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A CRITICAL LOOK AT GARFORD'S AB AB AB APPROACH TO ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY WRITING

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Abstract

This paper discusses Garford's (1988) AB AB AB Approach to Argumentative essay writing. It notes the importance of argumentation in life in general. It, however, observes that argument is a complex activity and student writers need to be instructed on how best to construct effective arguments. It is shown that while Garford's attempt is intended to meet this need, it seems to be confusing students more than it is helping them. The paper notes the strengths of Garford's approach and shows how and where it is a problem and then discusses how this can be rectified. It is suggested that students be introduced to a variety of approaches and encouraged to come up with their own, thereby developing their own creativity.

Introduction

While analysing some Zimbabwean 'O' level English essays on an argumentative topic for a doctoral research, the author noted a peculiar pattern of structuring argumentative essays in most English essays by second language speakers of English. The topic of the essay was: "It is said that young people should always respect and obey their elders. What do you think?" In the essays under examination, some clauses and even units as large as paragraphs appeared to be juxtaposed. It appeared in most of the English as a Second Language (EL2) essays which were being examined that relationships between some ideas, as expressed in and between some paragraphs, were not made as explicit to the reader as they perhaps needed to be.

This was noted mainly in compositions where writers attempted to present both sides of the argument following a strategy which appears to have been encouraged in their classes and advocated by Garford (1988). Garford, in a book which EL2 teachers interviewed by the writer testified as being widely used by 'O' level students who speak English as their second language in Zimbabwe, writes of the argumentative essay approach that; "use an AB AB AB paragraphs (A = For, B = Against) approach to an argumentative essay rather than an AAA, BBB approach. This is like a debate where you have a 'proposer' followed by an 'opposer' " (1988, p. 32)

This paper discusses Garford's AB AB AB approach, and shows how this approach may be responsible for some of the argumentative essay structuring problems experienced by some EL2 students in Zimbabwean schools. But first we consider argumentative writing in general.

Argumentative Writing

Argumentative writing may be defined as that kind of persuasive discourse which asks its audience to believe the writer's contention on the basis of the evidence presented by the writer.

The argumentative essay is one of the essay types in the Zimbabwean 'O' level English curriculum. The other types are the descriptive essay, the narrative essay, the situational essay, letter and report writing. Interviews with Zimbabwean English teachers and examination of writing books and writing articles have revealed that of all the essay types, the argumentative essay is regarded to be the most complex type from the points of teaching, learning and research.

Argumentative writing of high school students, in particular, has not been a popular research area. From the few studies carried out (eg. Connor and Lauer, 1985, 1987; Durst et al. 1990; Thondhlana 1994), it has been found that students generally have considerable problems writing argumentative essays. The National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) of the United states of America, in its many years studying student achievement in writing, reveals that students have much more difficulty with persuasive

tasks involving argument than with narrative, descriptive, or expository tasks. The problems faced by students writing argumentative essays include analysing the task demand, selecting material, deciding on an appropriate argument structure (depending on the demands of the topic), selecting appropriate communicative strategies including the use of logical connectors between and within the various stages of the argument.

Moffett (in McCann, 1989) argues that argumentative discourse is too abstract for young people. It is seen as a complex activity often involving other writing types in a writing course. It is further viewed as the culminating activity for courses of study. As such, elementary school curricula avoid the argumentative writing task and focus on the other types like narrative and descriptive writing.

Even at secondary school level argumentative writing is generally unpopular. McCann (1989) states that in the United States secondary school text book series typically avoid argument until the eleventh grade. He goes further to say that even college composition courses reserve argument for the end of the course.

In the Zimbabwean contexts, teachers interviewed by the writer said that the teaching of composition writing is minimal and more so the teaching of argument. Some style books (and maybe teachers also) even discourage students from attempting argumentative essays in examinations. For example, Berger and Darwin (1990, p. 6) call it a 'danger' area and have the following warning to students; "This is the most difficult type of composition to write and requires the greatest skill."

Yet the importance of argumentative discourse in our lives in general cannot be underestimated. In a narrow sense, argument is an important tool for academic study. In a broader sense it is an essential instrument for social, political, economic, and ethical expression. Argumentation is thought to be a practical training device, an analogue of broader decision-making processes as in disciplines like law and politics and generally an appropriate instrument for critical decision-making in human affairs. For example, in international negotiation, bargainers rely on argument to gain or maintain an

advantage or control. As observed by Walker (1985), negotiators use arguments to support their own positions, interests and offers, as well as to modify the other party's perceptions and expectations concerning their own preferences and outcomes. In this context, argument also promotes information exchange. As noted by Axelrod (1978, p. 177), bargainers better understand one another's preferences through argumentation. Further, as Katula and Roth (1980, p.183) argue; "...in order for a free society to ensure justice and pursue expedient policies, it is critical that each person knows how to construct and analyse an argument".

It seems, therefore, important that students begin to develop their ability to construct good argumentative texts even in their elementary years.

Garford's AB AB AB Approach

The AB AB AB approach is presented in a book which Garford wrote with the intention of providing 'O' Level English as a second language candidates with a quick, easy reference guide to the various approaches to essay writing. The book attempts a description of each of the essay types encountered by 'O' level students, suggesting ways of tackling them. Examples of appropriate communicative strategies and organisation of material for each of them are given and model essays for each essay type provided.

On argumentative essays, Garford highlights the importance of providing students with guidelines for writing argument. He introduces students to some communicative strategies necessary for successful argumentation, for example, the appropriate choice of person (that is, first and third person pronouns), the use of the passive voice, examples of appropriate logical connectors (for example, *on the one hand*, *in contrast*) and exemplification. No explanations are however given on the effect of using these strategies. The author assumes, in the introduction to his book, that his target readers can get such details in writing textbooks. This is an unfortunate assumption because textbooks that the present writer is aware of as being used by students do not deal much with writing and more so argumentative writing.

Garford goes on to introduce the AB AB AB Approach in an attempt to help students to construct good arguments. As noted earlier, Garford advocates an AB AB AB approach to argumentative paragraph structuring. He argues that this enables the writer to guide and help the readers to follow the logic and development of the writer's ideas.

Unfortunately, Garford does not give adequate instructions on how to employ his AB AB AB paragraphs approach. Firstly, he does not explain what he means by "A= For, B=Against". It is not clear whether this means *for and against the topic* or *for and against the writer's thesis*. We are also not sure whether by AB AB AB he means that the composition should be composed of six paragraphs and not more nor fewer. The problem is worsened by the fact that his model example does not really reflect this structure. In the model example it can be seen from the conclusion that he argues for the topic, so whichever interpretation we make of A and B, the structure will be the same. If we consider the structure from an AB AB AB paragraphs approach, we find that, contrary to what he suggests to his readers, the structure of his model example actually is.

Introduction: Focus (coeducational schools are 'different; from one-gender schools, so 'better' becomes a matter of definition.)

Body: B [argument against topic/thesis]

(When teenage boys and girls meet, there is a great deal of distraction.)

B and A [both argument against and for topic/thesis]

(One gender schools are different but it is too simplistic to give credit to separation of sex. One-gender school standards are higher because they are more privileged than co-educational schools)

A [argument for topic/thesis]

(The role of women in society has now improved)

A [argument for topic/thesis]

(Single gender schools foster sexist attitudes)

Conclusion: Thesis statement

(Co-educational schools are better)

Thesis here means the truth that we want our readers to accept or act upon. The failure of Garford to illustrate this structure satisfactorily probably makes it difficult for the reader, particularly his 'O' Level target readership and their teachers, to understand the requirements of the approach he advocates, and this is likely to be partly the cause of the problems found with some of their essays.

Garford's AB AB AB paragraphs approach is probably derived from Aristotle's concept of *stasis* (Katula and Roth, 1980). According to Aristotle; "...a stasis is the rest, halt or pause which occurs inevitably between opposing or contrary movements or motions when they meet. (Katula & Roth, 1980, p. 184).

Katula and Roth (1980) see an argument as a movement of contrary positions - as one point of view conflicts with another - toward some final resolution. As contrary positions arise during the course of argument, the movement is stalled until the contention is resolved. If we accept the concept of stasis, we find that it is important for a writer to know how to move an argument through the appropriate stases or points of potential conflict in order to produce a coherent argument.

In resolving a contention, a writer can choose one of a number of options depending on the chosen line of argument as may be determined by the topic. For example, the writer can choose to recognize the fact that there is a possible opposing point of view to the one she/he has made. She or he can, however, go on to respond to that opposition by showing in what way his or her point of view is more valid, as in the following example:

(1) I also believe the elderly are supportive to both their children and the children below. (2) I feel the elderly tie a generation of family together and should be paid respect by all younger members of the family for it is the elders who produce the family who in time could give birth to many more of the generation. (3) However, some people would say that elders become old, fall ill and lose their memory and how could they respect someone who can't even remember yesterday? (4) It is true that elders fall ill and even become senile but that is not their fault. (5) In this life you live only to die. (6) Old people can't be blamed for becoming pensioners and becoming dependent on their young family to help them out. (7) I believe as they grow weaker the more support and love they need. (8) Some people also argue that elderly people are too old fashioned and have lived different lives to the present generation and so why should they believe something they do not believe in. (9) I do not agree with this. (10) I believe young people should take an interest in their traditional heritage as well as live their own lives.

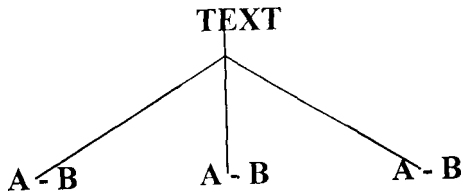
(EL1-11)

In the above example, the writer gives her point of view in Ss1-2. She then goes on to recognize the existence of opposition in S3. In Ss4-7, the writer responds to the opposing point of view maintaining her point of view. Again in S8 the writer recognizes opposition and in Ss9-10, she responds to the opposition defending her point of view.

In an AB AB AB paragraphs approach, the writer could choose to present both points of view in the form of, for example, A (argument for) and B (argument against) and gradually leaning more towards the more valid argument. Alternatively, the writer, having considered the strengths and weaknesses of both points (for and against), could then decide to take a middle position.

It appears that the strength of these styles lies in the ability of the writer to make the right transitions where these are necessary. In an AB AB AB paragraphs approach, we expect the body of the text to consist of AB blocks - a block being equal to an A paragraph plus its B paragraph counterpart. Let

us assume that our text consists of three AB blocks, the text will be as presented in the following diagram:



English writing conventions expect the writer to make transitions at two levels to enable the reader to easily follow his or her movements through the various stases. The writer is expected to make transitions of contrast between the A and B paragraphs within each block, and transitions of topic between the AB blocks. The writers in question do not appear to have any 'problem' making transitions of contrast between A and B paragraphs. The 'problem' seems to occur at the point where they introduce a new idea. We shall use the following text to illustrate this problem:

Introduction: It is a cherished ideal that young people should respect and obey their elders in a society as this will illustrate humanity in them but there are some elders who do not deserve to be treated respectfully, and their commands least deserve to be obeyed.

Paragraph 1A. The Bible urges us to be respectful and if we respect especially our parents then our days on earth are increased.

Paragraph 1B. On the other hand Jesus taught that it is justified to break law in order to be saved. For instance if an elder asks you to kill you can be justified for not obeying so as to please God.

Paragraph 2A. Young people should always respect and obey elders because they have experience in life and it is said wisdom comes with age that we can conclude that they are wiser than the youth. The youth will also learn of how to overcome and solve problems of growing up.

Paragraph 2B. It can be argued on the other hand that because the time is always changing and the ideas from the elders are old-fashioned that they cannot apply to today's society. The problems they faced are not the same as those faced by the youth today.

Paragraph 3A. It is important for the young people to respect and obey elders so as to learn from them the tradition and culture of their societies as these are a mark of each and every society.

Paragraph 3B. Some youths out of sheer ignorance argue that these are not important and they are old-fashioned. The culture and tradition on the other hand should also change in keeping with the changing time, technology and economic and political structures of the society thereby adopting new traditions, cultures and art.

Conclusion. I think young people should respect and obey their elders but should not always do so because no one is perfect. The elders at times do wrong or tell them to do wrong. The young people should be rational and be able to think about what they are being taught and then see if it really makes sense then they can obey.

For elders to be always respected and obeyed they should always try to be reasonable and command surmountable tasks so that the youth can always respect and obey them.

I can therefore say young people should always respect and obey their elders whenever they are reasonable.

(HBRME3)

(Note: The words/letters in bold are the researcher's)

In the preceding text, the writer has no problem moving from the A and B parts of Paragraph 1 (Paragraph 1A to Paragraph 1B). He clearly marks the stasis by the antithetic contrasive conjunct *on the other hand*. However, Paragraph 2A is merely juxtaposed, and so is Paragraph 3A affecting the smooth flow of the discourse. The incoherence in this case could lie in the fact that the reader is not prepared for the change in topic or focus in these paragraphs.

What are needed are transitional devices which give the reader the cues that lead him/her to anticipate what is to come. Without them, the prose does not flow nor are the relationships between the paragraphs clear. The text has been modified by adding transitional cues (in bold) which, in English writing conventions, are necessary for a more coherent text as follows:

It is a cherished ideal that young people should **respect and obey their elders** in a society as this will illustrate humanity in them but there are some elders who do not deserve to be treated respectfully, and their commands least deserve to be obeyed.

The Bible urges us to be respectful and if we are respectful, especially to our parents, then our days on earth are increased. **On the other hand**, Jesus taught that it is justified to break a law in order to be saved. For instance if an elder asks you to kill you can be justified for not obeying so as to please the Lord.

From the point of view of experience, young people should always respect and obey elders because they have experienced in life and it is said wisdom comes with age, so we can conclude that they are wiser than the youth. The youth can also learn of how to overcome and solve problems of growing up **from them**.

It can be argued **on the other hand** that because the time is always changing and the ideas from the elders are old-fashioned that they cannot apply to today's society. The problems they faced are not the same as those faced by the youth of today.

From the point of view of tradition, it is important for the young people to respect and obey elders so as to learn from them the tradition and culture of their societies as these are a mark of identification for each and every society.

Some youths out of sheer ignorance argue that these are not important and they are old-fashioned. **They think that culture and tradition should instead** change to be in keeping with the changing time, technology and economic and political structures of the society thereby adopting new traditions, cultures and art.

I think young people should respect and obey their elders but should not always do so because no one is perfect. The elders at times do wrong. The young people should be rational and be able to think about what they are being taught and then see if it really makes sense then they can obey.

I can therefore say young people should always respect and obey their elders whenever they are reasonable.

Two important transitions of topics were made at the beginning of the fourth and sixth paragraphs, creating a better flow of information than previously. Although the reconstruction was concerned mainly with transitions of topic, a few other changes were also made to add more clarity to the text as indicated in bold. Also, the ninth paragraph was deleted as it was thought to introduce a new idea, within the concluding paragraphs, which the writer does not develop. Though maybe still not a perfect composition, structurally, it is a clearer one.

The 'problem' of shifting authorial voice is further shown in some compositions where students adopt the strategy of writing their compositions in the form of a dialogue as in the following text:

A: We should obey and respect our elders because our parents at home encourage us to do so. And also our teachers teach us how we should respect our elders.

B: On the other hand although the parents and teachers encourage us to obey and respect elder people. I don't think it is important because everyone must be respected as far as I'm concerned. Even the elders must also respect the young people in order for them to be obeyed and respected by the young ones.

B: In contrast to what Mr X said I don't agree that elders must also respect the young ones because if we do so there would be no order in the community or society. The young people should be the ones who have to respect the elders, for example a school girl or boy should always be the first one to ask about the health of the teacher, parents or any other elder.

(EL2R-18)

As in the case of the previous text, transitions of contrast within the A and B paragraphs are not a 'problem', but transitions of topic appear problematic. Writer EL 2R-18 has decided to assign B paragraphs to a "Mr X" to resolve the problem of shifting authorial voice. This, however, violates the norms of English composition writing.

Failure to handle opposing views is also demonstrated by the following awkward expressions which show up again and again:

My opposing point of view...

My opposite view

This may have been encouraged by Garford (1988, pp. 32, 34) who argues that: "since discussion involves two people or more, as the writer, you must be at least two people. Take opposing sides and come to a balanced conclusion at the end." This suggestion is in itself not wrong. Research has shown that we can learn a lot about argumentation from debate if we are exposed to good debating (Sheckels, 1983). The difference is that while with a debate the interaction is face to face and the opposer can present his or her contrary views which are then rebutted by the proposer, in written

argument the writer has to anticipate the possible contrary views which means assuming both the role of the writer and reader. Nevertheless, there are invaluable lessons to be learned from debating. A good debate is substantive and highly organised. It is an intense intellectual activity involving the discovery, arrangement, and stylistically effective presentation of argument. It can provide writing teachers and students with valuable guidance in terms of both structuring and persuasive strategies. This, however, should be done without compromising the conventions of composition writing. Students should be taught good debate and then shown specifically what they can learn about argument from debating and how such strategies can be applied to written argument in ways that are acceptable to that mode.

Conclusion

While Garford's advocacy of the use of the AB AB AB approach in argument writing is well-intended, it unfortunately appears to be causing confusion to student writers. The approach itself, which may work with some topics has to be modified and refined so that it does not cause confusion. As was indicated earlier, there is definitely more than one way of constructing an argument as different topics may require different approaches. Students should perhaps be taught the basic requirements of an argument, for example, that generally an argument consists of claims which are supported by other claims or statements.

Teachers and textbook writers should be careful not to cripple students by giving them the false impression that there is one successful way of structuring an argument. In my view, student writers should be exposed to as many approaches as are available with the hope that they will develop their own creativity and discover other effective structures. In addition to exposing students to a variety of argumentative styles, textbook writers and teachers should systematically guide students on how to produce arguments which stand up to criticism or challenge. For example, students should be taught how to select appropriate information for a particular topic and then shown how to direct that material towards convincing the reader. In order to produce a coherent argument, they should be exposed to a variety of logical

connectors and then taught how to establish these between and within the various stages in the argument. They have to be taught how to specify the grounds on which their conclusions are based as well as to link conditions to their consequences and to set up expectations which are then countered. This is a highly demanding activity and the skills have to be developed over time.

Contrary to current practices therefore, it is my opinion that students should be introduced to argumentation both oral and written in the classroom from an early age. This would enable the education system to produce students who are intellectually alert, students who are able to explore and benefit from what their environment offers them. We would be able to produce academics and professionals who are able to see more than one side to the issues that are of concern to our community. As noted by Katula and Roth (1980, p. 183), "since events which have occurred and policies that must be adopted, fall within the domain of what philosopher Chaim Perelman calls "the credible, the plausible, the probable", decisions about them derive out of a systematic analysis and argumentation of all sides of the issue". It is the responsibility of education systems to prepare students for this challenge.

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