

# The Role of Genre-Based Activities in the Writing of Argumentative Essays in EFL

El papel de actividades basadas en géneros en la escritura de ensayos argumentativos en inglés como lengua extranjera

**Pedro Antonio Chala Bejarano\***

Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Colombia

**Claudia Marcela Chapetón\*\***

Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, Colombia

This article presents the findings of an action research project conducted with a group of pre-service teachers of a program in modern languages at a Colombian university. The study intended to go beyond an emphasis on linguistic and textual features in English as a foreign language argumentative essays by using a set of genre-based activities and the understanding of writing as a situated social practice. Data were gathered through questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, class recordings, and students' artifacts. The results showed that genre-based activities supported the participants throughout the experience and boosted their confidence, resulting in a positive attitude towards essay writing. The study highlights the importance of dialogic interaction to provide scaffolding opportunities, of understanding writing as a process, and of the use of samples and explicit instruction to facilitate writing.

*Key words:* Argumentative essay writing, genre-based teaching, scaffolding, situated social practice.

Este artículo presenta los hallazgos de una investigación-acción realizada con un grupo de estudiantes de la licenciatura en Lenguas Modernas de una universidad colombiana. El estudio buscaba ir más allá del énfasis en las características lingüísticas y textuales en la escritura de ensayos argumentativos en inglés como lengua extranjera, mediante un conjunto de actividades basadas en géneros y comprendiendo la escritura como una práctica social situada. Los datos se obtuvieron a través de cuestionarios, entrevistas semiestructuradas, grabaciones de clase y artefactos de los estudiantes. Los resultados muestran que las actividades basadas en la enseñanza de géneros proporcionan apoyo a los participantes durante la experiencia investigativa y aumentan su confianza y actitud positiva hacia la escritura de ensayos. El estudio resalta la importancia de la interacción dialógica para ofrecer oportunidades de andamiaje, la escritura como proceso y el uso de muestras e instrucción explícita para facilitar la escritura.

*Palabras clave:* andamiaje, enseñanza basada en géneros, escritura de ensayos argumentativos, práctica social situada.

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\* E-mail: pchala@javeriana.edu.co

\*\* E-mail: cchapeton@pedagogica.edu.co

This article was received on February 1, 2013, and accepted on July 27, 2013.

## Introduction

Today, due to its importance as an international language, the presence of English in educational settings is paramount. Institutions, then, encourage the development of students' abilities to communicate in the foreign language and writing is, of course, a skill to be included. However, writing is not always approached from a communicative perspective, and linguistic and textual emphases are fostered instead. On the other hand, essay production is widely used (Lillis, 2001) but not very often seen from a social and situated perspective that makes writing a meaningful and purposeful activity.

This research project emerged from a necessity to foster transformation in writing practices, which privileged a product over a process view of writing and allowed little opportunity for students to express their voices in a meaningful way. The study attempted to approach EFL argumentative essay writing from a perspective that influenced literacy practices worldwide: writing as a situated social practice. To complement this understanding of writing, a genre-based perspective was adopted as the pedagogical approach to frame the experience. Although these two perspectives have been central in research, they have not been openly used together to approach student writing of argumentative essays. The main objective of this study was to explore and describe the role that a set of genre-based activities may have on argumentative essay writing with a group of high intermediate students of English in the Bachelor of Arts in Modern Languages program at a private university in Bogotá.

The research question guiding this study was: What is the role of a set of genre-based activities in the creation of argumentative essays by high intermediate students of English in the BEI in Modern Languages program when writing is understood as a situated social practice?

## Literature Review

Keeping in mind the importance of *dialogic interaction* and *scaffolding* (Bruner & Sherwood, 1975; Vygotsky, 1978), we feel this study conceives students as subjects of their learning and fosters their individualities and *deliberation* processes (Grundy, 1987). Language is understood here as a situated action that embeds and manifests different forms of knowledge, beliefs, and ways to refer to the world. The three main constructs that support this study are Genre-Based Writing, Argumentative Essay Writing, and Writing as a Situated Social Practice. These are explained in the following sections.<sup>1</sup>

### Genre-Based Writing

This study considers Hyland's (2004) view that "genre-based teaching is concerned with what learners do when they write" (p. 5), which emphasises the importance of the situated context where writing occurs and further considers this practice as communication. Two characteristics of genre-based writing activities are considered: First is Hyland's (2004) concept of *modelling*, which aids students to explore the genre and understand features such as rhetorical structures or *frames* (Hyland, 2004) and *formulaic sequences* (Morrison, 2010). Second is Bastian's (2010) *explicit teaching of genre*, which promotes awareness of genre conventions as well as reflection on its purposes and uses. Genre is considered as *situated social action*; this perspective accounts for a social dimension of communication and acknowledges the relationship between the genres and their social context, students' *voice-as-experience* (Lillis, 2001), and the collaboration and scaffolding (Bruner & Sherwood, 1975) provided by skilled writers to struggling peers (Lin, Monroe, & Troia, 2007).

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<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive account of the constructs and literature review, see Chala and Chapetón (2012) and Chala (2011).

Two research studies on genre-based teaching can be mentioned. Morrison (2010) designed and implemented a short distance writing course at an organisation in Tokyo. It was an effort to improve the students' writing skills by preparing them for the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) exam through the use of a genre-based pedagogy to second language writing. The study provides interesting information regarding multiple drafting and feedback to provide scaffolding and to foster a transformative writing process. Finally, Chaisiri (2010) conducted a study in different universities in Thailand. It consisted of two phases: The first one investigated how teachers perceived their approaches to teaching writing and the second phase was an action research study, intending to find the role of genre-based activities in a writing classroom. This study provides significant theoretical and practical insights on how to use a genre-based perspective in an action research study.

### Argumentative Essay Writing

Argumentative essay writing is understood here as a dynamic literacy practice where the author establishes a dialogic relationship with an audience defending a point of view and looking to convince, get an adhesion, or persuade (Álvarez, 2001). As dialogue between interlocutors (Ramírez, 2007) emerges through argumentative essay writing, this practice goes beyond a linguistic perspective to become social action. In this dialogue, the writer communicates with a reader and shapes his/her discourse according to the relationship that is established between them: power, contact, and emotion (Goatly, 2000).

Three articles illustrate previous research connected to argumentative essay writing. Nanwani (2009) analysed the linguistic challenges lived by a group of students at a private university in Bogotá in the development of academic literacy. In his

study, the author provides insights to reflect on the challenges of writing academic texts. He also hints at a transformative view of this practice and suggests that students' backgrounds should be considered. Zúñiga and Macías (2006) conducted a study to help advanced English students of the undergraduate Foreign Language Teaching Program at Universidad Surcolombiana to refine their academic writing skills. This study draws attention to the importance of instruction, peer feedback, inclusion of sample papers, and the possibility to publish students' texts to foster their motivation. Finally, Street (2003) explored where writing attitudes originate and how they influence practice. Participants of this study were undergraduate students in a teacher education programme in Texas. The study sheds light on the positive and negative experiences in the process of writing, and it highlights the importance of the writing process and the product in the development of students' attitudes, as well as the consideration of their identity.

### Writing as a Situated Social Practice

Writing practices are situated and social as they occur within specific contexts, at specific moments, and serve the specific needs of communication, learning, and expression (Ramírez, 2007). In this sense, writing and the writer participate in discourses (Gee, 2008), ideologies, and institutional practices, as well as establish a dialogic connection with the world and the powers that surround them. At the same time, writers not only imbue their texts with their inherent characteristics such as gender or race, but also include their *voice as experience*: their beliefs, experiences, and feelings that have been built and moulded through social contact (Lillis, 2001). It is then understood that writing implies more than the development of a technical skill. According to Baynham (1995), writing can be approached via considering the subjectivity

of the writer, the writing process, the purpose and audience, the text as a product, the power of the genre, and the source or legitimacy of that power.

Although little research has been conducted which considers writing as a situated social practice, two research studies related to this construct are worth mentioning here. One was conducted by Correa (2010) in a general studies programme in a public school in Massachusetts. It examined the challenges that a mature ESL student and her teachers faced with regard to the construction of literacy and voice in writing. This study is important as Correa seems to call for a need to go beyond a technical view of writing and to stop considering that writing is “applicable across context, purpose, and audience” (p. 92). On the other hand, Ariza (2005) conducted action research with a group of ninth-graders in a public school in Bogotá. She investigated how teachers of English can guide their students to develop their written communicative competence based on White and Arndt’s (1991) process-oriented approach to writing. Even though Ariza’s study does not explicitly take writing as a situated social practice, it does show the implementation of a project where writing was approached as a process, not as a product.

### Research Design

This qualitative action research study looked to gather holistic insights by analysing what happened in the classroom setting (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). Action research was valuable to reflect on the pedagogical practice and find insights that contributed to its improvement (Sagor, 2000; Sandin, 2003). The action-research process followed in the study was composed of four stages, as proposed by Sagor (2005). However, keeping in mind Burns’ (2003) claim for flexibility in action research, the stages were dynamic, allowing for changes within our own interpretation of the research process.

The stages were developed in each cycle of the pedagogical intervention that was designed. The first stage was *clarifying vision and targets*. Careful thinking about the classes, the activities, and the outcomes of teaching and learning were important to come up with insights to approach writing in a different way. Research questions associated with the main goal of the study were raised here. In the second stage, *articulating theory*, an informed rationale was built to back up pedagogical intervention. Important outcomes of this phase were an instructional design to be implemented and a data collection plan in order to gather insights related to the research question. The third stage was *implementing action and collecting data*. Following Sagor (2005), this was the moment in which the instructional design was put into practice and data were collected to get insights about the pedagogical intervention. The final stage was *reflecting and planning informed action*. Data collected in each cycle of the instructional design were used in order to reflect upon the implementation of the activities and to plan further action for the subsequent cycle.

### Context and Participants of the Study

This study was conducted at Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, in Bogotá, specifically in the BED in the Teaching of Modern Languages programme. The participants (aged 17 to 23) included two male and thirteen female students. They were enrolled in the high intermediate level, a course taken in sixth semester. At the time this study was conducted, the course was divided into two modules: *International Relations* and *Current Issues*. This study was conducted in the latter, dealing with topics like technology, global and local culture, education, and work. Both the institution and the students were informed about the study and signed consent forms accepting participation in it.

### Data Collection Instruments

Four data collection instruments were used. First, the classes were recorded for sixteen weeks; recordings were important to collect the teacher's and students' actual words in their interactions throughout the development of the activities. Second, there were two questionnaires. One was applied at the beginning of the semester to build a profile of the participants and collect their beliefs and ideas about writing (see Appendix A); the other was used at the end of the process to gather the students' opinions about the experience of essay writing throughout the study (see Appendix B). Third, there were artifacts that included the evaluation of each cycle and the argumentative essays written by the participants. This represented important evidence of the role that genre-based activities played when students approached writing from a situated social perspective. Finally, three semi-structured interviews were conducted, one at the end of each cycle (see one sample in Appendix C). They were useful in order to gather students' reactions, thoughts, and ways they approached writing in the study.

### Pedagogical Procedure

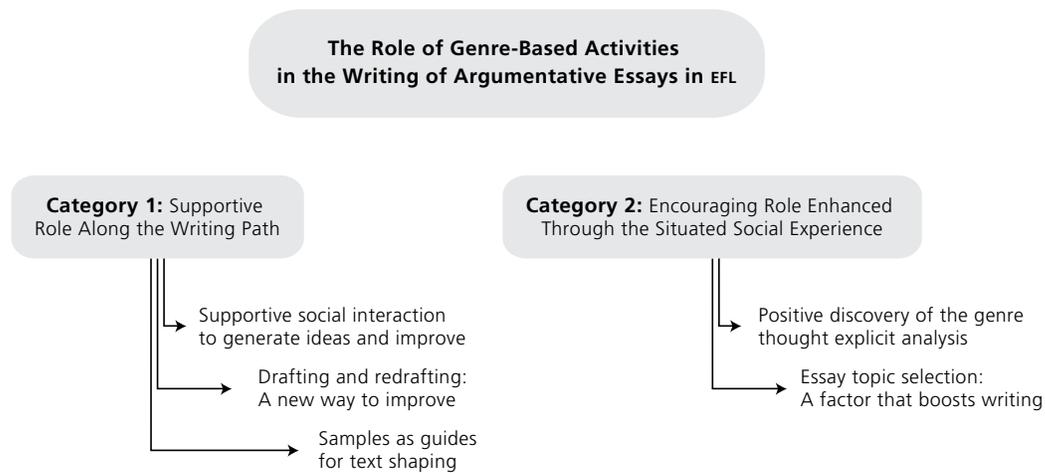
A central element of the action research process was the creation and implementation of an instructional design which integrated the three constructs of the study. It emerged after a process of deliberation (Grundy, 1987) upon the way in which writing was being approached in the classes.

During the implementation of the instructional design,<sup>2</sup> a number of activities were developed using a genre-based perspective to teaching writing (Bastian, 2010; Hyland, 2004) and considering writing as a situated social practice (Baynham, 1995; Gee, 2008; Lillis, 2001).

The instructional design was planned following the sequence of writing topics in the course programme and consisted of three cycles. Each cycle corresponded to a term during the semester and dealt with a specific type of essay: Opinion, For and Against, and Problem-Solutions. In order to account for a genre-based perspective to teaching writing, a six-step writing cycle was used based on Widodo's (2006) proposal of a genre-based lesson plan.

The first step of the writing cycle was *exploring the genre*. Students analysed sample essays in small groups and as a whole class with the guidance of the teacher. It was done in the light of theory and students' previous knowledge. In the second step, *building knowledge of the field*, students chose a topic and an audience and investigated to gather insights that they could draw upon when writing. Then, groups of peers shared their ideas to get preliminary feedback. In the third step, *text construction or drafting*, students actually engaged in the act of writing in and outside the class. The fourth step was *revising and submitting a final draft*; students self-evaluated their first draft, trying to go beyond the linguistic and textual features. Peer and teacher feedback was also provided through comments and prompting questions not only about formal aspects but also about the ideas themselves. Based on feedback and personal reflection, students constructed a new draft. *Assessment and evaluation* by the teacher in the fifth step provided qualitative feedback about students' writing performance. The final step was *editing and publishing*. Students made final adjustments to their texts and published them on a blog or on Facebook thus transcending academic purposes to achieve a more realistic and social purpose as well as a wider audience. Once the whole cycle finished, the students evaluated the activities developed, the materials, and the teacher's guidance. They did this by writing their impressions about these three aspects on a piece of paper, which they submitted.

<sup>2</sup> See Chala (2011) for a detailed description of the instructional design.

**Figure 1.** Categories Resulting From the Analysis

In the following section, the findings of this study are presented. The data gathered through and transcribed from the different instruments will show the participants' original voices as they were actually produced during the EFL class sessions, thus, errors were not marked/coded nor corrected.

### Findings

After a process of systematic analysis of the collected data and having used the grounded approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), two categories emerged: (1) Supportive Role Along the Writing Path and (2) Encouraging Role Enhanced Through the Situated Social Experience. These categories describe the main roles that the genre-based activities had in the students' construction of argumentative essays during the study.

The data showed that genre-based activities not only supported the participants throughout the construction of essays but also boosted their confidence resulting in a positive attitude towards writing argumentative essays. Support was provided through social interaction among the participants and between them and the teacher; drafting and redrafting, which raised awareness of writing as a process; and the sample essays analysed, which helped participants to shape their essays. Encouragement to write was

enhanced through the discovery of generic features and the possibility to choose the topic of the essays. Figure 1 is a visual representation of the categories and subcategories resulting from the analysis.

### Category 1: Supportive Role Along the Writing Path

This category refers to the guiding role that the genre-based activities had in the participants' essay writing process. The orientation that was identified in the data relates to the concept of scaffolding (Bruner & Sherwood, 1975; Vygotsky, 1978) provided through supportive social interaction among participants and by the samples that were analysed in class; this support was also enhanced through a process of drafting and redrafting. The data showed that the activities developed in the study had an important role in guiding students to diminish the occurrence of linguistic errors in their texts and acquire the ability to write essays that met the requirements of the genre.

The analysis of the data showed that the support provided by the genre-based activities came from three sources: (1) Social interaction with peers and teacher, which helped participants to generate ideas and improve their texts; (2) drafting and redrafting,

regarded by the students as a new way to improve their essays and their writing skills; and (3) the essay samples, which were considered by the participants as points of reference that they could use to shape their own texts. A common pattern that the data showed in the three sub-categories is related to students' concern for mistake identification and correction. Although insights show concern for aspects that went beyond linguistic and textual aspects, there was still concern for formal issues.

After presenting a general definition of the category, we now provide a description of the three sub-categories.

#### Supportive Social Interaction to Generate Ideas and Improve

Supportive social interaction refers to the various ways in which students established dialogic communication with their peers and teacher and which mediated to enhance text correction and skill improvement. This activity hints at the supportive nature of genre-based teaching (Hyland, 2004), and the importance of socialisation in the learning process, as stated by Vygotsky (1978). Data from the final questionnaire and second interview showed that group work before writing, during the step of *building knowledge of the field*, was an opportunity to get reactions, points of view, and advice from classmates with regard to the authors' ideas:

s<sup>14</sup>: My classmates helped me with some ideas and sometimes I help them too. (2<sup>nd</sup> questionnaire)

34. s<sub>13</sub>: I think it [doing the activities] was useful. For example, in my particular

35. case, you said: Guys you have to write another essays, so, I start writing about

36. child labor and then was what you said it was about cons and pros, so I told s<sub>3</sub>

37. ...and I said: "Oh my God, what can I do right now?" "Because I have, so I

38. start." So, she helped me to think in the new way that I had to do with my

39. essay, so, I think is useful because you can compare your ideas with others and do a better essay. (2<sup>nd</sup> interview)

Sharing thoughts with classmates through dialogic interaction was shown to be relevant for most of the participants in this preliminary stage of the writing cycle in order to get ideas and to focus more on the content that they were going to discuss in their essays. At the same time, this activity offered participants the possibility to contribute to aiding their peers in the construction or refinement of their arguments.

On the other hand, peer and teacher interaction and scaffolding provided in the step of *revising and submitting a final draft* were useful for the majority of the students to identify and correct "mistakes"<sup>4</sup> that had been overlooked by themselves and by the teacher. In this respect, one student states:

s<sub>11</sub>: Classmates were a big help because sometimes they show me what the teacher didn't realize. (2<sup>nd</sup> questionnaire)

Interaction was also important for text correction and improvement, as described by this student:

37. s<sub>7</sub>: I think it was really important because sometimes our friends or our

38. classmates realize of some mistakes that the teacher didn't realized

39. or sometimes, we express our idea, but it was wrong and they help

40. us to explain it or sometimes, for example, I wrote when s<sub>1</sub>'s

41. essay, she wanted to tell a story and I told her that it was in that way and

42. she said, Oh, yes, and she explained to you, and you said, ah, that's what you wanted to say!

43. That kind of things, I think are important. (2<sup>nd</sup> interview)

3 Codes used: s=Student, T=Teacher.

4 "Mistakes" in this study refer to what the participants understood as flaws in grammar and vocabulary.

The above student regards peer work as useful not only for improving his essays through the correction of mistakes, but also because it provides the opportunity to become an active agent in assisting others in their writing process. Also, although there is a concern for mistake correction, there is an interest for content improvement enhanced through social interaction. Looking at other students' essays and having theirs checked by peers were both useful strategies to get or refine ideas and listen to points of view that were different from that of the teacher. The social dimension of writing, evidenced in the interaction that emerged through peer and teacher supportive action, came also to enhance the development of writing skills. In other words, social interaction provided scaffolding opportunities:

s3: The most useful activities were reading other essays and correcting ours. . . . The guidance working with partners and having the teacher feedback really helped to write better essay. (Student's artifact)

In her evaluation of the first cycle, this student also highlights the relevance of socialisation with classmates and of the support provided by the teacher in order to render good results in writing. Writing was assumed as a social action in which guidance from others was important. The teacher's support was perceived as useful to guide the students in writing their essays:

s8: I like the feedback the teacher gave us for every essay because it makes us to realized things we should change or take into account for writing an essay. (2<sup>nd</sup> questionnaire)

Support provided by the teacher on a dialogic basis was considered by the participants as relevant and effective for them to correct their texts and improve their writing skills. Although identifying and correcting formal mistakes were found to be important contributions of supportive social interaction, there was also an opportunity for participants to improve the content of the essays and identify their strengths and weaknesses in writing, as expressed by this student:

s12: In my case I agree with [s15], about feedback because in my case I found some problems with grammar, because I tried to use just let's say simple grammar structures, so I realized that I have to use more well structured grammar. (2<sup>nd</sup> interview)

It is also necessary to mention that not all the students agreed with the importance of having their essays checked by peers. Some students did not consider this relevant due to their peers' lack of knowledge or inaccuracy to give feedback. This is expressed in the following piece of data:

s14: I think that teacher's feedback is more relevant than peer feedback because, in my case, I only take into account the teacher's corrections because the teacher knows more than a student. (2<sup>nd</sup> questionnaire)

#### **Drafting and Redrafting: A New Chance to Improve**

The writing and re-writing of essays based on personal reflection and supportive guidance provided by teacher and peers were found to be two innovative activities in the writing process; additionally, as the data from the interviews showed, they were strategies that had not been implemented in prior courses. The following is an example of this:

22. s11: I think for me the most useful activity was drafting and re-drafting and

23. also the feedback because what happened normally is that you just

24. write an essay and you have the feedback at the end with all

25. the mistakes, so you don't have actually the chance to improve

26. and the teacher cannot see the process, the way you have been

27. improving, they're just like, Ok, it is wrong and sorry, 2.0 or

28. 3.0, I don't know, any grade, but actually when you start writing

29. and reading again and writing again, sometimes actually when you

30. receive the feedback, you say, ah! Yes, I have already realized THIS mistake, because you have the opportunity to read and...

proof read, so, I think that that is what for me, was more useful. (3<sup>rd</sup> interview)

Figure 2. Student's Artifact—First Version

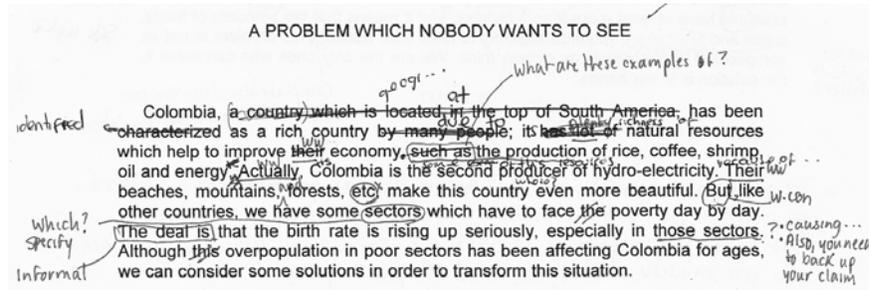
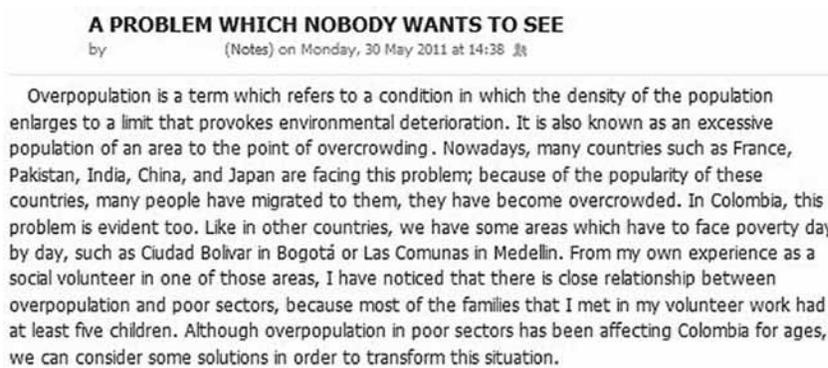


Figure 3. Student's Artifact—Final and Published Version



As this piece of data shows, mistakes were an important concern for students, and writing used to be viewed mainly as a product (Grundy, 1987) represented by a grade; however, there is a new interest in viewing writing as a process, and in this sense, drafting and redrafting become important because they allow writers to improve during the process.

In the participants' written production it was possible to find that drafting and redrafting were valuable activities as the texts showed higher levels of elaboration and correction after scaffolding activities were done and adjustments were made. Figure 2 and 3 show this of one student.

Certain aspects improved in the second draft with respect to the first one: To begin with, the topic is narrowed down from "Colombia" to "Overpopulation in Colombia." Moreover, unlike the first draft, the second one presents general information on overpopulation before focusing on the specific topic.

Furthermore, the ideas in the second version are supported by the student's own experience (Lillis, 2001), which is used to situate the text (Baynham, 1995) in her reality and gives her the opportunity to write from her own perspective. Changes in text formality and appropriateness of vocabulary are also more evident. Drafting and re-drafting were shown; then, as a way to meet generic features and by elaborating different drafts, the students became aware of how the texts should be organised, and what other conventions, such as formulaic expressions, could be used so that their texts came closer to the genre. The following piece of data, taken from an interview, illustrates this point:

- 89. T: And how can you evaluate the final version of your essay?
- 90. S10: I think, it's, you know because of the draft, you could identify what, I
- 91. mean, your problems, what were you doing bad, so, I think at the end

92. when I wrote the final version, I could do it better and it was, I think it was good. (2<sup>nd</sup> interview)

Through drafting and redrafting, most of the participants had the opportunity to identify mistakes and correct them, but this process in which they engaged also allowed them to reflect on the content of their essays thus raising their awareness with regard to their writing skills, enabling them to identify drawbacks and use this information to improve. This is a remarkable insight as students seemed to go beyond linguistic and textual issues to engage in other dimensions of writing that were more related to their subjectivity as writers and the process that they followed when engaged in this literacy practice.

#### **Samples as Guides for Text Shaping**

The essay samples presented and analysed in class during the step *exploring the genre* were considered by the participants as guides or models to shape their own texts. These samples were important to get students aware of key genre features and facilitate their personal writing process. Samples were shown to have a fundamental supporting role as reliable material to consult and get ideas from in order to adjust their texts in terms of rhetorical structure and formulaic sequences (Morrison, 2010). This aided students to gain control of the genre (Chaisiri, 2010), and thus engage in the act of writing in a more confident way:

S4: When I started to write my pros and cons essay I didn't find it difficult because with the examples of that kind of essays presented in class was very useful to write it. (Student's artifact)

This student highlights the role of samples as *facilitators in writing*. The data also showed that having a sample guided students in different degrees depending on their needs as writers. The following interview excerpt shows how samples were useful in this respect:

39. s2: I think all of them were pretty useful. For example when we looked at the

40. model text, it

41. was really helpful because it's like a guide for us, and we can follow that example, not copy it, but just follow that structure. (2<sup>nd</sup> Interview)

It was interesting to find that modelling did not generate blind text imitation. On the contrary, it enhanced the writers' ability to discern and make decisions (Grundy, 1987) about what elements they could integrate in their own texts to meet the genre conventions. Although students acknowledged the importance of essay samples as reliable material to guide their writing, they also showed discernment in deciding how the samples could help them to improve their texts and learn:

s11: I learnt from the samples, I could take some elements from them for me to use on my essays. (2<sup>nd</sup> questionnaire)

31. T: And another thing about the sample essays that I presented and that you

32. said that they were useful to you. Did you copy the same

33. structure? What aspects did you consider from that? From the 34. texts?

35. s5: The organization of the text? [T: Uh-hum.] For example, if the text

36. presents an organization from the most important points to the 37. less important, and also some linking words that I brought, and also I

38. considered the way to introduce the topic sentence because the 39. way those developed the idea, to parts of this points to start writing.

40. T: And why did you take those aspects, those little pieces?

41. s5: Because I think that if I do it, I can develop better my essay or I can make

42. it more organised and understandable, because I have to respect

43. sometimes the structure and that's why I used it.

44. T: Did you adjust, or did you use some of your own ideas to the structure?

45. s5: Yes, sometimes. For example, I have other problems with the conclusion and I never take some aspects of the models

because I think it doesn't adjust to my topic but what I do is to write my own ideas and to develop my own way. (2<sup>nd</sup> interview)

Samples helped learners to develop awareness of argumentative essay writing by allowing them to focus on generic features such as structure and formulaic sequences. On the other hand, samples were also useful to acknowledge the subjectivity involved in writing (Baynham, 1995), thus helping the students to make decisions about generic features they could use. Given the dynamic perspective that was embraced in the study, participants decided which elements to focus on and use in order to consider the features of the genre and at the same time make the text theirs. It was also possible for them to draw upon elements from their sociocultural context to build their texts and support their ideas.

### Category 2: Encouraging Role Enhanced Through the Situated Social Experience

This category refers to the positive role that the activities developed had on the students throughout the study to build their confidence in writing. The analysis of data showed that self-reliance and positive attitudes towards writing were enhanced due to the implementation of the genre-based activities when writing was considered as a situated social practice. Confidence was built through explicit analysis of the genre and understanding the purpose for writing, among other aspects. On the other hand, the data revealed that the students showed an improvement in attitude towards the act of writing itself due to two main aspects: (1) The encouraging discovery of the particular features of the argumentative genre and (2) the possibility to choose the topics of the essays.

#### Positive Discovery of the Genre through Explicit Analysis

Engaged in genre-based activities when writing, the students were able to build awareness as to how to

write opinions, pros and cons, and problem-solution, essays, paying close attention to genre conventions and features. This ability relates to the explicit nature of instruction in a genre-based pedagogy (Hyland, 2004). Explicit analysis of genre features allowed students to better understand how texts were structured, how the audience could be approached, and what language could be used to achieve their purpose. In connection with this, a student expresses:

s7: I can say it was an excellent experience. At the beginning it was a little bit difficult because the structure was not clear but thank to the explanations and power point presentation I really improved in my essays; now I try to organize it to make it coherent. Now I feel better writing essays. (2<sup>nd</sup> questionnaire)

As a personal endeavour, writing generated different reactions among the students, including fear. However, due to the use of samples and their analysis, this feeling changed; participants thus approached writing in a more confident way, even changing the perspective they used to have about this practice, as shown below:

109. T: s15, has your conception of writing academic essays changed in certain  
110. way?  
111. s15: well, I think it has changed a little bit because before I thought that  
112. writing an essay or writing something for English class was boring  
113. and I didn't feel excited about writing only for the teacher, but in this  
114. course, I realized that writing is a good thing to do, and I realized  
115. that I could express myself by a piece of paper and I'm excited when I  
116. write, next semester I will be excited because I will show the previous class, so it's nice for me to show my improvement to the other teacher. (3<sup>rd</sup> interview)

Students got engaged in discovering the particularities of the genre, and this seems to have encouraged them to change their negative views of writing.

Just as they focused on formal features of texts, they also acknowledged other important aspects like the social dimension and subjectivity involved in writing. Being able to discover these aspects and the reasons for writing made the experience more meaningful to the participants and therefore encouraged them to become more engaged in writing.

A genre-based perspective to writing was important to explore what students *did* when they wrote, and understanding writing as a situated social practice helped to discover how they *felt*. Students' attitude was an important factor that influenced the way they undertook writing. Analysis of the genre features allowed the students to become aware of textual features, which in turn helped them to become more self-reliant and develop a more positive attitude to undertake writing. Prior knowledge was *elicited* and *used* in order to support the analysis of genre features, as can be seen in the following exchange that was transcribed from a class session:

77. T: There are some pros, and there are some cons. Good. Now, do you know
78. any other ways to begin an introduction? Here we began with a general
79. idea.
80. S3: The other way is we begin with the thesis statement and then we develop
81. the essay.
82. T: Ok. What do you think?...We begin with the thesis statement and then
83. we go to the general point?
84. Class: No.
85. T: It would depend on your eh, style, but usually we don't do that. [S15:
86. Yeah]...Good. Another way.
87. S12: Another is called "dramatic entrance," but I don't know.
88. S7: You tell a story about or an experience that you had... [T: Yes.] Related
89. with the topic
90. T: Yeah. Why (bis) would you bring up an experience that you had (-) and

91. put it there?
92. S3: Because by giving this makes it more real for the reader... it is not like
93. an idea, but a real situation.
94. T: Excellent, and so it what?
95. T, Class: It catches the attention of the reader.
- T: Very good. Another possibility.
- S12: Define the topic.
- T: Define the topic, yes. Good. You can also use an explanatory question at the beginning
- S4: Or we can use a quote from someone else. (Recorded class transcription)

As seen in these data, dialogic interaction with peers and teacher allowed the students not only to analyse generic features, but also to establish dialogic communication; in this dialogue, the students' subjectivity (Baynham, 1995) and personal background (Lillis, 2001) were very important because they were able to resort to their knowledge and become active participants in the social construction of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). Analysis of the texts contributed to building students' confidence to write as it was an opportunity to solve doubts and answer questions.

### Essay Topic Selection: A Factor That Boosts Writing

Another important factor that boosted participants' engagement and positive attitude towards essay writing was the opportunity to choose the topics. This allowed participants to express their ideas more fully and relate to the text in a closer way. The students viewed this opportunity as innovative in their writing experience because, as found in the questionnaires and interviews, in previous courses it was the teacher who chose for them, and as a result they felt restricted as to expressing their feelings and unenthusiastic to write. A comparative quantitative analysis of students' responses in the first and final questionnaire showed that students felt they could

**Table 1.** Participants' View of Expression in Prior Courses and During the Study

| The texts that I wrote allowed me to express my own... |                        | Completely agree | Agree | Disagree | Completely disagree |
|--|------------------------|------------------|-------|----------|---------------------|
| ideas  | Before the experience  | 3                | 10    | 1        | 1                   |
|  | In this experience     | 14               | 1     | 0        | 0                   |
| feelings   | Before the experience* | 3                | 5     | 1        | 5                   |
|  | In this experience     | 8                | 7     | 0        | 0                   |
| points of view   | Before the experience  | 6                | 7     | 1        | 1                   |
|  | In this experience     | 12               | 3     | 0        | 0                   |

*n*=15 \* One student did not answer this.

express their ideas, feelings, and points of view more during this study than before (see Table 1).

Table 1 shows an important shift in the participants' degree of agreement with the question. Although in the two questionnaires the general opinion remained between "Agree" and "Completely agree," there was a higher degree of agreement when referring to the writing experience they had in the study. The qualitative data collected through the questionnaires and the interviews showed that the change in students' opinion was due to the possibility to choosing the topics of the essays. Participants felt confident to express their ideas more freely about topics that they liked, that were interesting to them, and most of all, which they could choose themselves:

S5: I agree with the fact that this course let me express my ideas, feelings and points of view because it was a space where we had this possibility thanks to the chance to choose our own topics. (2<sup>nd</sup> questionnaire)

Choosing the topic was revealed to be an opportunity for self-expression and an encouraging factor for writing. As participants were able to choose what they would write about, their confidence to write their essays was improved:

- 140. T: S12, you said that you felt confident and comfortable when you
- 141. wrote. Why was that?
- 142. S12: Mainly, because of the topic. I think that when we know about
- 143. something, we can develop it in a well manner, a well way.
- 144. T: What do you mean "in a good manner"?

145. S12: That for example we can use some strong arguments or to bring several

146. examples about something that we know well. We have more elements to enrich the essay. (3<sup>rd</sup> interview)

Being able to choose the topic helped the students to gain control of what they said and how they said it. Knowing about the topic was an important factor that contributed to building up students' confidence when writing because it helped them to draw upon ideas and present arguments that came from their voice-as-experience (Lillis, 2001).

### Conclusions and Pedagogical Implications

The data showed that the genre-based activities had two main roles in the students' construction of argumentative essays when writing was understood as a situated social practice. On the one hand, they provided support to the participants and on the other, they fostered encouragement to approach the act of writing.

As to the first role, the data showed that there were three ways in which the genre-based activities supported the participants' undertaking of writing. First, the dialogic interaction that emerged during the different stages of the writing cycles, among the students and between them and the teacher, provided scaffolding opportunities for the students to construct or refine their arguments; given this type of interaction, the activities allowed the participants to become active subjects in supporting their peers

and enriching their essays at the same time. Second, the possibility of drafting and redrafting was shown to be an innovative activity in the study which aided the students to start looking at writing as a process, not as a product. At the same time, this activity provided them with the opportunity to meet the generic features of essays and improve their writing skills. Third, the essay samples analysed in class were revealed by the data to be facilitators in writing; they were reliable sources for students to consult and shape their texts with regard to generic features such as formulaic sequences and text structure. The use of samples also fostered students' decision-making in writing by choosing the elements that helped them meet the genre features and at the same time keep their texts original and personal; hence, blind imitation of templates was avoided.

As to the second role, the genre-based activities generated confidence and positive attitudes towards writing because of two main factors. First, the discovery of the generic features through explicit analysis and exploration of the essay samples helped students to become aware of how to take on the act of writing argumentative essays; this explicit discovery helped them to improve their perception of writing and undertake this literacy practice in a more confident way. Second, the possibility of choosing a topic to write about was a boosting factor for students to engage in writing; the opportunity to express their points of view with regard to a topic that the participants themselves chose was an encouraging factor which helped them to improve their confidence to write as they gained control of what they said and how they said it.

Carrying out a project in which argumentative writing is approached as a situated social practice and framed within a genre-based perspective implies promoting teaching and learning processes that respond to local needs. Writing essays becomes more meaningful when it is approached from a situated

perspective, and when students can identify with their texts either because the issues affect them directly as people of the world or because they feel interested in the topics. By experiencing this, students may be able to focus on their sociocultural and personal context in a more direct way; they may be able to name, create and re-create personal experiences which allow them, as Chapetón (2007) states, to understand the social nature of the realities that surround them, approach issues from a critical perspective, and start a meaningful process of transformation of their reality.

This situated perspective of education calls for a change in the current paradigms of teacher training and practice within the ELT community in our country. In the first place, professional development programmes that promote teachers' reflections on their own sociocultural contexts should be promoted. As Cárdenas, González, and Álvarez (2010) claim, these programmes should encompass and value the particularities of the communities where teachers come from and must be coherent with their needs and expectations (own translation, p. 62). By acknowledging this gap, teachers can start to base their practices on their own realities and needs instead of importing external knowledge from training programmes that may turn out to be meaningless to their professional and pedagogical situation.

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### **About the Authors**

**Pedro Antonio Chala Bejarano** is a teacher of English at Pontificia Universidad Javeriana (Colombia). He holds a BA in Philology and Languages (Universidad Nacional de Colombia) and an MA in Foreign Language Teaching (Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, Colombia). His professional interests include EFL writing and materials design. He has authored school and university EFL teaching materials.

**Claudia Marcela Chapetón** is an associate professor at Universidad Pedagógica Nacional (Colombia). She holds a BA in English and Spanish, an MA in Applied Linguistics (Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, Colombia), and a PhD in Applied Linguistics (University of Barcelona, Spain). Her research interests include literacy, metaphor, and corpus linguistics. She has authored EFL teaching materials and textbooks.

**Appendix A: First Questionnaire Sample**

**QUESTIONNAIRE**

Dear student,

The following questionnaire seeks to find information that will help in the design and development of a research project on writing essays in this course. Based on this information, it will be possible to propose objectives and methodologies to develop this programme in the class. Please answer the questions as objectively as possible.

**I. LANGUAGE LEARNING:**

1. How do you like to learn English? Tick any activities that apply to you.

Listening to audio material (CDs, podcasts, songs, etc.)  
 Through games (competitions, board games, etc.)  
 Talking to other people (classmates, friends, etc.)  
 Studying English books (course book, grammar books, etc.)  
 Using audiovisual material (TV, videos, etc.)  
 Other. Which? \_\_\_\_\_

Explain your choices I think that audio materials and practicing speaking is helpful and important in order to learn other language

2. How do you learn best? Circle one number in the scale, where 1 is the best way you learn.

|                   |      |   |   |   |       |
|-------------------|------|---|---|---|-------|
|                   | Best |   |   |   | Worst |
| Alone             | ①    | 2 | 3 | 4 | 4     |
| In pairs          | 1    | ② | 3 | 4 | 4     |
| In groups         | 1    | 2 | ③ | 4 | 4     |
| As a whole class  | 1    | 2 | ③ | 4 | 4     |
| Outside the class | 1    | 2 | 3 | ④ | 4     |

**II. WRITING**

1. What types of texts have you had to write in the different levels of English in the Bachelor of Arts programme at Javeriana University?

Argumentative (e.g. essays)     Descriptive (e.g. reports)     Narrative (e.g. stories)

2. How was your experience writing these texts? Briefly explain.

At the beginning it was so difficult, but then in the next levels I improved in this skill.

3. Circle one number in the scale, where 1 is the highest degree and 4 is the lowest degree of agreement based on the following statement:

The texts that I have written in the different levels have allowed me to express my own...

|                   |                |       |          |                   |
|-------------------|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|
|                   | Strongly agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
| ...ideas          | 1              | ②     | 3        | 4                 |
| ...feelings       | 1              | ②     | 3        | 4                 |
| ...points of view | ①              | 2     | 3        | 4                 |

Explain your choices Most of the essays were argumentative; therefore, I could express my points of view more than my feelings.

4. What topics would you prefer to write about in this course? Tick your choice(s).

Your life  
 Social and cultural issues in Colombia  
 Social and cultural issues in the world  
 Other. Which? \_\_\_\_\_

5. Do you consider that writing can contribute to transformation in the society? (e.g., that people's ideas or behaviours can be changed) Yes \_\_\_ No X

Why? Because I believe in actions more than a couple of words write it down on a paper that one day could disappear.

6. Do you consider that your writing can contribute to transformation in the society? (e.g., that you can help change people's ideas or behaviours with the texts that you write) Yes \_\_\_ No X

Why? Because not all the people agree or have the same opinion that I have about some topic.

7. How do you feel when you are asked to write a text in English? Briefly explain.  
Usually insecure and worry because I don't know if I will do it right.

---

**III. YOUR BACKGROUND**

1. Gender:  Male  Female

2. Age: 17

3. Interests: (e.g. hobbies, sports, leisure activities) going out with friends, watch movies, listening to music and reading.

4. Where do you live?  
 In the north of the city  In the south  In the east  In the west  Near the University  
 Other: \_\_\_\_\_

5. What social stratum is your place located in? Please mark with an X.  
 1  2  3  4  5  6  I don't know

6. Have you ever travelled to an English speaking country? Yes  No   
 If your answer was YES, where have you been? England  
 What was the purpose of your trip(s)? Learn the language and share with other culture.

7. Have you ever lived in an English speaking country? Yes  No   
 If your answer was YES, where did you live? Bournemouth - UK  
 How long did you live there? 9 months  
 Why did you live there? Because of an exchange I did there

8. Did you complete your high school education at a school? Yes  No   
 If your answer was YES, go to question 9.  
 If your answer was NO, answer these questions and then go to question 10:  
 How did you complete your high school studies? \_\_\_\_\_  
 How did you learn English? \_\_\_\_\_

9. What type of school did you graduate from?  Public  Private  
 Was it a bilingual school? Yes  No   
 Was it a school with an intensive English programme? Yes  No

10. How long have you been a student of the Bachelor of Arts in the teaching of Modern Languages? II semesters.  
 Are you repeating this level (High Intermediate)? Yes  No   
 Were you classified into this level? Yes  No   
 If you were classified, was it: through a placement test? Yes  No   
 by a teacher of one of the levels? Yes  No

11. What other levels of the B.A. programme have you taken?  
 Elementary  Basic  Pre-Intermediate  Low Intermediate  Intermediate  High Intermediate

12. Have you studied English in another place apart from Javeriana University? (e.g., an institute, another university, private lessons) Yes  No   
 If your answer was YES, where have you studied English? \_\_\_\_\_  
 What courses/levels did you complete? \_\_\_\_\_

13. Are you currently studying a parallel major at the University? Yes  No   
 If your answer was YES, what major are you doing? \_\_\_\_\_  
 What semester are you in? \_\_\_\_\_

Thanks a lot for the information that you can provide.

Cordially,

Pedro Antonio Chala Bejarano  
 Teacher of the High Intermediate level  
 E-mail: [pechab@gmail.com](mailto:pechab@gmail.com)

**Appendix B: Second Questionnaire Sample**

FINAL QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear student,

The purpose of this questionnaire is twofold. First, it seeks to find information that will be useful to characterise the way you undertook the process of writing in the course; and second, it looks to gather information about the role that the writing activities had in your production of argumentative essays. Please answer the questions as objectively as possible.

**I. HOW YOU UNDERTOOK THE WRITING PROCESS:**

1. How was your experience writing argumentative essays in this course? Briefly explain.

well, I think it was useful because I really learned a lot of things about writing. I think that time I really learned how to make an essay, I really liked that we were able to write about our personal opinions or points of view, & that's interesting. In my opinion it was difficult for me because I'm not really good writing but I think I really learned.

2. Describe your experience writing these essays in the course.

a. Opinion essay: I didn't like this type of essay because at that point I wasn't really sure of how things were going to be and because I didn't know well how to write an essay. But I think it was useful because from that point I really got more interest in doing things well.

b. Pros and cons essay: well in this one I choose an ~~very~~ unusual topic that difficult things for me because I couldn't find sources that supported my ideas and opinions, but I think it was interesting because I was able to say my ideas without being worried about the grade. I was not thinking if I say something & teacher doesn't like so my grade is going to be bad.

c. Problem-solutions essay: In this one, I think it was the best for me, because I think at this point I was able to write better essays than at the beginning, was interesting & I really think I could do a good job. I think I was proud of my self because I learned how to do an essay really good ☺

3. What aspects did you consider in order to write your essays? Tick those that apply to you.

- The purpose of your text
- Strong arguments
- Grammar and vocabulary
- Your audience
- Your own ideas
- Other Which? to write something interesting that may be none in the class will develop

Explain your choices: I think the first thing I consider is what's the idea or the purpose of the essay for me, then I chose the topic & which aspects I would like to develop after that I tried to write including all my audience & try to not create conflict & then I start to write my own ideas, but that sometimes is difficult because I usually think one thing & when I look out for sources that supports that usually I can't find so is really difficult about grammar well I think that's

4. For the pros and cons essay and the problem-solutions essay you chose your own topic to write. Answer these flow questions about it:

Pros and cons essay:  
What topic did you write about? Bullying, as a good thing to be stronger & better

Problem-solutions essay:  
What topic did you write about? the prohibition of mobile phones - an inhibition of a profitable activity.

It was based on... Tick your choice(s).

- a personal experience
- a social and cultural issue in Colombia
- a social and cultural issue in the world
- Other. Which? none wants to see the other side of bullying. It can be something good!

It was based on... Tick your choice(s).

- a personal experience
- a social and cultural issue in Colombia
- a social and cultural issue in the world
- Other. Which? \_\_\_\_\_

Why did you choose this topic? because may be at school I was a bully... & well I know is not good but may be that can help the bullied to create a strong character & personality.  
How did you feel writing about this topic? Why?

Why did you choose this topic? because is something that affect everybody.

How did you feel writing about this topic? Why?

well I feel good, was something that I know & was difficult because the sources never agree with the things I believe. But it was interesting because I realize that people is always watching on side the bad side & never see advantages in bad experiences & I always try to be good things in everything.

actually I felt really good, it was good when I was able to find sources that supported my opinions, besides is something that is breaking now & in all moments, & I think it is interesting because may be it's part of the group that uses the mobile phone in an excessive way.

**II. THE ROLE THAT THE ACTIVITIES THAT WERE DEVELOPED PLAYED IN YOUR WRITING:**

1. Circle one number in the scale, where 1 is the highest degree and 4 is the lowest degree of agreement based on the following statement: *The texts that I wrote in the course allowed me to express my own...*

|                              | Strongly agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|------------------------------|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|
| ...ideas                     | 1              | 2     | 3        | 4                 |
| ...feelings                  | 1              | 2     | 3        | 4                 |
| ...points of view            | 1              | 2     | 3        | 4                 |
| ...reflections on the topics | 1              | 2     | 3        | 4                 |

Explain your choices I think ~~that~~ I or we were able to write about our personal experiences, opinion, ~~reflections~~ reflections etc something that I found interesting because many times we can not do this because it can affect our grades, but in this course was good because someone cares about our opinion or at least ~~that~~ doesn't judge us because of them.

2. From your perspective as a writer, what is your opinion about the activities that were developed in the course?

Explain I think were useful because they really help me to make my essays and help me to realize which were my mistakes.

3. Circle one number in the scale, where 1 is the highest degree and 4 is the lowest degree of agreement based on the statements that can be made with the options given and the following part of a sentence:

... was/were relevant in the construction of my essays.

|   | Strongly agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|
| A. Sharing ideas with my classmates   | 1              | 2     | 3        | 4                 |
| B. Investigating on my own about my topic   | 1              | 2     | 3        | 4                 |
| C. The materials (e.g. Power Point presentations, sample essays, readings, worksheets on fallacies) | 1              | 2     | 3        | 4                 |
| D. Analysing essay samples in class   | 1              | 2     | 3        | 4                 |
| E. The process of drafting and redrafting   | 1              | 2     | 3        | 4                 |
| F. Teacher's feedback   | 1              | 2     | 3        | 4                 |
| G. Peer feedback  | 1              | 2     | 3        | 4                 |
| H. Personal reflection  | 1              | 2     | 3        | 4                 |
| I. Other:   | 1              | 2     | 3        | 4                 |

Explain your choices in each case:

- A. that can help to create better & stronger argument & to see what others think about the topic
- B. it is useful because is necessary to know about the topic & to look out for sources that can help or to support our ideas & opinions.
- C. pp. presentations & others help us to have an idea & follow a model to create a well structure essay
- D. was good & interesting because we saw different types of essays & have saw ideas of how to write.
- E. was good because we saw which were our mistakes, we were able to correct them, to improve & to learn more about writing grammar, etc.
- F. was really useful, because we saw our grammar mistakes and confusions & many times if teacher does not give us feedback we can't realize about our mistakes
- G. was good because we learned many how to identify mistakes & to be observant & could help us that someone give us feedback to improve.
- H. was good because without doing that it is impossible to improve.

Thank you very much  
Cordially,

Pedro Antonio Chala Bejarano  
Teacher of the High Intermediate level  
e-mail: pechab1@gmail.com



## Appendix C: Sample Interview Protocol

### First Semi-Structured Interview

**Research Question:**

What is the role of a set of writing tasks in the creation of argumentative texts by high intermediate students in the Bachelor Degree in Modern Languages programme at Universidad Javeriana when writing is understood as a situated social practice?

**Interview Schedule**

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <p><b>Interviewee:</b> _____</p> <p><b>Date:</b> _____</p> <p><b>Place:</b> _____</p>   | <p><b>Intended Duration:</b> _____ min.</p> <p><b>Interview began:</b> _____ <b>Interview finished:</b> _____</p> <p><b>Actual duration:</b> _____ min.</p>  |
| <p><b>Topic: Opinions of students with regard to the genre-based activities that were implemented taking writing as a situated social practice.</b></p> | <p><b>Questions:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What is your opinion about the writing activities that we have developed in the class so far?<br/>(Prompts: Have they been useful to you as a writer? Why?)</li> <li>2. How did you feel during the development of these activities?<br/>(Prompts: Confident / worried / optimistic / interested / apathetic... Why?)</li> <li>3. What activities from the ones that were developed in the classes do you think influenced your writing most?<br/>(Prompts: Conversations with classmates / Whole group discussions/ readings / video activities... Why?)</li> <li>4. How would you describe your way of approaching writing after the development of the tasks?<br/>(Prompts: More critical about social issues/just as before/less focused on critical issues... Why?)</li> </ol> |