al 2021), use of chatbots to scaffold EFL students' Kai et al (2022) attempted integrating arguments and counter-arguments using graphic organizers and criterion instruction. However, Wingate (2012) argues that teaching argumentative writing focuses mostly on rhetorical and linguistic structures while giving relatively less attention to the organization of argumentation. Uysal, 2012; Stapleton and Wu, 2015; Qin, 2020; Siregar et al., 2021 also emphasize the need for learners to understand the structure of an argument. One of the most popular structures of argument, Toulmin's (2003) model describes an argument as consisting of six elements: claim, grounds, warrant, qualifier, rebuttal, and backing. While claim, data and warrant are the main elements, the optional elements include backing, rebuttal and a qualifier. Toulmin's classical model (2003) of reasoning includes all elements of reasoning and has been used to teach argument writing (Randi Dickson (2004), Rex, Lesley & Thomas, Ebony & Engel, Steven, 2010) & to study the types of claims (Yang 2022).

Yet another argument-heavy pedagogic tool includes debates, which have been useful in providing "multi-level interactions" (El Majidi, et al 2001), stimulating a considerable amount of written output" (Mary Juzwik 2018), facilitating accurate and appropriate use of language forms and structures Benati (2017) and encouraging experimentation with new forms & conscious use of language (El Majidi, de Graaff & Janssen, 2020) - all of which are crucial to writing. Different strategies and methods have been tried, a combination of using both reading passages focusing on classifying argument structure and

debates to teach argument writing has not been studied experimentally so far in the Indian context. To extend and add to the existing studies, we attempted to study the same to enable candidates to attempt GRE argument writing tasks.

Research Questions :

Does the study explore the following questions?

- a) Do candidates fare better in their writing tasks after three phases of intervention?
- b) Do they feel more confident about presenting arguments better after gaining practice in their exercise?

Research Methodology

A group of 30 learners, who were tutored virtually for their GRE language component, were chosen for the study. To roughly assess their entry-level writing proficiency, we made them write an argument essay and assessed them based on some of the following key parameters from the GRE assessment score guide given below:

- “clearly identifies aspects of the argument”
- “develops ideas clearly, organizes them logically...”
- “conveys ideas clearly and well”
- “demonstrates facility with the conventions of standard written English...” (“Ets.Org”)

Learners were subject to a 30-hour intervention period, during which they were given practice in two focused tasks, namely debates and reading activities related to identifying parts of an argument. These two tasks were chosen because we presumed that understanding the structure of argument through these activities would help

candidates handle GRE writing tasks better. The assessment criteria for GRE reveal that to obtain scores of 6 or 5, the learners are required to “analyze features of an argument insightfully” (“Ets.Org”) and in a “generally perceptive way” (“Ets.Org). This means that grasping the fundamental structure of an argument is a prerequisite to achieving the task. Therefore, the study was conducted in three phases:

- a) Phase I: An impressionistic assessment of candidates’ writing abilities using the criteria in the GRE scoring guide
- b) Phase II: Intervention period of training through reading and speaking activities
- c) Phase III: Post-assessment phase in which assessment was done using rubrics in the GRE score guide.

Reading Tasks

In the first phase, a model argument describing different parts was presented to the candidates. The candidates were presented with the following model and examples for a better understanding.

- Claim:** There are cats in the neighbourhood
- Ground:** You hear mewing, purring and growling at odd hours.
- Qualifier:** Therefore, it is possible that...
- Warrant:** Cats are animals that meow and purr
- Backing:** Your neighbour has a cat and you hear the mewing occasionally; you also saw it preying on a rat on the fence
- Rebuttal:** Unless there are other animals/rodents nearby.

(Adapted from Purdue- OWL).

After presenting the model breaking down parts of an argument, candidates were given two reading passages. These passages were argumentative in nature and contained all the elements of an argument essay, albeit not explicitly. The passages were on the following topics: “Smoking on campus” and “Conforming to tradition is always a good idea”. While the argument for the first topic focused on justifying the need for not banning smoking on campuses because it is not illegal and relevant counterclaims and examples, the second propagated the need for conforming to traditions followed by evidence and counterclaims. Learners were instructed to read the passage and categorize the parts of this paragraph into claims, data, warrant, backing and rebuttal based on the following template :

Table 1 Parts of a paragraph

Reading Passage - 1	Claim	
	Warrant	
	Rebuttal	
	Ground	
	Backing	

Learners were then made to read a series of 50 short argumentative passages on topics such as online games, tradition Vs. modernity etc. Each passage ran to about 175- 225 words and was pitched at the B2 level in the CEFR scale. While 20 were used in the classroom for training learners which took us close to 10 hours, another 30 were given for self-learning purposes, wherein candidates repeated the same activity.

Task 2: Debates

Learners were made to listen to parliamentary debates and podcasts (with a few adaptations). Following this, they were given practice in debates for close to 10 hours. Learners were divided into three teams, namely the *House for, House Against and a team of judges*. While the former category presented their arguments in favour of

a topic, the second team presented arguments against it. Both teams had five members each. The third house of the jury with 4 members judged the performance and chose the winner based on the following checklist developed by us. The topics for practice in debates included IPL Vs. One-day cricket matches, Life with Digital Technology – bitter/ better, Space exploration is a waste of money etc”

Table 2 Checklist for assessing the learners

Points	Yes	No
Did the argument have a clear structure from the start?		
Did the participants have sufficient points to present without any repetition?		
Did they make adequate use of supporting data/examples to back their claim?		
Are the examples relevant, valid and connected to augment the position taken?		
Is there a variety in data i.e. do they restrict to simple statistics or go beyond to give different kinds of examples?		
Did their argument have an overall flow? Was the argument logically convincing?		
Was each claim backed up with sufficient data?		

After a period of 30 hours, learners were made to respond to the following two writing tasks:

1. Online learning became more common post-pandemic and since all resources are available, some people think that all physical classrooms should be shut down and, in their place, everyone should be given a laptop and a fast-speed internet connection. *Write a response in which you discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree with the recommendation and explain*

your reasoning for the position you take. In developing and supporting your position, describe specific circumstances in which adopting the recommendation would or would not be advantageous and explain how these examples shape your position

2. School uniforms should be made compulsory because they foster equality among students, prevent bullying and reduce class differences among children. *Write a response in which you*

discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree with the recommendation and explain your reasoning for the position you take

The responses of students were taken up for analysis and the relevant responses and discussions are presented in the following section. Once the learners submitted the essays online, we also conducted unstructured, informal interviews to get an understanding of their general experience.

Analyses and Discussion:

Most learners seemed to show a marginal improvement in terms of their performance. For example, those learners who could develop essays at score 3 showed some features of performance of score 4, as evident from the responses below.

Select extracts which contain claims, counterclaims and evidence are presented below *without correcting their grammar, spelling and sentence structures are presented* owing to length-related constraints. Some of the claims put forth for the first topic include

“... online learning at home ... it will save travel cost, cut electricity bills, avoid traffic problems and accidents and reduce overall school fees” (R4) (backed by two pieces of evidence)

“...it will encourage more people to take more courses because they won't have to travel cutting through the thick of the traffic every day to reach their schools “(R13)

“ In fact if recorded video lessons of classes are available, students could also access more lessons and have as many digital copies as they need ...though some people might argue that digital copies can never be a substitute for original physical classes...”.(R9)

Each essay included at least two strong claims and two counterclaims each, supported by personal and hypothetical examples and statistics as evidence and followed by rebuttals.

“It would be ridiculous to switch to the total elimination of physical classes because it is like using an artificial power supply when natural light is still available. How many of us would prefer moonlight when sunlight is readily available?” (R10)

“The human element called the teacher is totally irreplaceable. Some examples here are a pat at the back, a nodding smile, the twinkle in the teacher's eyes ..these are the best forms of feedback that one can ever get...” (R14)

“A study done post-pandemic period proved that 80% of students still prefer learning in the physical presence of a teacher...” (R11)

“. Secondly, as per a recent report by AIMS, staring for long hours on screen and listening to lectures through headphones cause a lot of physical and mental problems such as dry eyes, vertigo, blurred vision, shoulder and back pain, carpal tunnel syndrome, headaches and increases a kind of intense tension by 40%... so on” (R21)

“Supporters of online classes might argue that even reading books can be stressful to the eyes. But there is no evil to eyes than the blue light monster that emanates from the computer which is scientifically proven to increase early blindness by 30%” (R2)

“Learning online can be very stressful. I swear by this because whenever I read from my laptop or draw CAD diagrams for too long, both my eyes and neck hurt and I feel fatigued set in very so on. We should not

compound issues by extending screen time “ (R4)

Some of the claims and rebuttals came through stronger rhetorical questions, as evident from the following responses. They were also followed by counterclaims.

“When you are cooped up in your room the entire day staring at a screen, where does socialization happen? There is hardly any scope for human-to-human interaction and one totally misses out on acquiring social and other life skills, which are integral to learning (R19)

“.... Interaction can also be staged in the classroom.....Is it so common for us to nod even when we do not understand in classrooms?” (R2)

“A student might easily get distracted by a notification from a mobile phone, which cannot happen in a physical classroom. It has been reported that a split second of distraction by a mobile phone notification can undo all the learning and attention the students managed to hold” (R13)

*“.... **The** best part of the classroom is interaction. When classes happen online, there is almost zero interaction sometimes. ... How many physical classes guarantee interaction? Psychologists say that even in the best of classes, the attention spans of students don't last beyond 20 minutes even with the best of lectures. A study has reported that 40% of students only pretend to listen and nod in a physical classroom. Haven't we all been part of the drama?” (R3)*

”.... Virtual socializing is also a form of socializing, but on a different platform. When classes happen online and when they do not

understand, students do mute and talk to fellow classmates. Not meeting face to face does not mean that there is no socialization at all”(R1)

“In fact, virtual classes help introverts better because such students are not threatened by hyperactive students who can sometimes be pushy... In many instances, I have felt more comfortable talking online than facing my classmates face to face” (R9)

“Virtual classes create space for all kinds of learners and most importantly introverts. A study reveals that student response was 30% more in online classrooms, especially amongst introverted students... ..counterclaim.. “Yet another important thing that science students need to think about is a practical experience like illustrations or activities, which can be effective only when they are done real-time”

The second topic “Uniforms” elicited the following responses:

“Making uniforms compulsory at school or college is an infringement on basic rights and eliminates the student's right of self-expression. Though self-expression could be done in any form, the way they speak, hairstyle and even through the choice of accessories and mannerisms, it is through the clothes that she /he makes a distinct impression.... In fact, Accessories like shoes and belts are noticed much later... ” (R12 who showed features of score 4)

“Some might argue that uniforms break barriers related to social classes and minimize bullying and unnecessary attention. However, even then, the creases in uniform and the crispness of a starched uniform vis a vis crumpled, old uniform can still bring out class

differences and result in bullying. Further bullying can happen on any grounds - even based on academic performance where high-achievers taunt low scorers (R 3 who showed a movement from score 3 to 4)

“Some people argue that when all students wear uniforms, they look similar and there is no scope for differentiation or showing of superiority. However, it is to be remembered that these days clothes are not the only markers of differentiation. In parts of Southern India, students wear caste tags and still continue to flaunt their superior lineage” (R9, who showed progress from original 3 to 4)

Though no dramatic improvement was noticed in terms of score 5, their responses were backed up with more solid evidence, as evident from the response above. Their claims in the essays were put forth with more conviction. More relevant examples were used to support their claims. Some higher-level candidates (on the threshold of score 5) used stronger argument structures which included well-fitting warrants and qualifiers of a more abstract nature as well. Extracts from their essays are presented below:

“One of the main differences between physical classes and virtual learning rests in the mode of interaction. In the first case, students can interact with fellow students and teachers, collaborate and team up, and clarify doubts, which makes learning more dynamic and organic. The environment is very conducive to discussing, debating and getting clarity. Whereas in online classes, there is hardly any scope for this. Some people argue that students can interact through chats, emails and other forums.. But no one can guarantee uninterrupted net connection even in the best of citiesa few seconds of bad connectivity

can disturb the tempo and rhythm of the class.”.(R12 who showed features of score 5).

In comparison to their earlier attempt in Phase I, each learner emerged with at least a minimum of two more claims and rebuttals supported largely by personal examples and statistics.

Similarly, during the informal, unstructured interviews we had with learners post the intervention session, candidates expressed an overall increased sense of confidence when it comes to handling argument tasks. Candidates mentioned that they did not feel as intimidated as before when they saw those long questions containing complex statements. Some of the responses listed below seem to indicate increased levels of confidence

“Earlier I knew ideas separately. Did not know to classify. As claim, evidence etc.. Now I understand” (R4)

“How to classify ..claim, rebuttal etc ..i understood now”(R11)”

“I thought the argument essay was like regular essays. Now I understand the spirit of it” (R34)

“The second time, I started thinking ..which word is stronger..fiercer..how can i make ideas stronger”(R9)

“Got an understanding of the flow and structure” (R5)

“Overall I feel better with my writing” (R13)

“I have more valid points to fill in the essay”(R2)

“I can see I have improved” (R7). “I have more valid points now...

“What is an argument? How should it be?. That I understood” (R10)

“Earlier ideas were like clouds. Now I can bring

them together and classify” (R24)

“I will deal with writing a bit differently... I will draw a table and then write claims etc and then form all into an essay” (R24)

“I have more valid points to fill my essay” (R6)
The usage of terms like “validity, more points, flow and structure” from the response seems to indicate that the combination of debates and reading passages has resulted in improved levels of written output and confidence.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on our analysis and conclusions, we would like to offer some suggestions to make the tasks even more effective.

1. Debates can be organized in a graded manner from something as simple as “House for Cellphone” and “House against Cellphones” to more complex and abstract topics “House of believers” and “House of Nonbelievers”. Both simple TV debates (on political and social issues) and complex debates such as those of Christopher Hitchens (from podcasts) on more abstract and complex topics could be used as models. This should be organized in a regular manner with ample scope for peer and tutor feedback.

2. Candidates can be asked to colour-code the parts of an argument. This would not only reinforce their understanding of argument structure and relate it to paragraphs but would also cater to learners of different learning styles.

3. Extension-writing activities based on the debates conducted in the class can also be given. These writing activities could be designed based on hypothetical questions such as the following:

A) NEET exams can be scrapped on the following conditions: maintaining a consistent academic record throughout schooling, special

project demonstrations in science subjects, and proficiency in science subjects at school.

B) Atheism and Theism are just positions of convenience held by individuals for political, social and psychological reasons

Limitations

One of the main limitations of this study is the small sample size. Further, for the final assessment, though we have faithfully used the rubrics that follow the prompts (italicized) which require learners to present most elements of an argument, we have not used the actual questions from GRE tests. More evidence is needed with real-life GRE tasks for valid results. Further, the combination method adopted in this study seems to be effective as gathered from the performance of writing tasks and learners’ responses. However, other variables might have impacted their improved performance and need to be studied further and triangulated. Yet another limitation of the study is that the assessment of the write-ups was done based on our ELT experience and understanding of GRE scores. However, none of the authors is a trained ETS rater. Hence, it is possible that our scoring of candidates’ essays might have had a certain degree of subjectivity, despite using professional judgment while sticking to the scoring criteria. A larger sample with trained raters would validate our findings even better. Future research can also focus on improving the academic register of argument essays, which we found wanting in the responses.

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