'Argument!' helping students understand what essay writing is about

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A B S T R A C T

Argumentation is a key requirement of the essay, which is the most common genre that students have to write. However, how argumentation is realised in disciplinary writing is often poorly understood by academic tutors, and therefore not adequately taught to students. This paper presents research into undergraduate students' concepts of argument when they arrive at university, difficulties they experience with developing arguments in their essays, and the type and quality of instruction they receive. A three-part definition which describes argumentation by what students need to learn was used as the framework for analysis. The findings show that students have only partial or incorrect concepts of argument. Many problems they encounter are caused by their lack of knowledge of what an argumentative essay requires, particularly of the need to develop their own position in an academic debate. The advice they receive does not make the requirements explicit and refers to argumentation inconsistently and vaguely. An 'essay writing framework', based on the three-part definition, is proposed for improving the teaching of writing. This approach puts argumentation at the centre of instruction and explains other aspects of writing according to the function they have in the development of argument.

1. Introduction

The 'argumentative essay' is the most common genre that undergraduate students have to write (Wu, 2006: 330), particularly in the arts, humanities and social sciences (Hewings, 2010). Although the nature of the essay varies considerably across and even within disciplines, the development of an argument is regarded as a key feature of successful writing by academics across disciplines (Lea & Street, 1998). Nesi and Gardner (2006) found in their survey of assessed writing in 20 disciplines that a commonly recognised value of the essay is its 'ability to display critical thinking and development of an argument within the context of the curriculum' (p. 108). However, many students struggle with argumentation: they are either unaware that they are expected to develop an argument in their essays, or have difficulty in doing so (Bacha, 2010; Davies, 2008), often because they have acquired starkly different concepts of argument at secondary school (Andrews, 1995). At university, they receive little help, as argumentation is not explicitly taught in most undergraduate programmes in the UK (Mitchell & Riddle, 2000). General advice on academic writing is usually provided in writing guidelines presented in course handbooks, and through tutors' feedback on student essays; however, these methods have limitations. Lea and Street (1998) found that students have difficulty in applying general writing guidelines to their particular writing contexts. Tutors' feedback comments are often of the categorical type, such as the imperative 'Argument!' written in the margins of student essays (Lea & Street, 1998; Mutch, 2003). Tutors tend to use this comment vaguely when they feel that the writer has somehow breached the writing conventions expected in the discipline, to indicate 'different deficiencies from reasoning, to referencing to structure and style' (Mitchell & Riddle, 2000: p. 17). It has been claimed that the vague use of the term reflects

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tutors' own uncertainty over the concept of argument (Lea & Street, 1998; Mitchell & Riddle, 2000). It may also reflect a broader uncertainty over the requirements of the essay, of which tutors tend to have only 'tacit' knowledge (Jacobs, 2005: 477).

Much has been written on the rhetorical and linguistic structure of arguments, and on academic writing in general, while less attention has been paid to the teaching and learning of argumentation. This is surprising, given the important role of argument in the academic essay. The research reported in this article investigated learning needs and teaching provision in a case study of first-year undergraduate students in an applied linguistics programme at a British university. In this programme, like in most in that field, the argumentative essay is the main writing and assessment format. The study had the following objectives:

1. To identify the concepts of 'argument' students have when arriving at university.
2. To explore the difficulties students experience with argumentation in academic writing.
3. To discuss the limitations of current instruction and make recommendations for improvements.

In the next sections, concepts and uses of the term argument, as well as issues with learning and teaching argumentation will be explored.

2. Concepts of argument

The term 'argument' is used in different ways in academic discourse, ranging from the philosophical construct of premises and conclusions (Toulmin, 1958) to diverse writing practices (Mitchell et al., 2008). It can refer to individual claims or the whole text. In reference to individual claims, argument means that a proposition is supported by grounds and warrants. As Davies points out, this type of argument requires the ability to make inferences, and can be taught through syllogisms such as 'if Socrates is a man and all men are mortal, then Socrates is mortal' (2008: p. 328). In reference to the whole text, 'argument' is defined by Andrews (1995: p. 3) as 'a process of argumentation, a connected series of statements intended to establish a position and implying response to another (or more than one) position'. Toulmin, Reike, and Janik (1984: p. 14) define argument similarly as 'the sequence of interlinked claims and reasons that, between them, establish content and force of the position for which a particular speaker is arguing'. According to these definitions, the core component of argumentation is clearly the development of a position, which can also be regarded as equivalent to the development of an argument. Another component is the presentation of the position through the logical arrangement of the propositions that build this position, which is mentioned in Andrew's definition as the 'connected series of statements', and in Toulmin et al's as the 'sequence of interlinked claims and reasons'. However, there is a third component which students have to learn in order to write argumentative essays, which is 'to analyse and evaluate content knowledge' (Wu, 2006: 330). This component concerns the selection of relevant information from sources, and its use in the development of the position.

As this study focuses on the teaching and learning of argumentation, these three components, (1) the analysis and evaluation of content knowledge, (2) the writer's development of a position, and (3) the presentation of that position in a coherent manner, will be used as the definition of 'developing an argument' in this paper. The definition is useful from a pedagogic perspective because it describes the abilities writers need to develop in order to be successful in writing argumentative essays (Wu, 2006). As will be shown later, the definition is also helpful for identifying students' learning needs, as well as shortcomings in the teaching of argumentative writing.

Research has shown that many academic teachers and students have fuzzy concepts of argumentation, which may be linked to a fuzzy understanding of what the genre 'essay' entails. As Johns (2008) points out, essay is difficult to define as a genre, because it is used as an umbrella term for various types of discipline-specific writing, and the characteristics of structure, register and argumentation vary greatly across disciplines. It is therefore obvious that the specific requirements of the essay in a given discipline should be explained to students by disciplinary experts. At the same time, the essay has low prestige being a student genre, not one that disciplinary experts have to write. Their understanding of the exact nature of the essay in their discipline may therefore be implicit and vague. Furthermore, what is accepted as a well-formed and valid argument in an essay depends on the discipline's value system and epistemology, and there is great variation across disciplines (Andrews, 2010; Samraj, 2004).

To explore students' and tutors' conceptualisations, Mitchell et al. (2008) interviewed first-year students and tutors in three disciplines. The students had partial understandings of argument, for instance 'a for-and-against structure sandwiched between introduction and conclusion' (p. 235). Tutors were equally uncertain about the concept. When asked how they taught students to argue, they used critique, critical analysis and even opinion as interchangeable terms of explanation. In Lea & Street's (1998) study, academic tutors across a range of disciplines recognised argument as the key element of successful writing, but had difficulty to explain the nature of a well-developed argument. In their feedback to students, they referred to 'what feels like familiar descriptive categories such as "structure and argument", "clarity" and "analysis"' (p. 163). Mitchell and Riddle (2000: p. 17) notice that academics also have weak understanding of related abilities such as 'analysis' and 'evaluation'. Equally vague is tutors' interchangeable use of the term 'argument' in the plural form (e.g. 'you did not back up some of your arguments'), and in the singular form (e.g. 'you failed to provide a coherent argument'). This obscures the fact that it is the development of a position, reflected in 'the large-scale structuration of the essay' (Andrews, 1995: p. 139), rather than the

evidence for individual claims, that determines the quality of an essay. This conceptual uncertainty leads to unhelpful advice and inadequate teaching of argumentation. As Swales (1990: p. 84) argues, students need appropriate content and formal schemata in order to make 'allowable contributions' to a genre. The formal schemata concern the rhetorical elements of the genre, such as structure, style, and register, and are needed for the appropriate presentation of the writer's position (Component 3 of the definition). As these schemata were formed by previously encountered texts, Students new to university will have schemata of previously encountered texts, i.e. essays they had to write at school, which may need to be adjusted for the genres required at university.

3. Learning argumentation

School essays are often confined to relatively simple argumentative structures (Andrews, 1995). A typical essay in humanities subjects requires that the writer states a claim on a controversial issue and supports this claim by evidence in order to convince the audience (Wood, 2001). This genre often takes the format of the 'five paragraph' essay which consists of the introduction of the topic, the statement of a claim, three supporting paragraphs for the claim and a concluding paragraph (Bacha, 2010). In contrast to school writing which tends to invite the statement of the author's personal opinion, academic writing requires the presentation of a considered opinion, based on the careful analysis of various and conflicting sources (Andrews, 1995). Furthermore, writing at university is seldom about making one claim, and therefore requires structures that can support more complex ideas. Therefore, students new to university have to adjust previously learnt formal schemata such as structure and register.

The three components of developing an argument, used as the definition in this paper, pose considerable difficulties for the novice writer. Analysing and evaluating content knowledge presupposes a certain level of subject knowledge which would enable students to distinguish relevant from irrelevant information in the literature. Due to their lack of subject knowledge, however, many students struggle to identify conflicting points of view in the literature (Andrews, 1995). The second element, establishing a position, requires expressing a 'voice' and a 'stance' (Street, 2009) in an academic debate conducted by experts, and achieving a 'workable balance between self and sources' (Groom, 2000: p. 65). 'Voice' and 'stance' are among the 'hidden features' of academic writing described by Street (2009), which have much impact on the success of writing, but are rarely made explicit to students. The difficulties these requirements pose for the novice writer have been widely discussed (e.g. Ivanic, 1998; Lillis, 2001). Groom (2000) describes three patterns of difficulty. The first, called 'solipsistic voice', means that students express their own experiences and opinions without reference to the literature. The second, the 'unaverred voice' refers to students who offer 'a patchwork of summaries of other authors views' (p. 67) without making own claims. The reason for this rather typical pattern is students' lack of confidence in taking a stance in relation to published authors. Essays that present the unaverred voice are usually accused of lacking criticality. The third pattern is the 'unattributed voice'; here students make propositions sound as if they were their own idea when in fact they were taken from another source.

The third component of developing an argument, the presentation of the writer's position in a coherent manner, involves the 'arrangement and re-arrangement' of propositions at the macro level (Andrews, 1995; p.29) so that the development of the position is reflected in a logical text structure. According to Andrews, this component is not addressed in most study guides and textbooks. It requires an adjustment of the formal schema of structure which is difficult for students who have so far only learnt to support one claim in a simple formulaic structure.

4. Teaching argumentation

The importance of making argumentation 'the focus of deliberate educational practices' has been repeatedly stressed (e.g. Davies, 2008: p. 327; Mitchell & Riddle, 2000); however, this is not part of the teaching provision in undergraduate programmes at British universities, where argument is in some cases taught generically on Critical Thinking courses. Nevertheless, as Mitchell and Riddle (2000: p. 27) assert, argument cannot be modelled and transferred from one context to another, because the genre 'argumentative essay' and therefore the nature of argumentation are highly discipline-specific, and should therefore be taught by 'mainstream teaching staff' (Mitchell & Riddle, 2000: p.18). By contrast, Davies (2008) proposes the teaching of argument through syllogisms and claims that the skill of logical inference-making can be learnt outside the discipline. This approach is based on the Toulmin model which describes argument by the units of claim, grounds, warrant and backing (Toulmin et al., 1984). Mitchell and Riddle (2000) used the Toulmin approach for teaching argument in various disciplines, after having simplified its terminology from 'claim, grounds and warrant' to 'then, since, because'.

The Toulmin model is also followed in some study guides (e.g. Fairbairn & Winch, 1996); however, it seems that it renders itself more easily to the analysis and construction of single claims and is less helpful at the macro level. Although Mitchell and Riddle (2000) claim that the model can be applied to longer texts, there is no evidence of how this would work. Therefore, it seems that if the Toulmin model is used in the teaching of argumentation, it needs to be combined with methods that address the large-scale structure or macro level of the essay. Indeed, most authors who advocate the Toulmin model also recommend additional procedures to address the macro level. Mitchell & Riddle suggest a four-stage procedure concerned with the overall text organisation; similarly, Bacha (2010) used the Toulmin model in combination with organisational plans adapted from Reid (1988). Davies (2008) also proposes a six-step procedure for planning and developing the whole essay, and only in step 5 is the syllogistic argument form used 'to guide the connection between premises and conclusions' (Davies, 2008: p. 336).

Textbooks, writing guidelines in programme handbooks and lecturers' feedback comments are traditional modes of academic literacy support. However, most study guides and writing textbooks do not explicitly deal with argument (Andrews, 2010), which subsequently remains 'a conceptually undefined adjunct to other issues' (Groom, 2000: p. 71). The limited advice available focuses predominantly on linguistic features and neglects the rhetorical function of argument in the process of disciplinary knowledge construction (Groom, 2000). Furthermore, it *tells* students that they must develop an argument when 'what struggling students are looking for is something that will *show* them what these things mean, how they work, and what they look like in and as text' (Groom, 2000: p. 70; italics in original text).

Feedback comments are a 'key factor in learning to write' (Hyland & Hyland, 2006: 206), and could be a particularly effective method of giving individual and specific guidance for the improvement of argumentation. However, this opportunity is often missed because feedback is expressed in a way that students do not understand (Walker, 2009), or in the form of 'categorical modality' (Lea & Street, 1998: p. 169), i.e. in imperatives and with exclamation marks. Mutch (2003: p. 31) found that 75% of feedback in his study was categorical. This form of feedback may be especially common in relation to argument due to teachers' uncertainty over the term.

The following sections present the case study of the learning and teaching of argumentation in an undergraduate applied linguistics programme.

5. Methods

The study was carried out with first-year undergraduate students. To identify students' understanding of the concept of 'argument' when they arrive at university (objective 1), two cohorts (2009 and 2010) with a total of 117 students were given an Academic Writing Questionnaire in Induction Week. In addition to close-response items to elicit information on students' background, there were various open-ended questions which sought in-depth information on their previous writing experience, the instruction they had received at school and their expectations of writing requirements at university. One open-ended question asked directly 'What is an argument in academic writing'?

Students' difficulties with argumentation (objective 2) were investigated through the analyses of (a) tutor comments on student essays and (b) student diaries. Tutor comments were chosen over the direct analysis of student texts in order to capture the assessment of several tutors. The analysis included 60 essays from three different first-year modules with comments from five tutors teaching on these modules. 40 essays in the sample were from students who had received low grades, while the other 20 were from high achieving students. The analysis focused on the comment sheets, e.g. the summary of strengths and weaknesses that tutors produce for each assignment. Occasionally, the comments written by tutors in the margins and text passages from essays were considered for further information.

As part of a wider investigation into novice writers' difficulties with academic writing, students had been invited to keep a diary while writing an essay. Eight students volunteered to participate. Their brief was to keep a record of the process of writing the assignment; there was no specific focus on argument. The diary entries covered the 4 week period when the eight participants were writing their first graded assignment. This period was chosen because the students had recently received detailed written feedback on a formative assignment, and it could therefore be assumed that they had some awareness of the importance of argument in academic writing. For this study, the diary entries were analysed for statements relating to problems with argument.

To assess current forms of writing instruction and their potential limitations (objective 3,) the writing guidelines in the Student Handbook and the tutor comments on the 60 essays were analysed for the ways in which they referred to the development of argument.

6. Findings and discussion

6.1. Students' concepts of 'argument'

From the questionnaire that was administered to two cohorts of first-year students, the answers to the open-ended question 'What is an argument in academic writing' in the Academic Writing Questionnaire were grouped into eight categories.

101 of 117 respondents had answered the question, and many answers included more than one aspect of argument. Therefore, the numbers provided for the eight categories derived from the coding do not add up to 101. The eight categories are listed in Table 1 according to the frequency of mentions.

It is noticeable that the majority of students did not mention key aspects of argumentation as defined in this paper. There seems to be little awareness of the need to evaluate and analyse sources: less than half of the respondents mentioned the need for evidence, and only eight the need for analysis. A relatively large number of students disclosed schemata which are in conflict with the target genre, for instance the 34 students who described argument as 'stating your personal opinion' (Cat.3). The following answer gives an example of this understanding:

'I believe argument in academic writing is when you strongly believe in a view and state why you believe so'.

Table 1
Students' understanding of argument.

Category	Frequency
1. Argument requires providing evidence	48
2. Argument has two sides	39
3. Argument means stating your personal opinion	34
4. Argument means 'persuasion'	17
5. Argument has more than two sides	15
6. Argument needs a proper conclusion	10
7. Argument requires analysis	8
8. Argument involves structure of whole essay	7

Several respondents in this category had explained in another open-ended question that stating and defending one's opinion had been required in their secondary school essays. Some school genres obviously encourage students to form an opinion first, and then persuade the reader of their stance (see Cat. 4).

A narrow concept of argument is reflected in the 39 statements in Category 2, 'Argument has two sides'. This concept seems to stem from the typical 'thesis-antithesis-synthesis' essay that is, as some respondents reported, required at school. The next statement shows how this concept leads to an inappropriate schema concerning structure:

> 'You would structure it so you had a couple of paragraphs on reasons for, and a couple for against, and then summarise, and ultimately come to your own opinion at the end'.

Only a minority of the respondents understood argument as involving multiple views (Cat. 5), or as being reflected in the large-scale structure of the text. Only ten students recognised that 'Argument needs a proper conclusion' (Cat. 6) and seven stated that 'Argument involves structure of whole essay' (Cat. 8).

The student answers revealed that many had concepts of argument that were either partial, or too narrow, or inappropriate for the genre 'essay' as required at university. This finding shows the need to teach the formal schemata of essay writing early on in the university programme, and to eradicate some misconceptions from students' previous writing experience.

6.2. Students' difficulties with argumentation

6.2.1. Tutor comments

In the comment sheets of the 40 low achieving essays, 78 comments concerned with argumentation were found; all of them addressed some deficiency. In the comment sheets of the 20 high achieving essays there were 34 comments concerned with argumentation; apart from eight, these comments were positive. The terms 'argument', 'arguments' and 'argumentation' were explicitly mentioned in 62% of the 112 comments. The comments in which the terms were not explicitly mentioned referred to closely related concepts such as critical analysis or evidence, for example:

> 'Essay displays very little criticality.'
> 'You make high inference claims which you cannot back up with evidence.'

The comments were grouped into the categories shown in Table 2.

6.2.2. Student diaries

The analysis of the diary entries produced five themes concerned with argumentation which are listed in Table 3, in order of the frequency of mentions in the diaries.

The tutor comments and the themes emerging from the student diaries are discussed according to the three components of argumentation as defined in this paper. The tutor comments are discussed first, followed by the related theme from the student diaries.

Table 2
Tutor comments concerning argumentation.

Low achieving essays (N = 40)	High achieving essays (N = 20)
1. Lack of structure (38) 95%	1. Good use of sources (14) 70%
2. Lack of criticality/analysis (14) 35%	2. Lack of structure (8) 40%
3. Lack of evidence (12) 30%	3. Conclusion soundly based on previous argument (6) 30%
4. Unrelated conclusion (8) 20%	4. Sound arguments (6) 30%
5. Unrelated information (6) 15%	

Table 3
Themes concerning argumentation in student diaries.

1. Use of sources (10 mentions)
2. Writing the Conclusion (7 mentions)
3. Structure (6 mentions)
4. Who am I? (6 mentions)
5. Demonstrating knowledge (3 mentions)

6.2.2.1. Analysing and evaluating content knowledge. The tutor comments in Categories 2, 3, and 5 on low achieving essays relate to various types of ineffective selection and use of information from sources.

6.2.2.1.1. Category 2: lack of criticality/analysis. Fourteen comments on low achieving essays accuse the writers of lacking criticality or analysis, which is in all cases related to ineffective use of sources, for example:

> 'Your essay lacks criticality. You provide lengthy reports of the literature without discussion'.
> 'You need to discuss ideas instead of reproducing them from the sources. There is no analysis'.

This problem, which was described by Groom (2000: p. 67) as the 'unaverred voice', refers to students' inability to use information from the literature for a purpose, e.g. for supporting claims and for developing their own position. Corresponding comments on the high achieving essays (Cat. 1: 'Good use of sources') praise the writers for the 'good evaluation and discussion of ideas from source material' and the way in which sources were 'effectively synthesised into a coherent argument'.

Selecting relevant information from the literature is clearly a concern to students; the issue was mentioned, sometimes repeatedly, in seven diaries, and presented as a difficulty in five (Theme 1/Table 3). The following entry illustrates problems with purposeful reading and note-taking:

> 'Made tons of notes. I typed all the notes on a word document and totalled 11 pages, which stressed me terribly. I get a feeling that I am going off the topic'.

There is, however, also evidence of focused reading in one diary:

> 'I think the arguments given by xxx could be used for my view'.

These examples show the close relationship between positioning and the effective use of sources. Students who have already a 'view' are likely to be more selective and purposeful in their use of information.

6.2.2.1.2. Category 3: lack of evidence. This category concerns students' failure to use sources for evidence to support their claims. In twelve of the forty low achieving essays the repeated instances of un-evidenced statements prompted the tutor to mention the lack of evidence in the comment sheets. Further comments, typically expressed in the single-word questions 'Evidence?' or 'Source?', could be found in the margins of these essays. They often referred to statements of the writer's opinion, i.e. the 'solipsistic voice' (Groom, 2000: p. 66). The opinions tended to be popular assumptions and personal beliefs, such as 'Politics is associated with the rich and powerful and to be frank politicians usually are'.

No reference to providing evidence was made in the student diaries.

6.2.2.1.3. Category 5: unrelated information. In this category which is closely related to Category 2, tutor comments referred to information which 'does not relate to the essay question', or 'does not fit the argument'. A closer look at the six student texts in this category revealed the writers' tendency to display knowledge by presenting a breadth of often irrelevant information. Three entries in the student diaries (Theme 5/Table 3) reveal that they want to demonstrate how much they have read, as the following example shows:

> 'Now I've read all the books and I'm confused because there is much overlapping and I'm not sure what opinions are better. I am going to list all of them, because I want to show the work I've done'.

The problem of unrelated information shows novice writers' struggle with critical and selective reading (discussed in Cat. 2), as well as their misconceptions over the type of knowledge to be presented in academic essays.

6.2.2.2. Writer's development of a position. As was argued earlier, the writer's development of their own position is the core element of argumentation. It is therefore surprising that position was not explicitly mentioned in any of the tutor comments. The absence of comments may give the impression that the students in this study had no problems with positioning. However, a closer inspection of the students' texts revealed that most of the 40 low achieving writers had not developed a position, rather they had presented lists of facts from the literature, or stated their personal opinions. This failure was always accompanied by shortcomings in the other two components of argumentation. Either the students had used sources in inappropriate ways, or they had failed to present their propositions in a logical structure, or both. In all these cases, the tutor comments always referred to one or both of the other two components, whilst the issue of positioning was not mentioned. Some comments, however, imply this requirement, for example:

> You need to try to organise your ideas better, based on authoritative sources but with your own discussion and arguments (Cat. 1/Table 2).

The need for positioning is hidden in the vaguer terms 'own discussion and arguments'. The use of the plural form 'arguments' may also obscure the requirement to develop an own position, i.e. 'an argument'.

The tutor comments in Category 4, 'Unrelated conclusion', also relate implicitly to students' failure to develop a position. Although the comments refer to some deficiency with the conclusion, they do not mention that this is the place where the writer's position should be clearly stated, or summarised. Instead, the focus is on structure or coherence, as the following example shows:

> 'Your essay looks like a list of seemingly unrelated points, without progressing towards a meaningful conclusion'.

If students knew the role of the conclusion in positioning (assuming that they knew the requirement of positioning in the first place), they might understand what is meant by 'meaningful conclusion'.

In the student diaries, the difficulty of positioning becomes apparent in Themes 2 and 4 (Table 3). Theme 2 links directly to the previous point, i.e. that students do not understand the role of the conclusion. This is obvious in the following entries:

> 'I wrote the big section today, so only the conclusion is left. I am not so worried about it, because it's small'.
> 'I managed to write the conclusion this morning [submission date], and I rushed it and wrote some minor facts about xxx. I thought at the end, this is not the right conclusion for the essay, it doesn't sound right at all. But the conclusion was only 300 words, so hoping I will not get marked down for 300 words out of 4000'.

Theme 4 reflects students' feelings of insecurity and inferiority in face of published sources which make it difficult for them to take a position in an academic debate. One factor causing these feelings is the abundance of available information. This problem emerges in several diary entries, for instance:

> 'It is impossible to write anything that is actually yours'.
> 'What is there left for me to say'?

The various and conflicting viewpoints encountered in the literature also create problems with positioning:

> 'Every time I think I've found a point to agree with, another point comes up which I find convincing, too, and soon I don't know which side I am supposed to be on'.

Another factor affecting positioning is students' awe of published propositions and their feeling that they are too inferior to be critical. This is expressed in the following statement:

> 'In the exploratory [essay, i.e. the formative assignment] he accused me of not being critical. How can I criticize xxx [a widely published author]? I know so little, I have to accept what he says'.

This entry shows a common misconception of criticality. It was shown earlier that in all cases when tutors commented on lack of criticality, students had failed to select and use sources effectively; however, that criticality implies the purposeful selection and use of sources obviously needs to be communicated to students.

6.2.2.3. Presentation of position in a coherent manner. Lack of structure received by far the most tutor comments. All but two of the low achieving essays (95%) were criticized for being badly or not at all structured, and even forty percent of the high achieving essays received comments of this type (Table 2). The comments remarked that ideas were not organized in a logical line of argument; several times the argument was called 'jumpy'. In 21 cases, the writers were accused of having failed to develop an argument because of the lack of structure and organization, for instance:

> 'Your arguments tend to get 'buried' in the rather shapeless text structure.'
> 'You have kicked the topic around and then have written a conclusion which is not strongly connected to this.'

The eight writers in the high achieving group who had received a comment on structure were told that their argument –although coherently developed- was difficult to follow, as the next comment shows:

> 'You develop your argument in a clear, logical manner – the reader would recognise that more easily if you used headings.'

Most comments in this category recommended the use of headings, and/or of an outline in the introduction of the essay. Whilst such use of signposting would require only simple adjustments of students' formal schemata, the problem with structure goes deeper and is closely linked to positioning. The eight high achieving students in this category had managed to develop a clear position despite the lack of structural features. By contrast, a closer look at the low achieving essays showed that the writers' inability to position themselves resulted in an unstructured, 'jumpy' text.

The difficulty of structuring the essay was also mentioned in six diary entries (Table 3). These entries show that this difficulty is closely related to the failure to select and evaluate information; students who had gathered too much and often irrelevant information could not fit this information into a coherent text. This came across in the diary entries, for instance:

'I have all the information about around 20 theories and approaches, and what I am missing is a structure by which those are to be presented. I was keen on discussing them rather than simply presenting one by one without a link'.

The students' difficulties with argumentation discussed in the previous sections may reveal nothing surprising to academic tutors who regularly assess student writing. However, the three-part definition of developing an argument which was used as the framework of analysis offers a new perspective. Because argumentation is defined by what students need to learn, the analysis of students' difficulties highlights certain shortcomings in writing instruction that might not have been obvious otherwise. This is particularly true for tutors' comments – or lack of comments - concerning positioning.

7. Limitations in teaching argumentation

The students in this study receive general academic writing support only through two pages of writing guidelines in the Student Handbook, and through tutor feedback. There is no specific focus on argumentation.

Some shortcomings in the tutor feedback have already been mentioned in the previous sections. The examination of both tutor comments and the writing guidelines revealed two main limitations. The first is vague labelling which obscures the general requirements of the genre 'essay' in this discipline, and that of developing an argument in particular. One example is the use of the terms 'criticality' and 'analysis', concepts which may have little meaning for many novice writers. The two terms were often used by tutors in relation to the selection and use of sources. Most of these comments explained further that ideas have to be 'discussed' rather than reported.

In the writing guidelines, the following advice on the use of sources can be found:

You will be expected to approach critically the ideas about which you have read.
Review your reading in the area and evaluate the ideas you have met.
When reviewing relevant literature it is important not just to reproduce the ideas and frameworks from the sources.

The problem with this advice is that unknown concepts are used to explain unknown concepts, and different labels are used for the same concepts (critically approach/evaluate). How 'criticality', 'analysis' and 'discussion' relate to 'argument' remains unexplained, and the term argument is used inconsistently. Whilst several tutor comments referred to the need to develop 'an argument', the term appears only once in the writing guidelines, in the plural form ('present your own arguments'). Tutors sometimes used the term to refer to both individual claims and the overall essay structure within the same set of comments, or even within one comment. Unclear labelling occurs also over the term 'position', as will be shown next. This vague and inconsistent advice offered to students is in line with Lea & Street's (1998) and Mitchell & Riddle's (2000) findings.

The second limitation is that both tutor feedback and writing guidelines do not address argumentation as the central requirement of academic writing. The writing guidelines advise on the structure and different parts of the essay, as well as on some aspects of style and presentation. What students need to learn in order to develop an argument is hidden in comments on related features such as the use of sources or structure. For instance, the failure to develop an argument was mentioned in 16 comments on low achieving essays; however, the key aspect of argument, i.e. that the writer needs to establish a position, was not mentioned anywhere. By contrast, the writing guidelines point out the need to reach a 'final position' (see extract below), but not that of developing an argument. Another example is the advice on conclusions. As discussed earlier, repeated comments were made by tutors on unrelated conclusions, without clarifying the important role of the conclusion in positioning. In the writing guidelines, on the other hand, positioning is mentioned only in relation to the conclusion; here, the impression is given to students that positioning takes place only in the conclusion:

It is very important that you reach your own conclusion based on the evidence you have presented earlier. The main purpose of the conclusion is to reach a final position in your essay.

The vague and inconsistent instruction on writing shown in this study is in line with what other studies (e.g. Lea & Street, 1998) have shown, namely that tutors have no sufficient knowledge of the characteristics and requirements of the genre 'essay' to adequately support the students who have to write it.

8. Improving the teaching of argumentation

It was discussed earlier that the quality of the academic essay depends on the development of an argument. It is therefore problematic when writing instruction is not focused on argumentation, but refers to it fleetingly, inconsistently, and under the guise of related aspects, such as structure or style.

Currently, the teaching of writing tends to focus on linguistic or 'surface' features (Lea & Street, 1998) without making explicit that developing an argument is the overarching requirement. Instead, academic writing instruction should start from this requirement and treat related aspects as subordinated. The 'essay writing framework' presented in Fig. 1 shows how this can be illustrated to students. There, the bold print in the middle text box is used to show that establishing an own position is the core of argumentation in essay writing, or indeed equivalent to developing an argument. However, the figure also illustrates that this core element is closely interlinked with, and dependent on, the other two components.
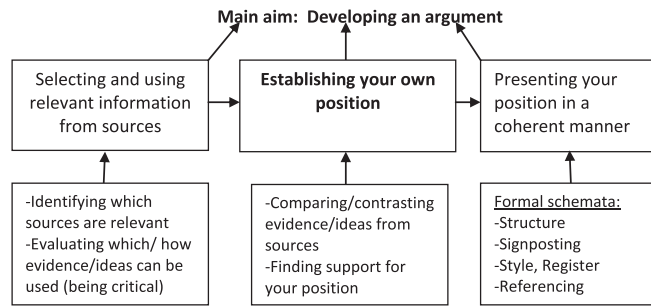
Main aim: Developing an argument

Selecting and using relevant information from sources	**Establishing your own position**	Presenting your position in a coherent manner
-Identifying which sources are relevant -Evaluating which/ how evidence/ideas can be used (being critical)	-Comparing/contrasting evidence/ideas from sources -Finding support for your position	Formal schemata: -Structure -Signposting -Style, Register -Referencing

Fig. 1. Essay writing framework.

Once novice writers have understood that developing an argument is the overarching aim of essay writing, and that three components are involved, other features of academic writing can be referred to in their contributing role to the overarching aim. Some of these features are presented in the lower row of boxes in the framework.

One example for the proposed approach is the teaching of 'structure'. This aspect was most criticized in the tutors' comments, but the relationship between structure and positioning was not explained. In the writing guidelines, the advice on structure also neglects positioning; instead the parts of an essay and their contents are explained:

> The main body will consist of different stages or sub-topics in a logical sequence. It may be organised in different ways. It may, for example, contain a background section and discussion section.

In the proposed writing instruction, the guidelines on structure would be rephrased to highlight that the structure serves the presentation of the position:

> The structure of the essay should reflect how you developed your **position**. ….. In the main body, discuss different viewpoints (compare, contrast), and explain **why you are taking your position**. In the conclusion, briefly summarise the previous discussion and **state your position clearly again**.

Using the essay writing framework as a basis for writing instruction would ensure a commonly understood terminology. Tutors could phrase comments more precisely by referring to the three components and highlight how particular deficiencies in students' essays hinder the development of argument. For instance, the previously cited comment 'Your essay lacks criticality. You provide lengthy reports of the literature without discussion' could be replaced by a more meaningful comment that would highlight which information is irrelevant to the development of the writer's position and why it is irrelevant.

The proposed framework for teaching academic writing on the basis of argumentation addresses the macro level. The macro level is not addressed in most writing guides (Andrews, 1995), although it reflects the development of the position and thus determines the quality of the essay. The Toulmin model is not easily applicable to the large-scale structure and therefore, as mentioned earlier, not useful as the main method of teaching argumentation. It can be used in a supporting role for teaching the component 'Presenting your position in a coherent manner', where it can help students to check the soundness of the claims they used to develop their argument.

The 'essay writing framework' helps to organize writing instruction in a way that enables students to fully understand the requirements of the genre. No claim is made that the framework can help with the complex aspects that appear in the lower row of boxes of the framework, such as evaluating sources or comparing evidence. These, being topic-dependent, require, as Groom (2000: p. 70) has argued, showing rather than telling. This can be done by using student texts as exemplars, and by demonstrating how these aspects are manifested in real texts. Exemplar student texts provide a realistic picture of the expected standards, and they can be presented in individual passages to show how the development of argument is reflected in the specific parts of the essay, for instance the conclusion. The abilities and formal schemata related to the three components of argumentation can be illustrated through a commentary, either provided by tutors in teaching sessions or in a separate column in independent learning materials. An example of the commentary on the introduction of a student essay is given in the Appendix.

9. Conclusion

The research presented in this paper provides further evidence for the need to teach argumentation explicitly to students. It revealed that students come to university with partial or incorrect concepts of argument and with formal schemata that do not help them to write appropriately in the expected genre. The instruction they receive at university addresses argumentation inconsistently and insufficiently. The fact that argumentation is a key requirement of essay writing is obscured through the use of vague language and an emphasis on surface features. It has therefore been argued that the teaching of writing should have the development of argument as its starting and central point. An 'essay writing framework' has been proposed

that highlights the development of argument as the overarching aim of essay writing and makes explicit how other features such as structure or style contribute to this goal. The framework is based on the definition of argumentation by the three components or abilities needed to develop an argument.

The proposed approach of teaching writing from the perspective of argumentation now needs to be tested and evaluated in order to show that it improves students' understanding of the concept and their writing of essays.

Appendix. Teaching argumentation with exemplar student texts

Below is the Introduction and headings of an essay written by a first-year student. Please find some comments in the right column.

Essay title: Are humans the only species that can possess language	[1] Reference to relevant literature on the topic
Introduction	[2] Introduces debate on the topic
'Language' is often considered the trait that defines 'humans', being significantly different to animal communication methods (Trask, 2004) [1], and having remarkable complexity to the mechanisms behind it. However, research has begun to study whether some animals –non-human primates- are able to acquire human language. Reports have caused argument and generated much thought, and the debate is still ongoing. [2] In what follows, I will discuss what 'possessing language' means, explore the research that has been conducted with apes, and come to a conclusion about the possibility of language possession by apes, or whether 'language' is a uniquely human feature. [3]	[3] Provides outline of essay – good signposting!
What is meant by 'possessing language?	[4] Headings and outline [3] give direction for reader and show how the argument is developed.
How animal communication compares	
To what extent can apes possess language?	
Conclusion [4]	

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