

# EFL argumentative essay writing as a situated-social practice: A review of concepts

## Ensayos argumentativos en inglés como lengua extranjera y su escritura como una práctica social situada: revisión de conceptos

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### Abstract

This article presents a discussion on the theoretical trends that see EFL argumentative essay writing as a situated social practice. The concepts explored in this paper constitute the basis for a research-based proposal that approaches argumentative writing from an innovative social, situated, and genre-based perspective and that can be viewed as an alternative to encourage EFL essay writing as a social practice in and beyond the classroom bounds. The conceptual discussion is first viewed from the second language learning theory and applied linguistics domains that underpin the proposal. Then, the core concepts are presented, explored, and explained. These involve first, writing as a situated social practice, second, argumentative essay writing as a dynamic process of creation and third, genre as situated social action. Finally, the article provides a reflection on how these concepts can be understood and interrelated for argumentative essay writing to be approached as a literacy practice that contributes to the education of EFL learners as reflective, critical, and social writers

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### Keywords

EFL, writing, argumentative essays, genre-based writing, discursive genre.

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### Resumen

Este artículo presenta una discusión sobre las tendencias teóricas que ven la escritura de ensayos argumentativos en inglés lengua extranjera como práctica social situada. Los conceptos que se exploran en este documento constituyen la base de una propuesta de investigación que aborda la escritura argumentativa desde una perspectiva innovadora, social, situada, y basada en la enseñanza de géneros que se puede ver como una alternativa para fomentar la escritura de ensayos en inglés lengua extranjera como una práctica social situada que trascienda los límites del salón de clase. La discusión de los conceptos se visualiza primero desde la teoría de aprendizaje de una segunda lengua y los dominios de la lingüística aplicada que fundamentan la propuesta. Luego se presentan, se exploran y se explican los conceptos centrales; éstos incluyen, primero, la escritura como práctica social situada, segundo, la escritura de ensayos argumentativos como un proceso dinámico de creación, y tercero, el género como acción social situada. Finalmente, el artículo presenta una reflexión sobre cómo estos conceptos se pueden entender e interrelacionar para que la escritura de ensayos argumentativos sea abordada como una práctica de alfabetización que contribuya a la formación de estudiantes de inglés lengua extranjera como escritores reflexivos, críticos y sociales.

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### Palabras clave

Lengua extranjera, escritura, ensayos argumentativos, escritura basada en géneros, género discursivo.

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Becoming literate goes beyond the mere learning of reading and writing skills; it embeds social, cultural, and personal practices that surround readers and writers as social beings and which shape the way they write or read. As Chapetón (2007) argues, literacy, understood as a social practice, is a purposeful activity that takes place in social interactions among individuals. Literacy should therefore provide us with tools for critical reason so as to be able to challenge and transform sociocultural practices through reflection and careful thought. This perspective is considered here, along with the idea that literacy is “interconnected with language practices and modes of learning that can only be understood in terms of their articulation with the power relations which structure the wider society” (Giroux, 2001, 207). As becoming literate implies being in contact with different practices that take place within the society, it is not possible to fully understand or approach literacy in isolation.

We share the belief that literacies are situated and that all uses of language are located in specific times and places (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Baynham, 1995; Gee, 2001). In this sense, it is possible to view writing as a situated practice and understand the importance of the context in which it takes place. Likewise, Gee (2008) says that a text or a simple sentence acquires its meaning only within the social configuration it forms at a specific moment. He argues that the practices in which texts are embedded are part of bigger constructs called Discourses, that is, combinations of literacy practices with different forms of thinking, believing, acting, and interacting with people, objects, and technologies<sup>3</sup>. Gee’s claims are essential as they imply a broader acknowledgement of what a literacy practice is, and a better understanding of the fact that when we interchange meaning, identities are created and shaped.

Thus, the main purpose of this paper is to share with the reader the theoretical framework that supports a qualitative research project whose main

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<sup>3</sup> Gee makes an important distinction between Discourses with big D and discourses with little d, the latter is used “to mean just language in use” (Gee, 2001, p. 124).

aim is to document and analyze EFL argumentative essay writing practices and enhance our capacity to address the issue of writing as a situated social practice within a genre-based approach. These writing practices can be seen as an alternative proposal to foster literacy as a critical, social, and situated activity that makes the writing event a significant experience in which EFL learners have the opportunity to express, communicate, share, and negotiate their views of the world and feelings through the written text.

A brief account of the second language learning theory and the applied linguistics domains behind the proposal is first given to provide a broad framework that situates the conceptual discussion. Then, the core perspective that views the act of writing as a literacy practice that is social and situated is provided. Finally, the way argumentative essay writing is understood and how it can be related to a genre-based approach in the EFL context is discussed.

### **The sociolinguistic and critical approaches to language learning and literacy**

A social view of learning is worth considering when writing is approached from a social perspective. Tarone (2007) states that “a sociolinguistic approach should be central to socially oriented SLA research” (p. 837); this is why the second language learning theory that frames this theoretical discussion is the sociolinguistic perspective of language learning. Keeping in mind a sociolinguistic approach to language and literacy learning calls for a coherent understanding of the integration of social and cognitive aspects and how they contribute to learning processes. Vygotsky (1978) states that language learning takes place first in a social way, and then internally in the individual; this can lead us to acknowledge the importance that social contact has for intrapersonal construction of meaning and scaffolding in learning.

As exposed by Tarone (2007), it is indeed necessary to bear in mind that second language learning is directly affected by social factors as well as through social interactions and social relationships. This

author, advocates for a sociolinguistic model<sup>4</sup> that includes not only the linguistic contextual aspects but also social factors and time. Considering Tarone's ideas implies bringing together the social and the cognitive in research that considers a sociolinguistic theory of learning. This can open possibilities to explore not only what happens in an individual's mind, but also how contextual factors influence and shape his/her learning process.

Different factors in the sociocultural framework in which students as writers are involved, the different practices (Barton & Hamilton, 2000) and Discourses (Gee, 2008) may have an impact on their written production. Just as Vygotsky sees a strong relation between the individual and the surrounding environment in the construction of meaning, we are concerned with how literacy practices can be shaped by the broader social ambits in which they are immersed. The importance of the context in which literacy practices take place is informed by Rogoff (1982) who aims for an integration of context and cognitive development, and highlights the fact that cognition is "an event or an activity integrating person and context" (p. 161) and that they cannot be separated or each studied in isolation.

It is considered here that through interaction peers can contribute to the construction of meaning and, thus, to learning. In this respect, Willet (1995), stresses the importance of socialisation to construct and stretch concepts and language; he shows that peers working together both engage in meaningful interaction and construct identity, and that team work supports language development and increases students' social status in a group. Swain (2000) also highlights the importance of collaborative dialogue<sup>5</sup> as a mediating tool for learning as knowledge that is collectively constructed can be later used by individuals.

4 See Tarone (2007) for a detailed description of this model

5 As defined by the author, collaborative dialogue is dialogue in which speakers are engaged in problem solving and knowledge building (Swain, 2000, 102)

The idea of language support and improvement through interaction may also contribute to encourage students to take an active role in the social practices in which they are involved. Given the fact that students come into the classroom with rich background knowledge, they may become important supporters of each other; this opportunity can promote learning and may help enrich discussion and debate both in and outside the classroom.

The critical applied linguistics domains underlying this framework are, based on Pennycook (2004), critical approaches to language education and critical approaches to literacy. The first domain focuses on transformative pedagogy, and it is based on the assumption that a critical approach to language education needs to focus on contextual issues and the ways in which research looks to transform the current situation (Pennycook, 2004). In this sense, viewing argumentative essay writing from a critical approach seeks transformation in two ways: First, by accounting for students' voices so that they express their ideas, opinions, and feelings about practices in which they are immersed; and second, by going beyond the linguistic features in the text to "transcend their own environments" (Freire & Macedo, 2005), and challenge the technical power of the text as well as the social and literacy practices (Barton & Hamilton, 2000) that shape it.

The second domain focuses on language and literacy, which in Pennycook (2004) are related to workplace settings. According to the author, critical applied linguistic approaches to these contexts "focus far more on questions of access, power, disparity, and difference" (p. 14) thus looking to actively engage people with change. In this sense, our aim is to view literacy beyond the mere development of skills and the mastering of linguistic forms to contribute to transformation. The former two aspects are important to consider as they also make part of the act of writing; however, the intention here is to discuss other aspects related to sociocultural issues that can be approached through writing as a situated social practice.

### Writing as a Situated Social Practice

Lillis (2001) describes writing as practice which links language and what socially situated individuals do both in specific situations and at the broader level of culture. This claim is important here as it embeds the idea that writing connects us to our social and cultural contexts. Baynham (1995), on the other hand, states that writing can be approached considering different aspects: The subjectivity of the writer, the writing process, the purpose and audience, the text as product, the power of the written genre of which the text is an exemplar, and the source or legitimacy of that power. Furthermore, it looks at the way in which writing and the writer are entrenched in discourses, ideologies, and institutional practices. This view is crucial as it challenges the typical perspective usually held in EFL contexts that writing is mainly a technical skill whose success depends on mastering of linguistic forms, and the ability of a writer to shape ideas to be decoded by the reader.

It is our belief that writing practices are embedded in social activities that take place within specific ambits, at specific moments, and serve specific needs. Writing is situated because it takes place at a specific moment in history and at a specific place in the society; it makes part of the world and acquires meaning within the context where it occurs (Baynham, 1995; Lillis, 2001). Different aspects make texts situated: First are the writers' own experiences, beliefs, and feelings constructed and shaped through contact with others; and then are those inherent to them such as age, gender, or race. Lillis (2001) calls these factors voice-as-experience, which are the life experiences and personal features that students as writers bring with them. These voices situate writing not only as the set of utterances that are produced in interaction but also as ideologies and cultural world views, which are not explicit in a utterance or discourse (Ramírez, 2007).

On the other hand, writing is social because it takes place within a social ambit. As stated by Ramírez (2007), it arises from the writer's need to communicate, learn, or express. As writers engage in jotting down their ideas, they establish dialogic communication with the world and with the

powers that compel them to write and about which they write. Besides, writing embeds ideologies and powers that are intrinsically attached to the writers and that are put together in a dialogical relationship with their voice, influencing their beliefs, ideas, and feelings, mediated by their role in the writing event.

Figure 1 shows our understanding of writing as a situated social practice<sup>6</sup>. It includes elements that are taken into account in the development of this core concept, and it is based on the authors that were considered to build this construct.

In this figure, writing is displayed as a metaphor of a cog in a watch, working with others which are different in size, strength, and purpose. Each plays a role and can be approached from three different perspectives: Its constitution, its purpose, and its importance for the well-functioning of the watch. Likewise, writing can be approached from the perspective of the text as linguistic expression, from the purposes that it serves in the society, or as practice that involves the two previous ones, and goes beyond to look at the power relationships, social institutions and Discourses (Gee, 2008) that shape it and influence the writer.

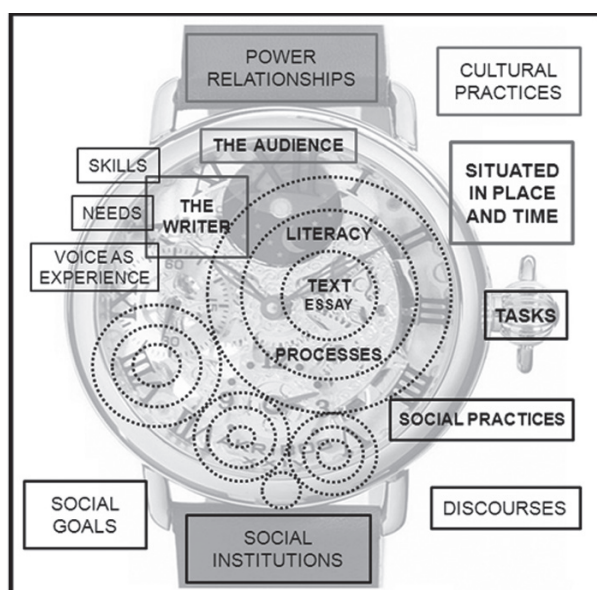
Just as cogs cannot work properly if isolated from their context, writing as a situated social practice can only be fully understood if viewed within the historical moment and the place where it occurs. Talking about writing as a situated social practice also involves the development of skills and the inclusion of the author's individual needs and voice-as-experience (Lillis, 2001).

Finally, as these practices occur in contact with others, it is possible to foster them in the classroom. That is why tasks, as conceived by Hyland (2004), are included at the point of the watch crown; these can wind the writing practices and contribute to both language learning/improvement, and the development of a practice where power relationships embedded in teaching and learning are challenged and transformed.

6 The watch image in the background was taken on October 29, 2010, from <http://www.watchesaddict.com/tag/luxury-watches/>



**Figure 1.** Writing as a situated social practice: A metaphor of a watch.



It is hard to find supporting research background to the construct of writing as a situated social practice, and even more so in the EFL context. An ethnographic study carried out by Correa (2010) in a General Studies Programme at a public school in western Massachusetts aimed to examine the challenges that a mature ESL student and her teachers faced with regards to the construction of literacy and voice in writing. Correa found that the main challenges on the student's part were to show knowledge in a way that was acceptable by her audience and have the vocabulary to do it. The instructors' and tutor's challenges included knowing how to provide students with support and feedback regarding their writing.

A vital contribution of this study lies at the heart of the recommended perspective towards writing: Correa states that the faculty where the study was conducted "would need to stop considering texts as fixed sets of structures that can be copied from a handout and that are applicable across context, situation, purpose and audience" (Correa, 2010, p. 92). This seems to imply on the one hand, that we need to go beyond the technical view of writing as skill learning, and on the other, that we need to consider writing as a situated social practice as it cannot be similarly applicable to all contexts, situations, purposes, and audiences.

A study carried out by Viáfara (2008), conducted in a writing course at Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia, explored the biographical narratives of 45 EFL student-teachers in the Modern Languages program at UPTC in Tunja and described how they had developed their writing in English. The participants, aged 20 to 26, were from Bogotá and from rural and urban areas of Boyacá and Santander. They belonged to three different cohorts between 2006 and 2008.

As to the methodology used to teach learners to write in English, which is of interest here, he found important information: Teachers placed excessive emphasis on students' mistakes, grammatical training was the core of writing practices, topic repetition was very frequent, and teaching methods were outdated. This, according to Viáfara turned the writing practices into a process of fear, doubt, and boredom. On the other hand, he also identified an urgent need for teachers to participate in Teacher Development Programmes (TDP) not only to improve their language proficiency but also to support their methodologies.

This study is relevant to this discussion in two main ways: First, it hints at the development of different classroom methodologies which promote learning and at the same time change traditional paradigms in writing practices; and second, since the study was carried out in a B.A. EFL programme, it was important to see students' reflections as to how they approached writing, and the flaws they evidenced in their education.

Ariza (2005) carried out an action research study with a group of 36 ninth-graders from a public school in Bogotá which intended to show 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. The students, boys and girls aged 14 to 16, were low-achievers and their least-developed skill was writing; however, the researcher only chose a sample of five average students based on their attitudes and commitment with the class. The data were gathered from students' artifacts and the researcher's observations. Four relevant aspects

were found through the study: First, activities with pictures were more important for generating ideas than those in which words were the starting point; second, tasks which were short, clear, and simple generated a more positive attitude and commitment on the part of the students; third, letters were a good resort for students to understand focussing; and finally, the teacher's role was found to be very important as a model and facilitator rather than a judge of linguistic elements.

This article is relevant here as it shows the real implementation of a project in which writing was viewed as a process, not as a product. Since our intention in this paper is to propose a conceptual framework that goes beyond the linguistic and textual in the writing of argumentative essays, it was both interesting and informative to see how this approach to writing worked in other contexts.

### **Argumentative Essay Writing: A dynamic process of creation**

Argumentative essay writing is defined here after Álvarez (2001), as the set of strategies of an orator who addresses an audience looking to modify their judgement, get their adhesion, or make them admit a given situation or an idea. It is complemented by Díaz' (2002) claim that predominantly argumentative essays deal with controversial topics, and in them an author defends a point of view that he/she considers valid. Their purpose is to convince, get an adhesion, justify a way to see facts, refute interpretations about an event, or persuade the reader to change an opinion about a subject. However, for persuasion to occur, there needs to be a dialogic basis between interlocutors (Ramírez, 2007) who have certain purposes and reasons to communicate and present them in order to reach an agreement. In this sense, argumentation involves social action.

The audience here is considered following Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1989): "Those whom the orator wants to influence with his/her argumentation" (p. 55). Three types of audience are mentioned by the authors: The universal type, constituted by mankind, a defined interlocutor, and the subject him/herself. The typology is useful to this discussion

as it implies that a writer keeps dialectic communication with a reader and shapes his/her viewpoints and arguments according to the relationship that is established between them. It is our belief, that the activities designed to foster argumentative writing as a situated social practice, should engage students in writing texts first, thinking of their potential readers - readers who may go beyond the classroom bounds-, and second, taking into account that interaction may imply dialectic communication between the writer's personal voice and that of the audience.

Although in a written text it is not possible to establish face-to-face interaction, it is essential for the writer to think of the audience in order to choose the ideas to be presented. Goatly (2000) describes how texts can convey and create interpersonal relationships; he describes three dimensions of these relationships based on Ponyton (1991): Power (vertical social distance expressed through force, authority, status, or expertise), contact (horizontal social distance understood in terms of frequency and duration of relationships), and emotion (which depends on the other two and is used to change the horizontal distance). Goatly refers to a number of language elements that authors utilise in their texts in order to establish relationships with their audience, showing concern for the reader, reducing assertively, imitating everyday speech, showing formality, addressing the reader directly, or expressing solidarity or separation. Bearing in mind these aspects shows an organisation of discourse in function of the readership, and their relevance at the textual level is expanded to a social level that is implied in writing as a situated social practice.

As to essay organisation, a proposal that integrates Oshima and Hogue's (1997) and Álvarez' (2001) essay models is put forward as the basis of this discussion. It accounts for organisation, clarity, and conciseness, but at the same time it reminds authors that they can draw on their own ideas, strategies, and resources to present arguments; besides, it gives writers the possibility to include their own values, feelings, and viewpoints based on their sociocultural context, always keeping the audience in mind within a dialogical relationship.

The introductory paragraph presents the topic and prepares the audience favourably so that they accept the thesis. Here, the writer can use different resources: Appealing to a precedent fact or event on which the thesis is based, adducing shared values or values made out of tradition, resorting to authority, and resorting to the emotions of the audience. The general statements provide background information about the topic of the essay, and the thesis statement introduces the main idea.

The body is composed of one or more paragraphs depending on the author's ideas. Each paragraph supports the thesis statement and has a topic sentence (the main idea of the paragraph), supporting sentences, and sometimes a concluding sentence. To support the topic sentences, the writer can present facts, so that the reader knows the defined thesis and positions him/herself in the writer's favour, and arguments that the writer considers are in favour of his/her thesis and can be used to refute counter-arguments. Writers can also use concessions to limit the extent of arguments and lower their argumentative force.

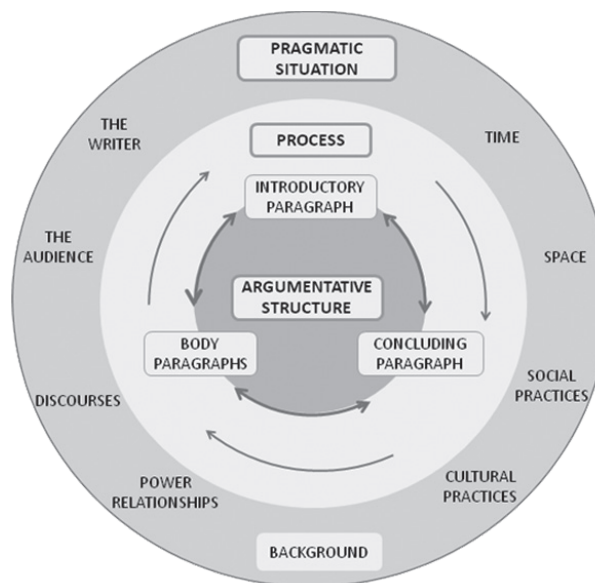
The concluding paragraph reminds the reader of the most important aspects that were presented and implies a reinforcement of the arguments that were used. Besides, it leaves the reader with the writer's final thoughts on the subject; this can be done by means of a judgement, a rhetorical question, or a piece of advice, without adding any new information.

Figure 2 shows how argumentative essay writing is understood in this proposed framework. It comprises several aspects: First is the text as a unit, composed of several elements both textual and linguistic; second is writing as a process of creation, thought, and use of skills; and finally is the situated social context that the writer and his/her audience belong to.

In the centre of the figure are the parts of an argumentative structure: Introductory paragraph, body paragraphs, and concluding paragraph. These elements are interrelated because each one influences what can be said and done in the others thus implying a dynamic relationship. The process of writing is in the second circle; in it, the author

chooses a topic and an audience, and he/she reflects and organises the ideas. Since this is a dynamic action, the writer can draft and redraft the text, look for appropriate arguments to support the thesis, and make adjustments through editing and proofreading (Stevens & Kluewer, 1983). The writer also decides upon the style of the text, the number of paragraphs, and rhetorical elements that can help him/her to influence the readers.

**Figure 2.** Argumentative essay writing: A dynamic process of creation



In the outer circle is the author of an essay who belongs to a sociocultural reality. He/she is able to relate to an audience and express his/her viewpoints with regards to issues that concern them both. The writer wants to reach a goal such as convince, persuade, or justify; to this end, he/she resorts to his/her voice-as-experience (Lillis 2001), that is his/her personal background, knowledge, and experiences. As part of a society, the writer also gets into contact with power relationships, Discourses (Gee, 2008), and social and cultural practices which make part of his/her reality and shape him/her as a person and as a writer.

Key studies that illustrate previous research connected to the core concept of argumentative essay writing are now discussed. Zúñiga and Macías (2006) conducted an action research study with

twenty-five students of the undergraduate Foreign Language Teaching Program at Universidad Surcolombiana. It sought to help advanced English students refine their academic writing skills using process writing (outlining, revising, and editing with peers' and instructor's feedback), as well as sources, content, grammar, coherence, cohesion, and feedback. The results showed great contribution of instruction and peer feedback in gaining knowledge of the writing process and improving writing skills.

During the development of the project, the students wrote three papers considering different approaches to writing. For data analysis, the three papers were reviewed taking into account organization and content; close attention was paid to progress made between the first and final draft in the second and third papers. Surveys and interviews were used to determine how peers helped each other to improve their texts. The data were triangulated and five major themes arose: Sources, organization, content, feedback from peers, and the students as writers.

This study is of relevance here because it shows the procedure that was followed to approach the process of writing academic texts, and more specifically, argumentative papers with undergraduate students of a language programme. It also points out factors that may help enrich the writing experience, such as peer feedback, inclusion of sample papers, and the possibility to publish the texts created by students to foster their motivation.

Nanwani (2009) is another study conducted in the EFL Colombian context. It describes the linguistic challenges lived by university students in Bogotá in the development of academic literacy. These involve language proficiency in terms of grammar and vocabulary, which affect precision, coherence, concision, and the choice of an appropriate register. Besides, the study emphasises the importance of two main aspects to be considered when dealing with academic writing in the classroom. First, it is necessary to become aware of socially broader parameters rather than specific idiosyncratic ways to write; and second, it is important to read in order to become acquainted with the rhetorical structure and the expected characteristics of the text. Keeping

in mind these two aspects can make it easier for the audience to understand and follow the ideas presented in the text. Finally, the pedagogical remarks presented by Nanwani hint at a transformative view of academic writing and provide clear steps that could be followed to approach writing as a literacy practice that considers students' particular features and situated sociocultural traits.

Street (2003) looked into pre-service teachers' attitudes about writing and learning to teach writing. Participants were five female students, aged 22 to 31, who were completing their undergraduate studies at a university in Texas in a teacher education program designed to prepare middle school educators to teach in urban schools. The study aimed to explore where writing attitudes originate and how they influence practice.

The research method, naturalistic inquiry, provided the opportunity to build a thorough account of students' experiences which modelled their attitudes towards writing and the way they saw themselves as teachers of writing. Data collection instruments during the course at the University included questionnaires and interviews with the participants and teaching staff, as well as copies of electronic journals and field notes. Then, when they moved to the field, observations, interviews, and journals were used.

Data analysis permitted the researcher to group the students into three categories according to their levels of self-confidence regarding writing: Reluctant, developing, and confident. The data generated suggested a relationship between the teaching practice of these developing writing teachers and their beliefs, attitudes, and experiences. When teaching writing, the confident writers offered more to their students than the other three as they saw themselves as belonging to two intellectual communities, writing and teaching, and they saw their roles in a different way than the reluctant and developing writers.

Street's study is relevant to this discussion for three main reasons. Firstly, it offers useful information as to the type of experiences that undergraduate students may consider positive and negative in the process of writing. Secondly, it points out the



importance of considering the role of the writing process as well as the product in the development of students' attitudes, and to take into account the writers' background or identity as members of a learning community when engaged in writing. Finally, and most importantly, the study also hints at the fact that writing needs to go beyond the linguistic aspect; as Street suggests, each writer needs to be welcomed and supported, and his/her ideas need to be validated instead of relying heavily on prescriptive correctness and editorial criticism.

### **Genre-Based Writing: A Situated Social Action**

According to Hyland (2004) "Genre-based teaching is concerned with what learners do when they write" (p. 5). This perspective goes beyond the focus on textual and linguistic aspects embedded in writing to consider the context in which texts are produced and the purpose of the writer, and ultimately to view writing as an attempt to communicate with the audience.

Morrison (2010) states that the genre-based approach is characterised by the provision of text models and explicit instruction. He says that it is important for learners to be aware of acceptable registers and other conventions of the genre and insists that explicit analysis is paramount. In this respect, we bear in mind Hyland's (2004) concept of modelling, which consists of genre exploration and analysis and allows students to become aware of genre features providing them with tools to write their own texts; we also consider Bastian's (2010) explicit teaching of genre; this not only allows for students' awareness of genre conventions but also reflection on what the genre means in the society, what purposes authors can attain through the texts, and how they can achieve them. Explicit teaching here also embeds Bazerman's (1997) idea that genres are forms of life, ways of being, and frames for social action, and as such they are intrinsically related to the social reality where they occur.

As to how genre is viewed in this discussion, we draw upon the key perspective of genre as social action as proposed by Hyland (2004) and evolves to

become genre as situated social action. According to Hyon (1996), "Genre scholars in these areas (...) have focused more on the situational contexts in which genres occur than on their forms and have placed special emphases on the social purposes, or actions, that these genres fulfil within these situations" (p. 696). Hyland (2004), on the other hand, states that although genres involve generalities and conventions, their understanding is more dynamic, thus favouring change and negotiation. Linguistic and textual aspects are recognised as a part of genres, but the social dimension of communication and the relationship between the genres and the social context in which they occur are more relevant.

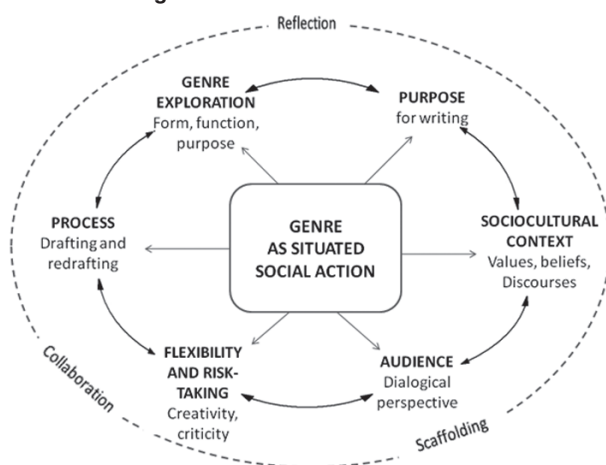
In this conceptual discussion, we relate to genre as social action as this view allows for flexibility in terms of content and form, and because it implies a situated and social approach to writing. Textual and linguistic flexibility means that the approach is not limited to the repetition or copying of templates; instead, it allows students to analyse the organisational and linguistic features of genres so that they can challenge the power of the text (Grundy, 1987) and take risks as to how they use rhetorical structures or frames (Hyland, 2004) and formulaic sequences (Morrison, 2010), related to conventional ways to formulate generic features such as thesis statements, topic sentences and introduce quotations, among others. On the other hand, this perspective can provide opportunities to consider students' voice-as-experience (Lillis, 2001), their purposes for writing, the writing processes that they follow, and the audience of their texts. Consequently, the view of genre changes to consider it as situated social action, a view which is explained as follows.

We contend that genre teaching in the EFL classroom should be considered as situated social action. In this respect, Bastian (2010) states that genres are not simply actions occurring within a void, but they happen within specific, social, and recurrent rhetorical situations. The author claims that, as social actions, genres contain ideological elements that "represent and reinforce what participants within certain rhetorical situations value, believe, and assume" (p. 31). On the other hand, Miller (1984) states

that the genre “acquires meaning from situation and from the social context in which that situation arose” (p.13). What comes to mind when analysing these visions is that first, genres are situated and acquire authentic value in the specific context where they appear, and second, that in order to have a complete perspective of their meaning, looking only at their linguistic and textual features is not enough.

It is our belief that the perspective of genre as situated social action is worth considering in the EFL context as it accounts for key aspects in writing. First is the writer’s subjectivity to choose a topic and select the ideas that he/she wants to include in a text; second is the purpose and audience which account for a dialogical relationship between the writer and his/her readership; third is the social and cultural context where the text appears, which imbues it with situated elements that it needs to become meaningful; finally are the beliefs, values, interests, Discourses (Gee, 2008), and knowledge that surround, influence, and shape the ideas that are included in the text. Figure 3 shows our understanding of genre as situated social action.

Figure 3. Genre as situated social action



In this figure, there are certain aspects that define and characterise a genre. First, is the purpose for writing, which arises from the needs of a writer to communicate with an audience (e.g. to explain, describe, convince, or persuade). In this sense, values, beliefs, and Discourses (Gee, 2008) emerging from the surrounding society and from the writer

him/herself are incorporated in the genre, shape it, and provide it with meaning and validity within the community where the genre occurs.

Bearing in mind the reflection made above, social and cultural aspects are interpreted and negotiated between the author and his/her audience, thus establishing a dialogical relationship. As face-to-face communication between the writer and his/her readership may not happen, the author of a text can dialogue with the intended reader when he/she chooses and organises his/her ideas: On the one hand, the writer may think of how to get the adherence and identification of those who share his/her viewpoints, and on the other, he/she may consider possible counter-arguments that arise from opposite or differing viewpoints. Likewise, the audience can establish dialogue with the writer when they put their own opinions and feelings in contact with the text, or, as Ramírez (2007) poses it, when the audience looks to understand a text, find information in it, or make sense of it.

Considering genre as situated social action also allows for flexibility and risk-taking; thus, students’ creativity and criticality are fostered to present their ideas and break with textual and rhetorical conventions that a genre may impose. This view also facilitates a process of exploration in which attention to form, function, and purpose of the genre can be made explicit; once students are acquainted with the genre, they are asked to reflect (Grundy, 1987) and make decisions as to their writing goals, the ideas that they choose to express based on an intended audience. In this way, students can develop a critical understanding of genres and make deliberate choices (Devitt, 2009). Besides, as writing is dynamic and evolving, students can engage in a process of drafting and redrafting that may lead them to discover their strengths and weaknesses and find ways to improve their skills.

Finally, there are other factors that permeate the concept of genre as situated social action. In the first place, collaboration and scaffolding (Bruner & Sherwood, 1975) provided by skilled writers to struggling peers (Lin et al., 2007) may play an important role: Skilled/experienced writers, with further deve-

loped writing skills, can assist struggling peers, and they may have an incidence to help them construct their texts too. As discussed by Cotterall and Cohen (2003), appropriate scaffolding that takes place throughout the whole writing process of an essay can benefit not only the manner in which language and rhetorical structure are used in the text but also the way that ideas, attitudes, and previous knowledge can be articulated with the situated context in which writing occurs, thus generating active engagement. Second, the whole process of writing a text needs to be illuminated by reflection and deliberation (Grundy, 1987), which allows authors to make decisions about their purpose for writing, the way they want to address their readers, the ideas that they are likely to include, and how they include them.

Having a look at research on genre-based teaching and learning may be helpful to view this construct from a practical perspective. For instance, Weber (2001) carried out a study whose aim was to teach twenty undergraduate law students, who had difficulty writing academic essays in English, to write formal legal essays taking on a concordance and genre-based approach to essay writing. In the first part of the project, the students studied model legal essays and became aware of generic and structural characteristics of the texts. Then, they identified recurrent structural elements in the texts and worked on concordances, focussing on lexical elements related to the generic structures they identified. Finally, the students wrote legal essays incorporating the structural elements they had found, and they were encouraged to use lexical items from their work with concordances. The essays were subjected to peer review, group discussions, and positive feedback from the teacher in short individual conferences.

Another example of studies that provide key practical insights in the use of a genre-based approach is that conducted by Morrison (2010). He describes the development and implementation of a short distance writing course at an organisation in Tokyo which specialises in placing potential students in higher education institutions in English speaking countries. The course was designed to improve the writing skills of students preparing for the

IELTS exam (whose score was paramount for students to get access to education abroad) through the use of the genre-based approach to second language writing; the course evolved using non-native writing samples written by the course teacher as exemplar texts to draw students' attention to language.

A syllabus was planned based on the analysis of sample essays produced by students from a variety of classes. Students were encouraged to raise their awareness of genre features and formulaic expressions, and then, they were encouraged to integrate those expressions in their own texts. Submission of multiple drafts via email fostered dialogue between the teacher and the students. Besides, feedback was beneficial for the students to become more competent writers, to identify their strengths and weaknesses when writing, and to be more aware of the comparative rhetoric of English and Japanese thus developing a culturally-relevant genre-based writing course.

Morrison's study is valuable here first, because his explanation and support of the creation of the course syllabus invites for reflection about possibilities to be considered when it comes to the design of a pedagogical intervention in terms of the main contents and material development so as to make them appropriate to the level and the text types to be dealt with. Also, the most relevant contributions of Morrison's study have to do with multiple drafting and feedback. In his words, the former should be seen as a useful idea to consider so that students can get engaged in a transformative process of their writing practices and have the chance to improve or further develop their writing skills. The latter, on the one hand, teacher feedback, was valuable to establish dialogue with the students and at the same time scaffold them, and on the other, peer feedback, offered a different perspective from classmates as readers; they can help to identify aspects in the texts that the teacher may overlook, and they can suggest ideas for the authors to consider when expressing viewpoints and feelings.

A third example is Chaisiri (2010), who reports on a study conducted at a university EFL context in Thailand. It consisted of two phases: The first one

looked to find insights as to how teachers perceived their approaches to teaching writing; the second phase involved the implementation of an action research study that intended to find the role of the genre-based approach in a writing classroom.

The study was carried out in twenty-one campuses of the Rajamangala Universities of Technology in Thailand, and its participants were sixty-three teachers (in the first phase) and forty students (in the second phase) involved in English for International Communication. Chaisiri conducted the research with the collaboration of a writing teacher who was a research subject, non-participant teacher, and assistant. The genre-based course was developed for eight weeks with a two and a half weekly class.

In the first phase of the study, a questionnaire and an interview were used to gather insights regarding teachers' perceptions of teaching writing. The results showed that most teachers used a combination of approaches, including aspects of genre-based instruction. In the classroom, data were collected through observation notes, interviews, journals, and students' artifacts. The teaching and learning cycle in the second phase had four stages: Building knowledge of the field, which included presentation of model texts, elicitation of students' knowledge, and revision of grammar features. In the modelling stage, groups of students analysed texts based on given questions. Then was joint construction between teacher and students. Finally was independent construction in which the students drafted their texts and went through self- peer- and teacher editing and feedback.

This article is useful since it provides important theoretical and practical insights about how the genre-based approach could be implemented in an action research study. Second, it raises awareness of some implications for EFL writing classrooms and of the consideration of practical recommendations that can be taken into account during the planning and application of the activities of a pedagogical intervention in an EFL context.

A key work that deals with the teaching of EFL academic writing in the Colombian context and hints at the use of genre-based approach to writing is a reflective essay by Gómez (2011). The author

discusses the reasons why his advanced students of English in an academic writing course of an undergraduate programme at Universidad de Antioquia struggle with English writing. He states that different sources, including national culture, educational background, and disciplinary culture can create obstacles to EFL students.

It is pointed out by Gómez that problems in writing composition in his students is due to little writing instruction provided since high school, as well as transfer of rhetorical structure from Spanish into English and the influence of formal communication in Colombia, which is, according to the author, "euphemistic and allusive" (p. 208). Gómez claims that the students lack contextual dependency because they are not in contact with a native English speaking community; therefore, students only mime what they see in local formal writing, which is rather focussed on the form than on the substance, and do not understand how English works.

As solutions to this situation, Gómez calls for academic writing teaching focussed on context awareness and practice; in this way, students can identify how academic writing is done in English and how it differs from or relates to writing in their own context; this focus can also show them how the use of language varies according to the context, and what choices they can make based on this. He also points at the fact that practice should provide opportunities for students to write about what they feel and like instead of asking them to read a text in English and then write about it.

Although Gómez' is not a research-based paper, like the ones presented above, his reflections are important to consider here because they relate to EFL academic writing in the local context of our country. The main contributions lie on his reflection about the causes of students' struggle with writing and on his suggestions to face this issue. Gomez' reflections are illuminating because they show concrete reasons why students' writing can be troublesome and how this can be approached in a real context. In this sense, the suggestion of making students aware of how writing varies according to the context, and how English works in contrast to Spanish -being



English more concise, clearer, and straightforward as opposed to the ceremonious style in the students' first language- is indeed relevant, as Gómez calls for the use of a clear set of basic rhetorical guidelines to show students how English writing works; through this idea, he seems to hint at the use of genre-based instruction that may be seen as situated action. Also, his suggestion of allowing students to express their own ideas and feelings through writing is important because it appears to hint at the inclusion of writing as a situated social practice in which the subjectivity of the writer in relation to their context is fostered.

### Concluding remarks

The core concepts presented and explored in this theoretical discussion paper can be interrelated and understood as a coherent whole. The genre-based approach can be useful to frame a teaching plan to write argumentative essays from a perspective where writing can be understood as a situated social practice. The genre can be explored and analysed in order to identify its conventions, but at the same time it can provide the opportunity to identify its purpose and its potential readers as well as to approach the sociocultural reality that surrounds and shapes this practice. In this sense, writing argumentative essays can allow authors to approach their situated context and go beyond the formal aspects implicit in this literacy practice to assume it in a more purposeful and meaningful way.

It is our belief, that the activities designed to foster EFL argumentative essay writing should engage students in writing texts that allow them to express their feelings, perceptions, and views about their surrounding worlds. This could be done in three main ways: First, by thinking of their potential readers, -who may well be found beyond the classroom or school bounds; second, by taking into account that interaction may imply dialectic communication between the writer's personal voice and that of the audience; and third, by acknowledging that once students are acquainted with the genre, they are welcome to be creative and reflective writers who are able to make decisions as to their writing goals, the ideas that they choose and share, thus engaging

in a transformative, dynamic, and social process. This may be possible when the writing event is seen as a situated social practice in combination with a genre-based perspective that allows for flexibility and risk-taking; in this way, students' creativity and criticality can be fostered to present their ideas and feelings and to develop critical understanding of genres that allows them to make deliberate choices and engage in meaningful, situated, social writing practices.

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