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# Exploring the status of argumentative essay writing strategies and problems of Iranian EFL learners

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## Abstract

The present study explores the status of argumentative essay writing strategy use and identifies the problems a convenient sample of Iranian EFL learners face while writing argumentative essays in English. Adopting a complementary process-genre approach and a mixed-methods research design, the researcher designed a genre-specific argumentative essay-writing strategy use questionnaire and pilot-tested it in an essay-writing course. The necessary data were collected using the designed questionnaire, students' argumentative texts written in the classes and their responses to the open-ended survey and semi-structured interviews. The results indicated a rather low status of strategy use in the sample since the students mostly depended on their previous writing competencies rather than following the conventions of working on this new genre of writing. The results of the open-ended survey, semi-structured interviews, and the analyses of students' argumentative texts indicated significant problems in the students' essay writing performance, categorized as cognitive, linguistic and discourse, and psychological problems, which were further attributed to the newness and complexities imposed by this genre of writing, students' inadequate linguistic and discourse competence and their inefficient use of writing strategies. Finally, it was suggested that to assist the students in writing better argumentative texts, writing instructors must ensure students have a fundamental understanding of what an argument is, including the components like claims, evidence, warrants and counterarguments, and encourage critical thinking by teaching students how to evaluate evidence, find logical fallacies and analyze the strengths and weaknesses of different arguments. They also need to share well-written argumentative essays as models for students to analyze and learn from, incorporate strategy instruction in their practices, offer further opportunities for writing and practicing in this genre of writing, and provide appropriate scaffolding and timely feedback on the students' argumentative writing performance.

**Keywords:** Argumentative genre, Writing strategy questionnaire, Problems in writing, Solutions

## Introduction

Research on writing strategies has moved towards the exploration of variables influencing writing strategy use (Hughes et al., 2019; Hwang & Lee, 2017). In fact, by focusing on the complicated and recursive nature of L2 writing processes and capturing the students' real-time cognitive activities while composing their texts, the researchers have proposed taxonomies of writing strategies, including rhetorical, cognitive, metacognitive, communicative and socio-affective strategies (Arndt, 1987; Cumming & Riazi, 2000; Mu, 2005; Palermo & Thomson, 2018; Sasaki, 2000; Silva & Graham, 2015; Zamel, 1983). This research hypothesizes that different genres of writing might necessitate the use of writing strategies in particular configurations since it is likely that students use different writing strategies depending on the specific writing situation, purpose of writing, task type and genre of writing (Hwanag & Lee, 2017).

The genre-specific approach to writing intends to present some insights regarding selecting certain linguistic and rhetorical moves based on the social context, the purpose or messages writers want to convey and their intended audience (Hyland, 2003, 2007; Paltridge, 2013). Since variations in the genres can influence the content and schematic structure of the texts, genre-specific scales and inventories must be developed to account for these variations. However, shifting to a genre approach might lead “to the neglect of writers' cognitive process and mental strategies which were emphasized in the process approach” (Huang & Zhang, 2020, p. 2), which necessitates adopting a complementary process-genre approach that simultaneously takes into account linguistic forms, cognitive processes and communicative purposes (Deng et al., 2014; Racelis & Matsuda, 2013).

Argumentative writing, which is one of the most common genres taught at higher education levels, demands using the strategies identified in the previous taxonomies, but the students must also be aware of the elements and cognitive processes that are specific to the argumentation genre. In fact, despite the ubiquitous presence of academic genre as one of the most common curriculum genres, there is little TESOL research on the nature of argumentative writing, its construction and the prevalence of prototypical argumentative structure (Latifi & Noroozi, 2021; Ozfidan & Mitchell, 2020; Schmeer, 2014). In addition, despite the existing teaching materials and instructional practices, the students whose first language is English find the argumentative writing tasks formidable and challenging, let alone EFL learners who are deprived of the natural and instructional resources essential for writing in this critical discourse mode that necessities considering the writers' purposes, audience's prospect, their contextual positions and specific rhetorical patterns (Allen et al., 2019). A significant gap in the literature on argumentative essay writing in English is the paucity of comprehensive and context-specific studies to address the pedagogical needs and unique challenges of EFL learners while working on this genre of writing as EFL contexts vary significantly in terms of students' language proficiency levels and their writing competence, educational systems, cultural influences and available resources. In addition, research on effective pedagogical interventions, support mechanisms and instructional materials tailored to argumentative writing in EFL contexts is limited. Thus, identifying the strategies that address the specific needs of EFL learners and assist them in writing better argumentative texts is essential. In the same vein, by applying the insights provided by previous studies on writing strategies,

the present study intends to develop an argumentative essay writing strategy questionnaire and investigate a group of Iranian EFL students' argumentative writing strategy use. The researcher also intends to identify the main problems EFL students encounter while writing argumentative essays and suggest solutions for resolving them.

## Literature review

### Theoretical background

The ability to identify, evaluate and compose arguments has been considered an essential academic skill and the development of argumentative texts has been one of the main goals of education (Helms-Park & Stapleton, 2003; Mitchell & Riddle, 2000). White and Billings (2008) defined an argument as "a form of discourse in which the writer or speaker presents a pattern of reasoning, reinforced by detailed evidence and refutation of challenging claims, that tries to persuade an audience to accept the claim" (p.4). The concept of argument is presented in three main senses: as individual claims resulting from the inferences individuals make out of premises and conclusions; as a position established through logical sequencing and arrangement of propositions; and as the evaluation and selection of information from the related sources to develop an argument (Toulmin, 2003; Wingate, 2012). Writing enables individuals to reflect upon, evaluate and record the representations of reasoning and use various discursive techniques to influence and persuade other people (Ferretti & Graham, 2019). Argumentative writing has been defined as "the writing that has a hierarchical, analytic structure and requires critical arguments to be systematically supported" (Applebee, 1984, p. 87). The ability to write high-quality argumentative texts indicates the students' problem-solving capacity and their ability to think independently and critically to logically defend their positions as essential skills to play an active role in society (Hisgen et al., 2020). Working on this genre of writing can also academically empower students by improving their ability to search for credible sources and to summarize and synthesize convincing evidence to support their viewpoints (Thompson, 2021).

This genre of writing has been attended from linguistic, cognitive and sociocultural perspectives (Ferretti & Graham, 2019; van Eemeren et al., 2014). The linguistic perspective takes into account aspects of writing such a world knowledge, knowledge of language features such as word choice and grammar, and genre and text structures while writing argumentative texts (Ferretti & Graham, 2019; MacArthur et al., 2018). According to the cognitive perspective, argumentative writing is a problem-solving process that necessitates the internal representations of the task environment and the adoption of self-regulatory mechanisms to enable the writers to go through various stages of planning, execution and monitoring to achieve their rhetorical objectives (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Graham & Harris, 2009). Writers use their knowledge of linguistic skills, topic knowledge, audience considerations, argumentative genre and discourse features and critical evaluative standards to write argumentative texts (Ferretti & De La Paz, 2011; McCutchen, 2011). From a sociocultural perspective, writing is a semiotic tool established and practiced in social situations, supports social interactions and influences the writer's representations of meanings and his/her participation in social activities (Bazerman, 2016; Newell et al., 2018). Altogether, these perspectives have provided important implications for our understanding of argumentative writing.

In the same regard, the common thread in the studies focusing on the linguistic and rhetorical structure of argumentation is that "developing argumentative writing as the milestone of academic writing includes a body of linguistic, cultural, pedagogical and contextual factors" (Ghanbari & Salari, 2022, p. 2), and necessitates applying sophisticated cognitive and linguistic abilities (Ferretti et al., 2007). While working on this genre of writing in classrooms, the students, besides considering the conventions and principles of academic writing, are expected to critically evaluate their arguments and supporting evidence, address the counterarguments or opposing perspectives and provide a response for them, and satisfy the linguistic and rhetorical demands of the tasks, which make the writing process quite challenging (Ferretti & Fan, 2016). Hyland (1990) suggested a descriptive framework explicating the rhetorical structure of the argumentative genre, including: "1. the thesis which introduces the proposition to be argued, 2. Argument discusses grounds for thesis, and 3. A conclusion that synthesizes the discussion and affirms the validity of the argument" (p. 69).

In addition, Toulmin (2003) has proposed a prototypical schema of argumentation including five components:

- Claim: taking a stance in a discussion
- Evidence, data: reason, proof, facts
- Warrant: inference (linking) rules
- Backing: support of the warrant
- Rebuttal: restrictions, specifications, and counterarguments (as cited in Naznin, 2018, p. 55).

Some scholars have utilized this model to analyze the rhetorical structure of argumentative essays across levels of expertise and by practitioners to teach this genre of writing (Abdollahzadeh et al., 2017; Ghanbari & Salari, 2022; Lea & Street, 1998; Németh & Kormos, 2001; Qin & Karabacak, 2010; Rapanta et al., 2013; Sundari & Febriyanti, 2021; Toulmin, 2003; Wolfe, 2011). For example, the studies conducted in EFL contexts have found that the argumentative essays written by Iranian and Chinese students are mostly deductively organized, and the students mainly use data and claims more frequently than counterarguments and rebuttals (Abdollahzadeh et al., 2017; Qin & Karabacak, 2010). However, within the domain of teaching argumentative essay writing to EFL learners, various theoretical gaps exist, impeding a thorough comprehension and effective implementation of teaching methods. A gap persists in formulating teaching strategies that accommodate diverse educational and cultural backgrounds, rhetorical preferences, and the specific needs and capacities of EFL students. Toulmin's argumentation model offers a structured approach adaptable for identifying, tackling, and teaching effective argumentative writing strategies to students encountering difficulties in crafting argumentative essays. Additionally, this framework could inspire the development of a comprehensive questionnaire to evaluate students' grasp and application of these strategies. This holistic approach aligns theory with practice, facilitating a deeper understanding of effective argumentation and bolstering students' proficiency in crafting compelling and well-structured argumentative essays.

### Students' Problems in Writing Argumentative Texts

Compared to oral argumentation, written argumentation has been slow to develop, and most of the students' argumentative writing drafts have poor quality. Many students struggle to develop the skills needed for generating high-quality arguments (Allen et al., 2018; Noroozi et al., 2023), and most of the written arguments do not have effective evaluative standards, lack adequate supporting proofs, and fail to consider alternative perspectives or counterarguments, which necessitates designing interventions to resolve the problematic areas and improve the quality of students' written arguments (Ferretti & Lewis, 2019). Studies that have focused on the students' difficulties in argumentative writing have indicated that they have an incomplete understanding of the concept of argumentation. Most do not know the key features of a well-developed argument (Lea & Street, 1998; Wingate, 2012). Besides this conceptual misunderstanding, students have difficulties in analyzing the conflicting viewpoints in the sources, cannot establish an effective position and present it in a coherent way in writing, lack the essential rhetorical knowledge and skill, and might face linguistic, cognitive and psychological problems (Andrews, 1995; Aydin & Ozfidan, 2014; Beckett & Kobayashi, 2020; Rahmatunisa, 2014; Shahriari & Shadloo, 2019; Wei Zhu, 2001) since this genre poses rhetorical challenges for the students (Abdollahzadeh et al., 2017; Dastjerdi & Samian, 2011; Lee & Deakin, 2016; Saprina et al., 2020).

Evans and Green (2007) assert that L2 students perceive all aspects of this genre of writing as challenging, with language-related components being more difficult than content-related factors. Nevertheless, some researchers have considered the discourse structure of argumentative essays as being more complex than language-related aspects, which can be the result of teachers' instructional practices that emphasize accuracy at the sentence level at the expense of focusing on discourse organization and rhetorical features like writing effective argumentative propositions or rebutting counterarguments (Connor & Mayberry, 1996; Kubota, 1998; Liu, 2005). Dang et al. (2020) classified the problems students face while composing argumentative essays into the following aspects: linguistic competence (vocabulary and grammar), coherence, background knowledge, organization and development (writing introduction, body and conclusion), and lack of critical thinking. Besides these linguistic and cognitive aspects, Saputrai et al. (2021) pointed to the significance of cultural differences between students' first language and target language and the role of psychological aspects like low motivation, low self-esteem, lack of interest, low mood condition and fear of making mistakes.

Ozfidan and Mitchell (2020) also found problems in various aspects of EFL students' argumentative writing, such as thesis statement, organization/structure, content, development, academic tone, finding evidence, integrating academic sources, writing counterarguments and refutations. They suggested that to resolve these problems, writing instructors must modify the designs of writing courses, teaching strategies and materials they use. Tasya (2022) attributed the cause of these difficulties to the students' insufficient proficiency in productive skills, lack of knowledge about the content and subject matter to be written and inadequate use of strategies for planning and revising the argumentative essays. Eliciting L2 writers' perceptions with regard to the obstacles they face in the writing process can assist the instructors in providing more relevant and responsive teaching practices targeting the problems and needs of the students. In a recent

study, Ghanbari and Salari (2022) examined Iranian EFL teachers' and learners' perceptions and views on argumentative writing and analyzed the structure of argumentative texts written. The findings of their study indicated that argumentative writing is poorly conceived and tackled by Iranian EFL learners, and they face many challenges while writing argumentative essays. Overall, practical constraints in educational settings—such as inadequate resources, outdated curricula, and insufficient teacher training—restrict the implementation of targeted interventions aiding EFL students in overcoming challenges in argumentative writing. Furthermore, challenges may arise in effectively engaging EFL students in activities intended to enhance argumentative writing due to varying levels of motivation, interest, or perceived relevance. Strategies-Based Instruction (SBI) plays a pivotal role in addressing students' challenges in argumentative essay writing and fostering their overall writing skills. SBI empowers students by equipping them with a range of writing strategies, fostering metacognitive awareness, offering personalized instruction, encouraging engagement, and ultimately enhancing proficiency in crafting argumentative essays.

### **Strategies for Writing Argumentative Texts**

In order to write an effective argumentative essay, the writer must apply an appropriate style for presenting rational and relevant ideas and arrange those ideas logically by using their linguistic, discourse and strategic competencies. Recently, there has been a proliferation of research and educational interventions focusing on improving the students' argumentative writing performance (e.g., Allen et al., 2018; Kim & Crossley, 2018; Lu & Xie, 2019; Roscoe & McNamara, 2013; Huang & Zhang, 2020). In one of the studies in the Bangladesh context, Naznin (2018) found that teachers can assist students in writing good argumentative essays by clarifying the argumentative concept and showing them the structure and rhetorical organization of this genre of writing, teaching them appropriate writing strategies, guiding them in planning their ideas and developing the arguments in the execution stage of writing, and providing them with feedback. Some researchers have found that variables such as genre-specific writing goals, topic knowledge, knowledge of persuasion, motivation and strategic behavior can predict the argumentative writing quality of students (Ferretti & Lewis, 2018; Graham et al., 2018; Olinghouse et al., 2015).

In addition, some researchers have been inspired by the model of Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) in order to address the cognitive and social dimensions of writing, emphasizing the students' capacities for planning, writing and revising the essays and engaging in dialogic interactions with the teachers to scaffold their self-regulated problem solving (Harris & Graham, 2016; Harris, Ray, Graham, & Houston, 2018; McKeown et al., 2018; Nussbaum & Kardash, 2005; Ray et al., 2018). For instance, Harris et al. (2018) examined the effects of self-regulatory instruction for close reading of informational texts on elaborating and supporting the students' argumentative writing. The strategic-based instruction integrating reading and writing could improve the complexity of students' planning, inclusion of genre elements and overall quality of written essays. Ray et al. (2018) also indicated that SRSD instruction assisted the students in having better plans, incorporating genre elements and achieving higher essay scores on the ACT examination. Addressing the issues of how teacher-directed classroom interventions can



influence the quality of students' argumentative writing, McKeown et al. (2018) maintain that initially, the teachers must receive strategies-based professional development and observe procedural fidelity. Morris et al. (2023) also found that engaging in collaborative group work and considering the purpose and audience of argumentation can improve the quality of EFL students' argumentative texts. Finally, el Majidi et al. (2023) indicated that debate pedagogy, involving debate-related activities such as reading articles and writing cases, by engaging students in meaningful learning experiences can be effective in improving the textual and content features of argumentative essays. Methodological gaps arise due to the absence of instructional approaches tailored to distinct phases (planning, execution, and monitoring) of argumentative writing. Developing a strategy questionnaire can shed light on the stages where students face the most difficulties, thereby informing targeted instructional interventions to address their specific challenges in argumentative writing and aid in their improvement.

Overall, argumentative writing is important in L2 contexts since the ability to write argumentative texts has been considered an indicator of students' writing competence (Hirvela, 2017). Despite its significance, this genre of writing has not received adequate research attention and is not properly attended to teaching and learning endeavors (Hirvela, 2017; Pessoa et al., 2017; Wingate, 2012). In other words, despite the existing level of theorization and research and the significance of argumentation for students in various disciplines, argumentative writing has received inadequate academic support in the sense that few courses directly attend to this genre of writing (Altınmakas & Bayyurt, 2019; Divsar & Amirsoleimani, 2021; Taheri & Nazmi, 2021). Ghanabri and Salari (2022) maintain that "the research on argumentative writing suffers from the lack of coordinated efforts which consider text, students and teachers in the wider academic contexts" (p. 2). In addition, Peloghitis (2017) believes that further clarification is needed regarding the problems students experience in writing argumentative essays and the strategies they use in composing such texts. Accordingly, the present study, with a direct pedagogical focus in mind, intends to design a genre-specific argumentative essay writing strategy use questionnaire, investigate the difficulties EFL students face while writing argumentative essays and suggest solutions to resolve these problems. In fact, the present study intends to respond to the following research questions:

1. What is the status of argumentative essay writing strategy use among Iranian EFL learners?
2. Is there any significant relationship between strategy use and the quality of argumentative texts produced by Iranian EFL learners?
3. Are there any statistically significant differences between more- and less-skilled student writers in argumentative essay writing strategy use?
4. What are the problems Iranian EFL learners face while writing argumentative essays in English? What solutions can be presented to resolve these issues?

## **Method**

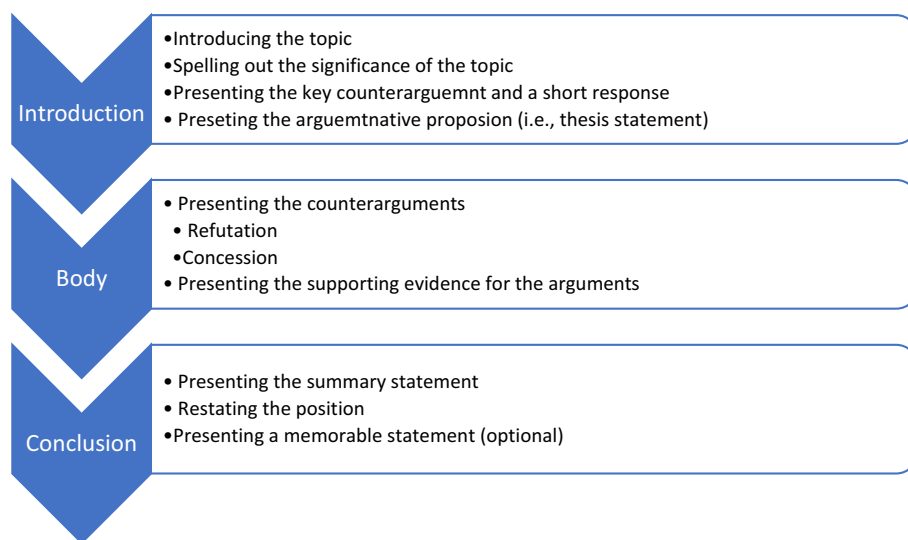
### **Setting and Participants**

The present study was conducted in an essay writing class at the University of Hormozgan in 2023 winter semester. A convenient sample of 29 Junior Iranian EFL

students (9 males and 20 females), from the researcher’s own class, participated in the study. Their language proficiencies ranged from intermediate to advanced and they were from various ethnic and educational backgrounds. They had already passed two basic and advanced writing courses and had enrolled in an essay writing course in which they became familiar with the conventions of writing expository and argumentative essays and practiced writing summaries and research reports. After receiving instruction on various genres of writing and being exposed to some exemplary models and passages, they were required to write essays in class. This class followed a process writing approach, and students were guided in different stages of writing by the instructor-researcher of the present study. It is worth mentioning that prior to the inception of the study, the students were informed about the objectives of the study and the tasks they were supposed to complete, and they willingly accepted to participate in the study.

**Teaching Argumentative Essay Model**

In order to teach argumentative essays, the instructor followed a modified version of the argumentative essay writing model presented by Lee et al. (2009). This model consists of an introduction, body and conclusion organization (see Fig. 1). In the introduction, we have four moves: introducing the topic through attention-getter and background explanation, spelling out the issue’s significance, presenting the key counterargument, and presenting the argumentative proposition (i.e., thesis statement). In the body paragraphs, the counterarguments and the response to them (concession or refutations) are presented, and then the writer’s evidence for supporting the argumentative proposition is provided. In the conclusion section, we had a summary statement or restatement of the position, and memorable statement. During the instruction, the students wrote passages based on this framework and were provided feedback on their work quality.



**Fig. 1** The argumentative essay writing model



### **Instruments and Materials**

The researcher made use of a variety of resources for collecting the required data: (1) a researcher-developed argumentative essay writing strategy questionnaire, (2) two argumentative essay writing tasks, (3) an argumentative essay scoring rubric, (4) an open-ended survey and interview data to identify the students' challenges and difficulties while writing the argumentative essays.

#### ***Argumentative essay writing strategy questionnaire***

Designing an argumentative essay writing questionnaire can be rationalized and justified for several reasons. In fact, the present study involves the development of a pedagogical tool that can be used for instructional purposes; whereas, most of the previous studies on SLA strategy use may contribute to theory-building or empirical research without necessarily creating a tangible teaching or assessment tool. For educators, such a questionnaire can serve as a valuable teaching tool that enables them to teach and reinforce key concepts related to argumentation, evidence, and essay structure. In other words, it can help instructors understand their students' ability to construct coherent arguments, use evidence effectively, and structure their essays logically. In addition, using a well-designed questionnaire can establish a feedback loop where students can reflect on their responses, identify areas for improvement, and track their progress over time. For designing such instrument, at first, the literature was extensively reviewed to identify the existing models of argumentative writing and their theoretical underpinnings (Toulmin, 2003), to sketch upon the studies investigating the students' writing strategy use (e.g., He et al., 2011; Riazi, 1997; Sasaki, 2000), and to find the examples of reliable, valid and frequently used writing strategy questionnaires (Hwanag & Lee, 2017; Khaldieh, 2000; Mu & Carrington, 2007; Petric & Czarl, 2003). In this stage, the items that targeted the students' actions and strategies in the writing process were driven from these questionnaires and adapted to suit the argumentative writing genre. In the next step, a reflection log was given to a group of students in an essay writing course to get their opinions regarding their actions and processes while writing argumentative texts. Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six students to get further information about the writing processes they usually engage in while writing argumentative essays. Based on these sources of information, 50 items were created which were categorized into planning, execution and monitoring strategies subdivided based on different stages of writing. The initial draft of the questionnaire was given to two writing professionals with more than 10 years of experience in teaching writing for quality assessment (judging the redundancy, readability and clarity of sentences). After their suggestions for removing and revising some items, 42 items were kept in the final version of the questionnaire. All the items pertaining to writing strategies were prefaced with a heading specifying the specific section of the essay. Respondents rated their usage of strategies by selecting a five-point Likert scale from *always true of me* (5) to *never true of me* (1). This division has been done for the sake of clarity and is not intended to represent separate stages. As for the validity of the questionnaire, we could not estimate procedures like factor analysis due to the small sample size. Therefore, the decision on the validity of the developed instrument was based on the literature in terms of selecting the method and principles

for designing the questionnaire, benefiting from expert judgment and our own sense of plausibility regarding the students' strategic behaviors and practical constraints. In fact, the present study can be considered as a pilot study for the designed questionnaire. In order to ensure the reliability of the instrument, the internal consistency of the questionnaire was estimated using the Cronbach alpha coefficient (i.e., 0.95), which is substantial.

#### ***Measures of argumentative writing performance***

In order to measure the students' argumentative essay writing performance, they were required to write two argumentative essays based on the prompts taken from their textbook and IELTS academic module task 2. The first essay was written in the classroom and students were given 45 min to write an argumentative essay on the topic given in their textbook: "*Even if a couple is very unhappy in their marriage, the couple should stay together at least until their children leave home. Do you agree or disagree with this idea?*" The second writing task was conducted in an exam session and the students wrote an argumentative essay on an IELTS argumentative essay writing prompt: "*Some students prefer to study alone and others prefer to study with a group of students. Which one do you prefer and why? Provide adequate evidence and explanation for your response*". The students were informed that they have 45 min to complete the task and their written passages will be analytically scored based on various features of an effective argumentative essay. A total of 58 written passages were collected from the students.

#### ***Argumentative essay scoring rubric***

The students' argumentative essays were assessed on a modified form of an argumentative essay rubric (as cited in Naznin, 2018), including eight criteria, each receiving 5 points: claim (ideas and organization), opposing claim, evidence, refutation, word choice and sentence fluency, style (voice), concluding statement, and conventions, usage and mechanics. This rubric had been developed based on The 6+1 Trait Writing model (Culham, 2003) which "emphasizes writing instruction in which teachers and students analyze writing using a set of characteristics, or "traits," of written work: ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions, and presentation" (Coe et al., 2011, p. ix). The total score for each essay was 40 and based on the students' average performance in the two argumentative essays, they were categorized as more-skilled (N=14) and less-skilled (N=15) student writers. To ensure the accuracy of measurement, the written essays were scored by two experienced raters. The researcher and one of his colleagues in the ELT department initially discussed the aspects of each criterion in the assessment rubric and after reaching an agreement engaged in the independent scoring of the essays. Each essay received two separate scores, one from each rater. The correlation coefficient ( $r = 0.89$ ) suggests a positive linear relationship between the scores assigned by two raters. This indicates that the two raters generally agreed in their assessment of the essays.

#### ***Open-ended survey and interview data to identify students' problems in writing argumentative essays***

In order to identify the students' problems in writing argumentative essays, various sources of data were used: students' responses to an open-ended survey soliciting the

problems and difficulties they usually encounter while writing argumentative essays; interviews conducted with some of the students to reveal detailed information about the causes of these problems and how they influenced their writings; and document analysis, that is, analyzing the students' argumentative written texts. As for the open-ended survey, the students responded to the following two questions: (1) What problems and difficulties did you encounter while writing the argumentative essays? and What did you do in order to resolve these problems? Subsequently, to add further depth to the responses, six students (3 less-skilled and 3 more-skilled writers) participated in the semi-structured interviews. To identify the main problems, initially the students' responses were transcribed and carefully analyzed to identify the recurring themes and issues. In this step, the researcher's initial impressions, recurring themes and exemplary quotes and excerpts were recorded. Subsequently, some labels and codes were assigned for meaningful segments of these recorded texts to capture the essence of what the students have expressed. In the next stage, the initial codes were organized into broader themes and categories reflecting the patterns of problems or challenges the students face in writing the argumentative essays. In order to resolve the possible discrepancies and to ensure consistency and validity of the overarching themes, the researcher cross-referenced the themes and findings from interview data, survey responses, and the analysis of written texts. Finally, the identified categories were presented to an experienced writing instructor in the department to get her feedback for further validation.

#### **Procedures of data collection and analysis**

Initially, by consulting the literature on L2 writing strategies, the researcher conducted interviews with some students regarding the processes and strategies they use in various stages of writing argumentative essays, and his own knowledge and experience of working with and teaching argumentative genre developed an argumentative essay writing strategy questionnaire. This questionnaire was then given to some experts and students to pass comments about the efficacy of its structure and items included. Based on these comments, some items were removed and modified. Subsequently, the designed questionnaire was administered in an essay writing class (that is, as a pilot study). Before administering this questionnaire, the students who had received instruction on the argumentative genre of writing wrote two argumentative essays. In order to ensure the accuracy of scoring, two raters independently scored the written essays and the students' average score in the two writing tasks was considered as an index of their writing ability. In addition, based on their performance on these essays, the students were categorized into two groups: more-skilled ( $N=14$ ) and less-skilled ( $N=15$ ) student writers. In the quantitative phase of the study, descriptive statistics, correlation analysis and independent samples *t*-test were run.

In the qualitative phase of the study, content and text analyses techniques were used. In fact, in order to identify the possible challenges and difficulties that the students faced in writing the argumentative essay, they responded to an open-ended survey and a number of them were interviewed as well. The transcribed data were qualitatively analyzed through content analysis to identify the themes and overarching categories. Subsequently, the students' written passages were analyzed through text analysis to identify the areas of difficulty and to get further insights into the sources and causes of students'

problems in writing argumentative essays. Finally, in order to enhance the trustworthiness of qualitative analyses conducted and to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings, data triangulation and peer review/debriefing processes were employed. In fact, the researcher used multiple sources of data (that is, responses to the open-ended survey, interview data and the analyses of students' written texts) to corroborate the findings. The findings were also presented to an experienced colleague in the department to refine the themes and interpretations.

### Results of the study

The first research question intended to investigate the status of argumentative essay writing strategy use among the students. As for the planning stage of writing, the students have reported frequently using a general strategy common in almost all kinds of writing: *I investigate the topic to collect and generate evidence* (Mean = 3.79, SD = 1.14). Due to the availability of technology-based resources, students turn to the internet to read about the writing topic, find exemplary texts and generate the required evidence and supporting details.

Similarly, in writing the introduction, a general strategy has the highest mean score: *I introduce the topic by bringing some general/background information* (Mean = 3.86, SD = 1.30). Next comes the strategy for writing the second most important component of an essay, that is, writing the thesis statement: *Sensing the argument's overall scope and direction, I state the argumentative proposition* (Mean = 3.65, SD = 0.90). Providing background information and presenting a strong thesis statement are mentioned as the key aspects of any essay and are emphasized by the instructors. Therefore, it is natural to see their presence in almost all the essays the students write.

In writing the body paragraphs, the students have reported more frequently using a strategy that shows their awareness of the purpose of writing an argumentative essay and the audiences' expectations for presenting a fair and balanced argument: *I know that to gain acceptance, I must not only explain and support my proposition but also anticipate and overcome objections that the opposition might raise* (Mean = 3.82, SD = 1.13). This strategy emphasizes the fact that compared to other genres of writing for which the writers only present solid details to support their thesis statement, in writing argumentative essays, they need to see the issue from the eyes of their possible opponents by evoking a sense of adversary and provide logical and fair responses to the arguments they make. The next strategy enjoying a higher mean is related to the consideration for the coherence of the passage: *I read repeatedly through sentences and paragraphs to check the logical flow (i.e., consistency of style, tenses, point of view, etc.)* (Mean = 3.79, SD = 1.11). This strategy indicates the students' awareness of the significance of discourse aspects of writing (that is, coherence and organization of ideas) and their consideration of writing as a recursive process.

Regarding the argumentative essay's conclusion section, a strategy showing the students' awareness of their responsibility for persuading the readers has the highest mean score: *I try to finish the argumentative essay strongly and with a conviction/persuasion* (M = 3.82, SD = 1.03). In fact, during the instruction, the students have been told that they should again put themselves in the shoes of their readers and present a strong and convincing assertion that follows from the arguments presented and not

**Table 1** Descriptive statistics for the strategies used in the planning stage of writing

	Before writing an argumentative essay, ...	Mean	SD
1	I think critically about the issue	3.75	0.95
2	I consider what the requirements of the writing task are	3.55	.94
3	I investigate the topic to collect and generate evidence	3.79	1.14
4	I evaluate other points of views	3.31	1.03
5	I anticipate an opposition to my proposition	3.48	1.08
6	I try to arrive at an independent judgement	3.58	1.18
7	I anticipate crucial points that may determine my success or failure in persuading the readers	3.31	0.89
8	I make an outline for the main ideas and supporting details of the essay	3.34	1.04

**Table 2** Descriptive statistics for strategies used in writing the introduction

	While writing the introduction of an argumentative essay, ...	Mean	SD
9	I introduce the topic by bringing some general/background information	3.86	1.30
10	I state the significance of the issue in a logical manner	3.48	1.15
11	I state the counterargument (i.e., opposing view) in a concise manner	3.20	1.01
12	I briefly respond to the opposing views by conceding/refuting them	3.37	0.94
13	Sensing the argument's overall scope and direction, I state the argumentative proposition (i.e., thesis statement)	3.65	0.97
14	I consider the fact that the proposition should define the argument's scope and make a debatable assertion	3.41	0.90
15	I check that the proposition is not self-evidently true or claims something that's purely a matter of opinion	3.41	1.11

end the passage abruptly with a clincher that the readers would not be satisfied at the end and get a feeling of 'so what?'

As for the final stage of writing (i.e., monitoring), a strategy which shows the students' understanding of the benefits of teachers' feedback and learning from them has the highest mean: *I check my mistakes after I get back the essay with feedback from my instructor, and try to learn from them* (Mean = 3.89, SD = 1.11). In fact, due to the complexity of this genre of writing, students encounter many problems while writing, which necessitates teachers' application of scaffolding and feedback.

The second research question intended to see whether any statistically significant relationship exists between argumentative essay writing strategy use and the quality of argumentative passages written by Iranian EFL learners (Table 1). According to Table 2, there was a low level of correlation between these two constructs ( $r = 0.17$ ). This finding confirms the low status of writing strategy use among Iranian EFL learners.

As for the third research question, an independent samples *t*-test was run to investigate the possible differences between more-skilled and less-skilled student writers with regard to argumentative strategy use (Tables 3, 4, 5, 6). As the results displayed in Table 7 indicate, there were no significant differences between the mean scores of more-skilled ( $M =$ ) and less-skilled ( $M =$ ) writers in terms of argumentative strategy use ( $t(27) = -0.307, p = 0.542 > 0.05$ ). This finding confirms the idea that it is not the quantity but quality of strategy use that distinguished high and low quality written texts.

**Table 3** Descriptive statistics for strategies used in writing the body paragraph(s) of argumentative essays

While writing the body paragraphs of an argumentative essay, ...	Mean	SD
16 I know that to gain acceptance, I must not only explain and support my proposition, but also anticipate and overcome objections that the opposition might raise	3.82	1.13
17 I try to see the issue through my opponent's eyes and draw out the most telling arguments they could use against me	3.24	.87
18 I never try to look good by mentioning only weaker opposition arguments	3.51	1.02
19 I consider how to refute the opposition's argument by finding the weaknesses in the opposition's thinking (i.e., by pointing out errors of logic and failures of insight)	3.31	1.03
20 I try to find the points that I have to concede (i.e., agree to some extent) to them	3.72	1.03
21 I bring solid evidence to respond to the counterarguments	3.58	.98
22 I use adequate supporting details and evidence to support my argument and persuade the readers that the position I take is valid	3.37	1.11
23 I extensively and clearly develop each supporting point by building a paragraph around it	3.31	.89
24 I read repeatedly through sentences and paragraphs to check the logical flow (i.e., consistency of style, tenses, point of view, etc.)	3.79	1.11
25 I try to show that my ideas are clear, reasonable, and solid	3.65	1.07
26 I try to direct, develop, and monitor my thinking while writing the argumentative essay	3.62	1.01
27 I regularly scrutinize and, when necessary, modify the argumentative propositions throughout the writing process	3.44	.94
28 I try to ensure that my propositions are written in a way that the reader will be on my side at the end	3.48	1.24
29 I use a variety of words, phrases, and clauses to create cohesion and clarify the relationships among the claim, reasons, and evidence	3.06	1.19
30 I continue writing my essay when I encounter difficulties and challenges	3.27	.99

**Table 4** Descriptive statistics for strategies used in writing the conclusion of argumentative essays

While writing the conclusion of an argumentative essay, ...	Mean	SD
31 I try to finish the argumentative essay strongly and with conviction (i.e., persuasion)	3.82	1.03
32 I provide a concluding statement that follows from and supports the argument presented	3.51	.98
33 I restate and summarize the main points of the argument, showing the reader how the points made proved the argument	3.44	1.32
34 I restate and stress the importance of the original thesis statement as the entire essay has been revolving around arguing and supporting this point	3.37	1.01
35 I present the concluding remark (e.g., a suggestion or a plea for action) which indicates the end of the essay and leaves a final impression on the reader	3.44	1.18

**Table 5** Descriptive statistics for strategies used for the monitoring stage of writing

After finishing the argumentative essay, ...	Mean	SD
36 I read my writing thoroughly from start to end to determine what I have to revise	3.20	1.29
37 I look at the content of the essay to see whether it is persuasive enough and presents a balanced view of the topic	3.34	1.26
38 I look back to the information provided to identify and resolve the possible logical flaws and fallacies in my argumentation	3.17	1.03
39 I check whether the essay is following the/an appropriate structure, style and organization pattern based on the argumentative genre of writing	3.41	1.23
40 I check the chain of ideas to see whether the passage is coherent and cohesive enough	3.51	1.18
41 I check the structure of sentences, vocabularies used and mechanics of writing to ensure their accuracy and appropriateness	3.41	1.23
42 I check my mistakes after I get back the essay with feedback from my instructor, and try to learn from them	3.89	1.11



**Table 6** Correlation coefficient results

Variables	Mean	SD	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)
Strategy use	28.79	5.11	0.171	0.374
Writing quality	29.27	5.32		

**Table 7** Independent samples t-test results for more-skilled versus less-skilled writers' strategy use

Groups	N	Mean	SD	Sig	t	df	Sig. (two-tailed)
More-skilled	14	29.95	6.31	0.542	-0.307	27	0.762
Less-skilled	15	29.57	4.41				

**Table 8** Key problems and difficulties students encountered while writing argumentative essays

Cognitive	Inadequate understanding of the concept of argumentation Inefficient critical and logical thinking, Inadequate supporting evidence, Use of simple and easily-refutable counterarguments, Not employing proper writing strategies
Linguistic and discourse	Grammatical problems in sentence structures Not following the rhetorical structure of a unified argument, Texts were not coherent enough
Psychological	Feeling of uncertainty and anxiety due to the newness and difficulty level of the argumentative genre Low levels of motivation and self-efficacy beliefs in writing Fear of not meeting the expectations of the teacher or not getting good marks in the exam

The Final research question qualitatively explored the difficulties and problems the students faced while writing argumentative essays in English and the possible solutions for resolving them. For this purpose, the students' argumentative texts, their responses to the open-ended survey questions and the results of interviews were solicited. The identified problems were categorized as cognitive, linguistic and discourse, and psychological problems which are further elucidated below (Table 8).

Regarding the cognitive aspect, the key problem the students encountered is related to their inadequate understanding of the concept of argumentation; the texts written have a more expository tone and style, according to which an assertion is presented and further supported by using facts and examples. The following excerpts taken from the written texts indicate the most common pattern in writing the introduction section of argumentative essays among the participants:

*Excerpt 1: Everyone has their own preference about the study method, and all of them have specific benefits. I am of the opinion that it is better to study in a group than to study alone. I feel this way for three principal reasons, which I will explore in the following essay.*

*Excerpt 2: Some students prefer to study alone. Others prefer to study with a group of students. Both of these have both advantages and disadvantages.*

*Excerpt 3: It goes without saying that having focus and concentration in studying is very Important but, if a person could have that focus with being and studying with others will make him or her more interested in learning at least for me for instance learning with other will make my understanding better.*

As it is evident, among the four key moves of the introduction of an argumentative essay, only two of them (namely, providing background information and pressing the thesis statement) are used. This problem can also originate from the students' inefficient critical and logical thinking which is, in turn, the result of the education system in which they have been instructed that favors a knowledge-transferring model of education, giving little room for students' active involvement in the learning process to think about and discover the content for themselves. In addition, there was little evidence of effective counterarguments in the passages and the supporting details were not persuasive enough for the readers to accept the position taken by the writers. One student presents the following comment as a response to the open-ended survey question:

*Fatemeh: Writing an argumentative essay is highly challenging for me because I don't know what to present to be persuasive enough. Also despite our instructor's expectation and based on the framework he used for teaching, I could not present effective counterarguments and refute them. So I only tried to provide support for my own ideas.*

Furthermore, as the results of the questionnaire indicated, the students lacked the necessary writing strategies while writing the essay. For example, these students did not spend time planning effectively for generating ideas and thinking about the essay's possible structure, which are essential for writing, let alone employing other sophisticated writing strategies. In fact, this problem overshadows all the other problems students encounter while writing, which can be attributed to the dominance of product-oriented approaches in teaching writing in EFL contexts. One student comments:

*Reza: When I was writing I faced a block and I didn't know how to continue writing the passage... I lost my concentration and wasted a lot of time because I couldn't properly manage my performance during writing.*

*Zahra: Writing has always been difficult for me. We didn't know the significance of writing until we entered the university. Previously, we wrote only some sentences and received no guidance on how to write an effective paragraph in English.*

Regarding the problems in the linguistic and discourse aspects of writing, there were many examples of grammatical errors in the sentence structures and most of the passages did not follow the rhetorical organization of an argumentative essay. The following excerpts illustrate the point clearly:

*Excerpt 4: Actually I prefer to study in group because when I study with someone I understand more but when I study alone I should study two or three times I can say when we study in group I can understand the meaning of the lesson from my friend's tongue and it's better than study alone so as I say when we study in group as my friend explain the lesson to us I can explain it to others in that way I can understand the lesson.*

*Excerpt 5: ...*

*The reason behind all of these is that by teaching and communication we will learn faster and better.*

*Rarely you would see any group of students working together or studying together because we all believe that studying alone is better.*

*In this situation if students use the team-work they would be much more successful especially in English learning.*

*It is possible that in this line of work students get much more excited to study and it may also become a very challenging competition.*

*To sum up this idea and situation I have to say being able to study with others is a very social and influencing method.*

The abundance of grammatical problems in the students' texts can be attributed to their inadequate language and writing proficiency levels, insufficient authentic reading and writing practices, and the difficulty level of the argumentative task that demands simultaneous attention to various aspects of writing. In fact, most Iranian students are taught grammar explicitly in a rather decontextualized fashion and consider the rules of grammar to be memorized rather than used for writing accurate sentences. In addition, the newness and difficulty level of the argumentative genre that demands the incorporation of various moves in each section poses challenges for the students and overwhelms them. Therefore, managing various aspects of writing, like content, organization, cohesion, sentence structures, mechanics of writing, etc., at once might not be easy for EFL students who have few opportunities for authentic experience and practice in writing in English. One student in the interview session maintains:

*Mohammad: Writing an argumentative text was quite difficult for me. When I was looking for ideas to put them on the paper, I didn't know how to present them that would be satisfactory for my instructor. While I was thinking about using each move in my passage, I forgot to pay attention to the grammar of sentences or use of appropriate vocabulary. I'm not sure my passage can be considered an argumentative text as emphasized by our instructor.*

In addition, the analyses of the written texts indicated that most of them did not follow the structure of a unified argument and, thus, the rhetorical organization of an

argumentative passage having the instructed moves had not been followed. Adding to this problem was the fact that the passages were not coherent enough and the students jumped from one idea to another without showing the proper connections between the ideas and providing acceptable evidence and supporting details for each point. Students' lack of content and background knowledge on the topics can also intensify the problem, though the attempt was made to select a very general topic that all the students are familiar with in the exam session (i.e., task 2).

The students' psychological problems like their feeling of uncertainty and anxiety were mostly due to the newness of this genre of writing that demands simultaneous consideration of various issues and incorporation of several moves in the passages. In addition, since one of the tasks was written in the final exam session, the students were afraid of not getting good scores and meeting the instructor's expectations, which indicates their low levels of self-efficacy beliefs in writing. Two students presented the following comments in the interview session:

*Hamid: I could not manage my thinking during the writing; I thought I was writing the passage in the wrong way that made me anxious. I think we need further practice to write such passages.*

*Sahar: I wrote a passage, but I don't know whether I have written it correctly. The instructor expected that we try our best to write based on the argumentative framework he taught us, but I was completely mixed up.*

Finally, based on the students' problems in writing the argumentative texts, the instructor-researcher of the present study presented the following suggestions to resolve the students' problems and assist them in writing higher-quality argumentative passages:

- Writing instructors must ensure students have a fundamental understanding of what an argument is, including the components like claims, evidence, warrants and counterarguments.
- Writing instructors must encourage critical thinking by teaching students how to evaluate evidence, identify logical fallacies, and analyze the strengths and weaknesses of different arguments. They must foster classroom discussions and debates on various topics to promote critical thinking and argumentation skills.
- Writing instructors must guide students through the planning and outlining process before they begin writing and help them organize their thoughts and arguments logically.
- Students must be provided with more effective instruction and well-written exemplary argumentative passages to become familiar with this genre of writing and the effective features and requirements of argumentative passages
- Students need further practice and feedback for writing argumentative passages. Instructors must conduct individual conferences with students to discuss their writing progress, address specific challenges, and provide personalized feedback.
- Students need more effective instruction, modeling, mediation, and scaffolding on (argumentative essay) writing strategies

- Technology-based resources and platforms offering writing management systems, automatic evaluation, assessment and feedback should be used for guiding the students in various stages of writing and assisting them in knowing the features of good writing and refining their passages
- Writing instructors must show respect for the students' efforts and emphasize that they can learn from their mistakes and can improve the quality of their writing to enhance their motivation, engagement, and self-efficacy beliefs.
- Writing instructors must encourage out-of-class literacy (reading and writing) activities to assist the students in gaining further authentic exposure and experiences in writing in this genre of writing.
- A stress-free environment must be created that fosters a collaborative atmosphere in which learners assist each other in completing the assigned writing tasks.

On the whole, writing instructors must bear in mind that improving argumentative writing skills is an ongoing process, and students may progress at different rates; therefore, they must tailor their instruction to meet the needs of individual learners, respond to their specific problems and provide ample opportunities for practice and refinement.

## Discussion

Adopting a complementary process-genre approach and a mixed-methods research design, the present study intended to investigate the writing strategies and problems of a group of Iranian EFL learners while writing argumentative texts. As the students' responses to the items of the argumentative essay writing strategy use questionnaire indicated, the argumentative essay writing strategy use has a rather low status among the students and they have mostly embarked on some general strategies common in almost all genres of writing and their passages lack the essential qualities of argumentative texts. In fact, these passages were written like expository essays presenting a thesis statement and a number of supporting details as arguments. Similarly, Abdollahzadeh et al. (2017) maintained that the argumentative essays written by Iranian students are mostly deductively organized and the students mainly use data and claims more frequently than counterarguments and rebuttals. The findings of present study also confirm the idea that critical-thinking-related skills are not effectively attended to and fostered in university education (McKinley, 2013). In addition, since argumentative writing demands a response to a controversial issue by thinking logically and critically, the students' low level of critical thinking influenced the efficacy and adequacy of the arguments presented as well since the passages written were not supported with adequate facts, evidence, reasoning and logical explanations that made the texts more informative than argumentative. In general, Iranian EFL learners encounter challenges in composing argumentative essays due to various factors like their restricted language proficiency, struggles in adopting Western-based argument structures and persuasive techniques, difficulties in crafting a clear thesis, organizing arguments logically, effectively addressing counterarguments, maintaining essay coherence, limited exposure to argumentative writing in their native language, and inadequate practice in English. To tackle these issues, tailored instructional approaches are necessary, including explicit teaching of argumentative writing strategies, culturally sensitive instruction, scaffolded practice,

specific feedback, exposure to model essays, and opportunities for guided practice in argumentative writing.

In addition, there was a low level of correlation between argumentative essay writing quality and strategy use. Furthermore, no statistically significant differences existed between more- and less-skilled student writers in the argumentative essay writing strategy use. These findings signify the fact that the application of writing strategies is not a straightforward issue and depends on various factors such as the individuals' personal characteristics and attitudes (e.g., motivation and self-efficacy beliefs), their cognitive capacities (e.g., working memory, aptitude, etc.), their identities and emotions, their level of linguistic and discourse competence, topic familiarity and genre knowledge, previous writing experiences, quality of instructional procedures and writing techniques taught, cultural differences, contextual idiosyncrasies, physical circumstances, course requirements, time restrictions, writing purpose and assignment focus (e.g., to explain, summarize, critique or persuade), task characteristics and perceived difficulty, quality of teachers' evaluation and feedback, technology use, etc., which can influence the students' use of writing strategies and their views on the strategies that can contribute to more effective writing performance (Abdollahzadeh, 2010; Hwang & Lee, 2017; Kim, 2016; Maarof & Murat, 2013; Manchón et al., 2007; Pajares, 2003; Petric & Czarl, 2003). Therefore, providing a supporting environment can be beneficial for the students to be competent in this genre of writing. In fact, previous studies have also suggested that instructional support and dialogic interactions for using critical standards when evaluating arguments, critical questions on argumentative strategies, rhetorical judgment, audience consideration, formative feedback and scenario-based assessments (SBAs), which focus on creating, evaluating and summarizing skills can influence the students' argumentative writing (Deane et al., 2018; Ferretti & Lewis, 2018; Nussbaum et al., 2018; Wissinger & De La Paz, 2016).

In the qualitative phase of the study, the analyses of the students' argumentative texts and their responses to the open-ended survey and semi-structured interviews revealed that they had encountered various problems while writing argumentative essays which are categorized as cognitive, linguistic and discourse and psychological problems. Previous studies have also confirmed that despite the significance of argumentative essay writing in academic contexts and across various disciplines, many students face difficulties while applying critical thinking and developing arguments (Abdollahzadeh et al., 2017; Saprina et al., 2020; Sundari & Febriyanti, 2021). In fact, the students do not seem to "be prepared to effectively scaffold argument writing" (Pessoa et al., 2017, p. 42). The difficulties are related to various aspects of argumentative writing, such as linguistic coding, structure, content, rhetorical organization and students' lack of domain knowledge and difficulties in applying the requirements of a high-quality argumentative text (Hays et al., 1988; Valero Haro et al., 2022; Wingate, 2012). More specifically, these problems can be attributed to the particular structure of argumentation, limitations on the students' cognitive resources and poor pedagogic endeavors and activities employed (Martin Davies, 2008; Ghanbari & Salari, 2022).



In order to resolve these problems, the researcher presented a number of suggestions, but the key solution is embarking on strategies-based instruction to enhance the students' competency in this genre of writing. For example, using the insights from SRSD tradition, some argumentative writing strategies have been developed which are abbreviated by using mnemonics that help students remember to use the critical components of an argumentative essay: "TREE (Topic sentence, Reason, Examining Reason and Ending); STOP (Suspend judgment, Take a side, Organize ideas, Plan more as you write); and DARE (Develop a topic sentence, Add supporting ideas, Reject arguments for the other side, End with a conclusion)" (Song & Ferretti, 2013, p. 69). As an example, Song and Ferretti (2013) found that students receiving SRSD revising strategy instruction focusing on asking and answering critical questions (ASCQ) on the arguments wrote higher quality essays containing more alternative standpoints, counterarguments and rebuttals. Argumentation Scheme (AS) revising strategy also enabled the students to provide further supporting reasons and concrete examples for their standpoints. Hisgen et al. (2020) also supported the positive influence of STOP and DARE training on students with learning disabilities to compose higher-quality argumentative passages. Consequently, strategies-based interventions must be incorporated into the writing courses to familiarize the EFL learners with features of good argumentative texts and improve their argumentative essay writing competency (Fajrina et al., 2021).

Overall, resolving the issues faced by EFL university students in writing argumentative essays and boosting their writing skills requires a multifaceted approach. This entails implementing Strategies-Based Instruction that explicitly teaches writing techniques suited for argumentative essays. Additionally, it involves providing students with exemplary argumentative essays as models, analyzing these essays to highlight effective strategies, structures, language usage, and reasoning. Detailed feedback should encompass not only grammar and structure but also critical thinking, argument development, and adherence to academic conventions. Addressing cultural disparities affecting argumentative writing, employing digital tools, encouraging reflective practices, offering personalized support for specific writing challenges, and customizing strategies to individual needs are also crucial aspects of this multifaceted approach. Creating a supportive environment in which the students can learn from each other and assist each other in completing the assigned task can add to the efficacy of such courses. In fact, in the initial stages of instruction on argumentative writing, it might be better for the students to engage in collaborative writing and subsequently write their passages independently. Writing instructors can also start with smaller argumentative tasks before tackling full essays, which helps students build their confidence and skills gradually.

## Conclusion

Following a process-genre paradigm and using various sources of data, the present study designed a genre-specific argumentative essay writing strategy questionnaire, investigated the status of strategy use for different phases and sections of argumentative essays by a group of Iranian EFL learners, explored the main problems they encountered while

writing the argumentative texts, and presented some suggestions for resolving these problems and writing higher quality argumentative texts. The findings pointed to the low status of argumentative strategy use and the abundance of problems in the students' argumentative essay writing performance. In fact, despite the credibility and multifunctional nature of writing, this skill is not well-recognized in the Iranian EFL context due to outdated curricular policies and the existence of various ideological, institutional and practical obstacles that limit the teachers from adopting more effective pedagogical practices (Naghdipour, 2016). The key solution for resolving this problem is empowering the writing teachers to adopt a strategy-based instruction approach and training more strategic and self-regulated learners. Nevertheless, due to the small sample size, there was no possibility for validating the designed questionnaire and, thus, generalizing the findings to other contexts; this is an endeavor that future research can attend.

#### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the students who participated in the study. I would also extend my sincere gratitude to the editors and reviewers of the journal for their cooperation and helpful comments.

#### Author contributions

OM designed the study, collected the data, and wrote the paper.

#### Funding

The study did not receive any funding. This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

#### Availability of data and materials

All the data are available upon the request of the editors and the corresponding author can provide them.

#### Declarations

##### Ethics approval and consent to participate

A statement on ethics approval was obtained from the Department of English Language Teaching, College of Humanities, University of Hormozgan.

The students were informed about the objectives of the study and the tasks they must perform, and willingly participated in the study.

##### Consent for publication

Not applicable.

##### Competing interests

The author has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

The author did not receive support from any organization for the submitted work.

Received: 9 July 2023 Accepted: 5 December 2023

Published online: 01 May 2024

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