

Argumentative essays and conceptual incongruities: Students mediated by identity and interdisciplinarity

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Abstract

Characterized by specific and rigid boundaries of institutional practices and expectations in the academy, student writing is a synergistic literacy practice where students are required to construct generically diverse texts by yoking concepts with appropriate linguistic resources. This empirical study involving 196 first-year ESL students at a university in Sri Lanka critically explores why conceptual incongruities occur in argumentative essays constructed by them, and how they defend their arguments. We analysed all their timed essays and noticed that 72 out of them contained conceptual incongruities. By ‘conceptual incongruities, we refer to instances where students’ conceptualization process is not aligned or coherent with the essay topic. For our analysis of student texts, we have introduced two social cognitive perspectives: untutored competencies and tutored competencies. The former includes inherited, social, and ideological identities emerging from societal epistemologies whereas disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity constitute the latter. This empirical research demonstrates how students’ conceptualization process is mediated by a labyrinthine repertoire of knowledge premised in students’ untutored competencies and tutored competencies, signalling deviations from their essay topic.

Keywords: argumentative essays, identities in South East Asian contexts, interdisciplinarity, critical discourse analysis, conceptual incongruities, tokenist discourses

Introduction

This empirical study critically explores how 196 first-year ESL students at a university in Sri Lanka cope with their argumentative essays and how they defend their arguments. ‘Political discourse has contributed to the disappearance of the public sphere in Sri Lanka. Discuss why you agree or disagree with this statement’ was the topic of the timed argumentative essay completed by these students as part of continuous assessment for the module: Discourse Analysis. Public sphere, a concept introduced by Habermas, is a domain where public opinion reigns. Making references to the eighteenth-century feudal society where the public sphere was represented by land lords, not by peasants, Habermas emphasises the necessity of a plethora of communicative acts (e.g., discussions, debates) in order to establish a common platform for public opinion to be voiced and heard regardless of individuals’ differences and preferences. He further stresses that such social entities can challenge the political authorities where necessary (1989). In our contemporary contexts, media ownership and political alignments can impede the process towards realizing a public sphere. However, the positive impact of the pervasive social media and citizen journalism in creating a public sphere can hardly be overlooked. These issues invariably surface in argumentative writing centred on the concept of public sphere.

Argumentative essays and conceptual incongruities

Argumentation is a multifaceted skill where students are often required to argue for and against a given topic. Intrinsicly, it is part of social practices oriented in organized or disorganized corpus of knowledge, mostly prevalent in political, media, and legal discourses which often reflect social realities. It is also a knowledge domain used for negotiation of meaning from developmental levels to advanced communication skills enveloping a plethora of local and global discourses particularly of social, political, economic and historical significance.

These discursively constructed knowledge structures have seeped into student writing, too (Author, xxxx; Belcher, 2013; Hyland, 2012). Framing and developing an argument compellingly in academic writing, students need to focus on several aspects of textual construction: target text topic, critical thinking, critical judgment, primary academic voice, and empirical evidence (Atkinson, 1997; Author, xxxx; Benesh, 2001; Gleason, 1999; Kibler & Hardigree, 2016), linguistic resources, generic features, and intellectual intensity (Paltridge, 2004; Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011). Hence, argumentative essay writing process involves complex and multifaceted skills where students are required to argue for and against a given topic, often taking up multiple subject positions which entail a strong element of conceptualization. While constructing their argumentative essays, the participant students of this study were preoccupied with their inherited identities and disciplinarity/interdisciplinarity mediated by several discourses associated with ethnicity, politics, social injustice, nationalism, and religion with the resultant incongruities in conceptualization.

Conceptual incongruities may be defined as the formation and use of concepts that are not aligned or coherent with the essay topic. When student writers deviate in terms of conceptualization from a particular essay topic for a variety of reasons, incongruities invariably occur, and very seldom do such digressions enable students to effectively participate in the discourse of argumentation in writing. An essay topic with its specific boundaries can be regarded as what we might call a micro knowledge domain which students are required to expand in their writing process to create a macro knowledge domain. Obviously, the former should be congruous with the latter. However, at times, students transcend the boundaries of the micro knowledge domain in inappropriate ways that engender conceptual incongruities. Such instances of incoherence are problematized in this article. As the findings of this research

demonstrate, students' journey from a micro knowledge domain to a macro one is often fraught with difficulties emanating from identity and interdisciplinarity-oriented issues.

Conceptualization process requires critical thinking which generally means ability to explore issues from a variety of perspectives. However, being 'critical', as the term is understood superficially, presupposes the existence of something inadequate, deficient and in need of restructuring or reinterpretation. Hence, it often relays negative connotations. In all the 72 essays we analyzed, students were blaming, inter alia, political power and dominance for the disintegration of the public sphere. From a CDA standpoint, this critique may be interpreted as shallow since criticality should not necessarily purport negative overtones. As argued by van Dijk, power and dominance are jointly constructed and shared by people and they contain an element of reciprocity (1993). For example, Sri Lanka is a democracy where politicians are elected and vested with power by the people.

Boundaries of a micro knowledge domain (essay topic)

Since writing is a recursive process which involves five major dimensions: prewriting, drafting, revision, editing, and, publishing (Emig, 1971), students, with appropriate pedagogical intervention, have ample opportunities to develop their conceptual consciousness in the writing process. A productive starting point for a prewriting process could well be the essay topic itself: 'Political discourse has contributed to the disappearance of the public sphere in Sri Lanka. Discuss why you agree or disagree with this statement.' Despite their subjectivity, the essay topic contains explicit and implicit boundaries for students to take cognizance of. The former includes the theory of the public sphere, political discourse, disintegration of the public sphere, argumentation, counter argumentation, and the 50-minute timed essay with 750 words as physical boundaries whereas the latter comprises academic English with appropriate

conventions, causality, criticality, and conceptualization. Students need to fuse these elements together (a synergistic activity) in creating a macro knowledge domain. In other words, students are required to develop their conceptual consciousness as well as boundary consciousness in the writing process in order to avoid conceptual incongruities.

Theoretical framework and textual analysis

The theoretical focus of this study is on two social cognitive constructs: untutored competencies and tutored competencies. Seminal scholarly works by Bandura (1989) and Flower (1994) have explored some dimensions of these two constructs, but not with particular reference to student writing in the academy. Untutored competencies are premised in societal epistemologies such as social cultural, political, economic, and historical knowledge domains accessible to students through social interactions. They may include their prior genre knowledge as well (Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011). In particular, they forge students' inherited, social, and ideological identities.

People are born into this world with several identities; prominent among these identities in a South Asian context are language, ethnicity, religion, colour, and caste. As they grow up, people become more conscious of these identities (Bandura, 1989), and attempt to locate themselves in relation to others in society. Eventually politically defined asymmetrical power relations emerge and are deposited in the mind of social actors. Social identity as the phrase suggests is developed through societal interactions. In other words, it is the social image of people (Turner, 1991) delineated through their behavior patterns, employment, respect, and various other society-based preferences and differences. These identities exercise enormous influence on academic writing (Hyland, 2004; Ivanic, 1998; Norton, 2000). People's ideological identity is mostly characterized by their persistent belief in political or religious dogmas

(Althusser, 1977). As a result of ideological identity, people develop resistance to any coercive changes to their beliefs, values, attitudes, and experiences imposed by others. Sri Lanka is a multicultural country with a fractured society in terms of religion, ethnicity, political discourses, language, social status, and gender (Author, xxxx; De Votta, 2007; Ivarsson, 2017; Mihlar, 2019; Morrison, 2020). As evidenced by this research, very often, student identities are conditioned by these societal phenomena characterized by power, dominance, marginalization, social disparities, injustice, discrimination, and exclusiveness.

Tutored competencies comprise knowledge capital (disciplinary/interdisciplinary) gained from institutionalized formal education providers such as schools, colleges, and universities. People's acquisition of knowledge by experience or exposure, not by instruction, constitutes untutored competencies (Lubben, 2010; Mar, 2013). The complexities, which emerge from the coexistence of these interactive competencies in student writing, often result in relativization and prioritization of concepts in student texts. By disciplinarity, we mean a condition which highlights monolithic characteristics unique to a particular discipline. It is a body of knowledge which can on its own claim to be a discipline. Interdisciplinarity on the other hand signals a condition where disciplinary integration as well as interactions are manifest (Author, xxxx; Klein, 1996). For example, a particular discipline can integrate strands of knowledge from another discipline in order to enrich its scope. When students learn two or more subjects concurrently, interdisciplinarity can also occur in terms of their reciprocity, coexistence, and concept formation, posing challenges to novice student writers. Some scholars have emphasized the impact of disciplinarity, interdisciplinarity, and discorsal identity on student writers (e.g., Author, xxxx; Bazerman, 2011; Gimenez, 2008; Ivancic, 1998). They illustrate the chaotic nature of interdisciplinarity and the resultant complexities in student writing. A more theoretical

foundation for interdisciplinarity stems from Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge* where he argues how discursive practices metamorphosed into disciplines. CDA has recently captured new dynamics of interdisciplinarity: hyphenated disciplines and teamwork in research (Weiss & Wodak, 2003), centrifugal dimensions of disciplines (Unger, 2016), critical/applied revolution in disciplines (Author, xxxx) which may be identified as more tangible phenomena. However, in this research we have demonstrated some intangible aspects of interdisciplinarity, too, where students almost inadvertently write themselves into their texts while being entangled in a labyrinthine repertoire of knowledge: disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and social in the process of argumentation. Hence, the coalition of textual, social, and cognitive dimensions within interdisciplinary contexts (Unger, 2016) is inevitable in student writing.

In the analytical process, we are informed by the tenets of critical discourse analysis (CDA), in particular social injustice as explicated by Wodak (2011, 2001). CDA perspectives include, but are not limited to, social, political, cultural, historical, and economic contexts within which diverse texts are constructed, analyzed, contested, and modified (Weiss & Wodak, 2003; Wodak, 2011). This approach enabled the authors to explore a variety of discourses that shaped student texts, and to expand on their implicit meanings. CDA foregrounds societal epistemologies concealed in conventions, lexical choices, semantic deviations, and various aspect of conversation (van Dijk, 2001). CDA has also exerted enormous influence on pedagogical practices in many parts of the world. In most developing countries, writing pedagogy is still dominated by text book pedagogy with a strong focus on grammar-orientation, and writing conventions. However, the role of student identities and interdisciplinarity are seldom utilized in writing pedagogy.

Literature Review

Although the literature available on academic writing is almost encyclopaedic, the genre of argumentative essay seems to have shared a modest proportion of this huge canvas of academic literacy. Our critical scrutiny of the available seminal work on ESL student writers' argumentative writing at tertiary level have confirmed that research on the conceptualization process involved in argumentation is markedly meagre. Much of the research is preoccupied with academic conventions, and lexicality with less orientation in conceptualization, inherited identities, and interdisciplinarity. As a consequence of this conspicuous under representation, this literature review lends itself to a very succinct outline.

Concept learning and concept change closely linked to argumentative writing have been discussed in the literature (e.g., Asterhan & Schwarz, 2007; Howe, 2007). These studies mostly focus on the psychological dynamics in students' conceptualization (e.g., understanding evolutionary process; conceptual metaphors). Some have discussed the issue of conceptualization with reference to students' individual objectives (e.g., Ferretti et al., 2009). Another noticeable aspect relating to conceptualization is the disciplinary impasse. Some scholars have emphasized the impact of disciplinarity, interdisciplinarity, and discursal identity on student writers (e.g., (Author, xxxx; Gimenez, 2008; Hyland, 2012; Ivanic, 1998; Klein, 1996). They illustrate the chaotic nature of interdisciplinarity and the resultant complexities in student writing, including argumentation.

Lexical choices student make in argumentation have also been discussed in the recent literature. Bychkovska & Lee (2017) identify the lexical bundles used by Chinese undergraduates in their argumentative writing. Generic features in decision making have also been discussed in relation to argumentation (e.g., García et al., 2020).

The latest trend in scholarship on argumentative writing exhibits a bias towards online literacy practices related to this genre. The role of online discussions and concept formation, for example, in initiating argumentative writing is a relatively new area explored by several scholars (e.g., Bauler, 2019; Hanh & Kellogg, 2005; Marttunen & Lauri, 2011). Perhaps one of the reasons for this novel emphasis is the phenomenal strides made in new technologies of communication, and the resultant literacy practices which have become ritualistic among intertextually and digitally agile students of the 21st century.

Methodology

We embarked on this empirical research at a university in Sri Lanka in October 2019, and it was completed in August 2021. Data collection alone took more than a year. Informed by our own experience as ESL practitioners and also our professional contacts with ESL lecturers and student writers in the academy, it was hypothesized that first- year ESL students experience difficulties in coping with argumentative writing in terms of conceptualization. In their high school environments, these students were required to write short argumentative essays not exceeding 350 words; however, relatively long essays (750 or more words) prescribed in the academy were formidable challenges to these students.

Ethical considerations

Prior to this research, formal approval from the university authorities was obtained for interviewing the lecturers, and the students, and collecting student essays for classification. All participants signed consent forms individually for voluntary participation in this research. It was spelt in the consent form that participants' and their institutional identities would be treated in the utmost confidence during and after the research and that they can withdraw from the research at any desired time.

Participants

Two lecturers anonymized here as Perera and Sumith, and 196 students voluntarily participated in this research. The age range of these students was from 21 to 28 and they belonged to four parallel classes taught by the two lecturers. Participating students, whose essays and interviews are under review here, were identified as Khalid (22), Manori (20), Upul (23), Selva (21), Bhagya (23), and Ruwani (22), all enrolled in a B.A. (General) Arts degree program. Khalid, from an urban area close to the university, studies ESL, Tamil, and Geography. He completed his GCE (Advanced Level) with a credit pass in English at an international school in Colombo. Born in a small village about 75 km from Colombo, Manori has had a rural upbringing. Currently, she studies ESL, Sinhala, and political science as subjects. Prior to entering the university, she attended a public school where she obtained a credit pass in English at the General Certificate of Education (G.C.E. Ordinary Level) examination. Selva studies ESL, Tamil, and geography for his degree. He lives in Colombo, and completed his G.C.E. (Advanced Level) with an ordinary pass in English at a public school in Colombo. Upul from a rural area has chosen ESL, Sinhala, and geography for his degree. He completed his G.C.E. (A. L.), and GCE (O. L.) with an ordinary pass in English at an international school in Kandy. Educated at a convent in a Colombo suburb, Bhagya studies ESL, geography, and political science. She completed her GCE (A. L) with an ordinary pass in English. Ruwani from a rural area studies ESL, Sinhala, and political science. Before entering the university, she attended a public school and obtained a credit pass in English at the G.C.E. (O.L) examination.

Perera (48), and Sumith (41), obtained their academic qualifications (MA in TESL; Diploma, in Education) from a national university. With their long experience -15 years and 10

years respectively- they were teaching discourse analysis (a module of the core discipline, ESL) at a university in Sri Lanka.

Research questions

The following qualitative questions were instrumental in pursuing the objectives of this research:

1. Why are conceptual incongruities present in ESL student writers' argumentative essays?
2. How do these students defend their arguments?

Interviews

For interview purposes, we selected 72 students: 49 Sinhala speaking students and 23 Tamil speaking students. The 72 students were individually interviewed one week after the classification of the essay data. The duration of the interviews with each individual student and the two lecturers held in the English department room of the university was approximately forty-five minutes. These interviews were semi-structured with open ended questions (Merriam, 2009), and conversation starters, informal questions, short open-ended questions, statement questions, prompts, and cues (Brenner, 2006). All the interviews were recorded for use in this article and in any prospective article.

Data collection

Conceptual incongruities were the main stumbling block for 72 students out of 196 who attempted to participate in the discourse of argumentation. Hence, the primary data included argumentative essays completed by 196 first-year university students, 72 qualitative interviews with selected students (see Table 1), and the four interviews we had with the two lecturers. As part of continuous assessment for the module, Discourse Analysis, these students had completed their 750-word timed essays within 60 minutes on 'Political discourse has contributed to the

disappearance of the public sphere in Sri Lanka. Discuss why you agree or disagree with this statement', under the supervision of two lecturers. The two lecturers had already marked the 196 essays using the following criteria: academic English, analytical skills, content, and generic features. With the two lecturers' permission, we went through all the 196 essays while taking notes on the evidence of conceptual incongruities. We also noticed that 72 out of them contained such lapses in argumentation (see Table 1). It is not practicable to analyze all these essays and interviews in this article. Hence, following a simple random sampling, we introduce here excerpts from six student essays and their corresponding interviews while making references where necessary to the remaining 66 student essays and interviews. The 72 essays were stratified according to the high frequency in the manifestation of major factors leading to conceptual incongruities (see Table 1). Recently published scholarly works on student writing with particular reference to argumentative essay writing constituted the secondary data.

Contributory factors for conceptual incongruities	Affected essays
Political and economic issues	23
Ethnicity-related issues	15
Religious preoccupations	14
Nationalist preoccupations	12
Interdisciplinarity	08

Table 1

Results and analysis

Socio-political and Socio-economic nexus

In our analysis of the six essays, along with references to the remaining 66 essays, we are not overly concerned with their lexis, grammar, syntax, or conversational English-related difficulties. Since these students are inexperienced writers whose first language is not English, such linguistic inadequacies are often inevitable. These language-oriented imperatives become more challenging when students are engaged in ‘selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse’ of academic community (Bartholomae, 1995, p. 623).

In all the 72 essays we analysed, the thesis statement was deductively located, most probably due to the impact of model texts introduced by the lecturers. Majority of the students either repeated the essay topic or used the phraseology of the essay topic in their thesis statement which is quite natural:

The disappearance of the public sphere is always linked to political discourses...Public sphere is not there in Sri Lanka because of political involvement...The disintegration of the public sphere is largely because of political discourses...Political discourse has contributed to the disappearance of the public sphere...

Manori provides evidence in her essay to suggest that in Sri Lanka, political discourse has contributed to the disappearance of the public sphere:

As I can see, unemployed young people in rural areas have become three wheel drivers. Most of them have passed GCE Advanced Level... and the current regime is responsible for this... (Manori, para, 3).

Some uneducated people like masons and carpenters migrate to large city areas to look for jobs and this cause social problems like family problems... Another thing is

the exploitation of labor and city business owners exploit these poor people... (para, 4).

Karl Marx was able to see all these social disparities like the working class and the capitalists. The problem of our country is that politicians don't like change. We need a change for a Marxist society... (para. 5).

Concepts such as rural unemployment, existence of social and economic problems, non-availability of adequate infrastructural facilities, influx of people from rural areas into urban areas, and exploitation of 'poor people' from rural areas by 'city business owners' and references to 'the current regime' are not congruous with the arguments envisaged in the thesis statement. These conceptual incongruities further imply a counter argument which is linked to the hypothesis that once these problems cited by Manori are rectified by the political authorities, the public sphere would automatically be restored. However, there cannot be any guarantee that elimination of social and economic problems can ensure the instant emergence of a public sphere. Manori's conceptualizations illustrate inadequate economic development measures introduced by a particular government in power, but she does not provide evidence as to how political discourse has exerted influence on the demise of the public sphere.

In addition to her social identity, interdisciplinarity has also crept into Manori's conceptualization process. It was revealed at the interview with Manori that as part of the assessment procedures in Political Science, she had completed an assignment which required her to discuss Marxist theory on poverty:

Researcher: Why do you specifically mention Marxist discourse here?

Manori: We did an assignment on Marxist theory on poverty. It is related here.

Politicians have capitalist agendas.

R: But how would you explain the link between politicians with capitalist agendas and the public sphere?

M: Yes, it is complicated...

It is significant to note here how interdisciplinary dimensions of previously completed assessment tasks are embedded in Manori's textual construction, creating conceptual incongruities. Similarly, references to Marxist discourse were present in eight essays indicating a strong correlation between disciplinary/interdisciplinary dynamics and students' conceptualization process. The extensive use of linguistic choices (e.g., word/phrase clusters) frequently encountered in Marxist discourses also confirms Manori's leanings on Marxism:

...the politicians declare that they will take care of the masses... **wealth is not equally distributed** in the country (para. 2).

Another thing is the **exploitation of labour** and city business owners exploit these poor people (para. 4).

Karl Marx was able to see all these **social disparities** like the **working class and the capitalists** (para. 5, emphasis ours).

These instances demonstrate not only the impact of interdisciplinarity (most probably originating from one of her subjects: Political Science) and disciplinarity (Discourse Analysis) on her conceptualization process but they also illustrate her ideologically driven inclination to link the Marxist discourse to explicate socio-economic and political problems in the rural areas of the country. This may be construed as innocent moves by students to work with knowledge familiar to them. What we can witness here is the integrative behavior of interdisciplinarity, disciplinarity, ideological identity, social identity, and prioritization in Manori's conceptualization process. In other words, Manori's tutored competencies and untutored

competencies have coalesced into one matrix where her conceptualization is forged. However, such reductionist stances can hardly conform to the requirements of the essay topic. The interview with Manori further confirmed the circumstances which apparently prompted her to deviate from the argument and arrive at hasty conclusions. Although she dwells on Marxist discourse, her major focus is on the experiential element which is less cognitive and more proximal:

R: ... You have mentioned youth unemployment, urban migration, and violence as the consequence of the negative attitudes of the political authorities.

M: Yes, I think so, because politicians are selfish and look after their own interest. The masses are ignored.

R: OK. How would you relate this particular situation to the disappearance of the public sphere?

M: It can happen indirectly. You know (Silent)

R: You have also emphasized the significance of the Marxist discourse to overcome these problems.

M: Yes, very true. This is what we need to have a public sphere. Everybody knows about people's problems and various problems.

Manori's social identity defined by her being brought up in a rural environment and her Marxist-oriented ideological identity seem to have adversely affected and masked her critical thinking process which is vital for the conceptualization process required for argumentative purposes in the context of the essay topic. Political discourse for her is composed of politicians only. From a CDA perspective, this assertion is further evidenced by the repetition of the word 'politicians' eleven times in her essay. The other constituents of political discourse such as

government and non-government institutions, and citizens directly involved in activities of political orientation and significance have not been subjected to her conceptualization process. In these circumstances, we cannot blame the students for deviating from an essay topic; in fact, writing pedagogy is to blame for providing inadequate academic support for these students.

Tokenist discourse

There were also references in 15 essays to the dire need for racial justice and harmony which in Manori's essay is referred to as 'racial issues'. It is noteworthy here that four of the six essays we analyzed here belong to the Sinhalese majority. These inclinations seem to expose the nexus between ethnicity and conceptualization despite the accompanying incongruities. Bhagya, for example, dwells on the racial divide in more explicit terms. According to her, people cannot have a common platform to voice their opinions as a result of the tensions among Sinhalese, Tamil, and Moslem people:

Citizens in this country are not united and they have many conflicts because they create them. This country cannot survive like this because citizens don't care about other nationalities. This is going to increase hatred and citizens have to be educated for this...(para. 3)

In addition, both political discourse and public sphere as two socio-political entities and concepts have simultaneously assumed tokenistic propositions in Bhagya's essay. For example, they are deliberately developed into a predetermined climactic reference only to the thesis statement, but are not concretized in terms of their relevance to the overall canvas of the essay:

So, it's clear that the overwhelming power of the politicians cause disappearance of the public sphere (para, 3).

But the overwhelming power of the politicians has caused the disappearance of the public sphere because of their fear that it would damage their honourable image (para, 6).

The correlation between ‘the overwhelming power of the politicians’ and the disappearance of the public sphere remains unexplored in the essay. In other words, the way in which Bagya attempts to integrate concepts developed in her essay with the thesis statement is abrupt and incoherent; hence, the resultant emergence of pervasive tokenist discourses instead of an argumentative discourse in most part of her essay is evident.

A presuppositional analysis

A presuppositional analysis of the topic would reveal that the public sphere did exist in Sri Lanka sometime in the past, and that it has now disappeared due to or not due to the political discourse. We raised this issue at the interview with Bhagya:

R: In your essay topic, there is an indication to the existence of a public sphere in Sri Lanka some time back. Have you noticed that?

M: Mmm. Yes, I noticed but but mmm time is the problem. We have to write 750 words or more and within one hour. So, it takes time to think and mmm and organize mmm So I usually think about the most important things...

R: Perhaps, that’s why you place much emphasis on nationalist discourse in your argument.

M: Yes, I always compare things before I argue. So, I can find out the most important points and I leave out unimportant things. So, they are my own ideas.

According to Bhagya, her conceptualization process has not attracted this presuppositional aspect owing to two reasons: the time constraints relating to the writing task,

and her inclination to prioritize concepts with which she has close affinities. This tendency also reveals that both relativization and prioritization in the conceptualization process are eventuated by the student's ideological consciousness. Furthermore, if we refer back to Manori's emphatic comments made earlier '...the current regime is responsible for this.' (para.3), and 'Obviously, the current regime is responsible for this situation' (para. 5), it is implied that a better government than the one she is commenting on did exist in the past.

Conceptual void: citizen journalism

Ruwani in her essay refers to media organizations that are closely aligned with their favourite political parties:

We have newspapers but they are behind the political parties So, they don't show the reality. The public don't have their opinions to share. Therefore, newspapers are one sided and up to corruption. Public sphere is not possible newspapers are with the party politics. Political pressure is too much for newspapers... (para. 3)

We asked Ruwini as to why she focused only on newspapers in her analysis of the public sphere:

R: ... You referred to newspapers and how they are related to political parties. There can be independent newspapers as well. What do you think?

Ru: I feel like saying that they are under political power, and maybe they are always like that...'

From a CDA perspective, we cannot ignore the implications of 'I feel like saying' and 'maybe they are always like that'. The former denotes her emotional state rather than criticality, and the modality in the latter is indicative of her uncertainty. Here, it is the political discourse that seems to dictate terms to her. Ruwani could have added another dimension to the

conceptualization process. For example, as a result of the ubiquitous new technologies of communication, citizen journalism has become a popular mode in the social media and it can to a certain extent contribute to creating a public sphere outside of the locally and globally visible mainstream media organizations. Such individual-based media entrepreneurship can often establish rapport with the majority of the people, and challenge the ulterior motives of political organizations affiliated to their preferred media organizations:

R: In your essay, there is no reference to the popular media or to their political affiliations, or connections. Any particular reason?

Ru: Mmm. I thought political discourse... I thought I should discuss political discourse, because it can destroy the public sphere.

This excerpt illustrates how ideological identity and interdisciplinarity mediate in her conceptualization process often causing incongruities in argumentation. In fact, according to her lecturer (Perera), she should discuss the media discourse, not the political discourse, in relation to the Habermasian public sphere:

Researcher: Ruwani has got 8 out of twenty for this essay. What has gone wrong here?

P: Many things. Obviously, the student is not addressing the question very well. She talks about politicians and their weaknesses without paying attention to Habermas's public sphere. For some reasons, the student talks about politicians and that is not relevant here either.

R: Why do you think it is irrelevant?

P: Well, it doesn't serve any purpose here. Her arguments are split, not connected.

A flashback to Manori's conclusive remark, 'Marxist discourse is more powerful than other discourses for us' seems to link the destitute and impoverished rural community in her village and its vicinity with the anticipated advantages of Marxist discourse. And from Manori's remarks earlier in the interview, 'Everybody knows about these young people's problems and various problems', it is reasonable to infer that they are interpretations made by people living in the midst of socio-economic bankruptcy and for Manori they are vicarious experiences. These interpretations become part of common knowledge in the form of discourses and their impact on student writers' conceptualization process is further adumbrated in Khalid's essay.

Ethno-religious preoccupations

Khalid's preoccupations with discourses of ethnicity are revealed in his opening paragraph: 'Sri Lanka is a multicultural country and it has three main ethnic groups, Moslems, Tamils Sinhalese. Moslems are clearly a minority...' (para. 1). This statement reveals his approach to develop concepts required for this essay in terms of ethnicity-related issues. Like Manori, Khalid makes his thesis statement by repeating a large part of the essay topic: 'In Sri Lanka I think political discourse has contributed to the disappearance of the public sphere'. Khalid contemplates a society where ethnic reconciliation and religious tolerance must reign, and he laments the political indifference and insensitivity to these issues:

We need also understanding among people to respect each other. Public sphere is necessary for this and the political power should understand this situation. How can people work together without understanding? Different ethnic groups have political parties behind them and this is also a reason for the disappearance of the public sphere. So the government support is necessary for a multicultural society (para. 4).

Right from the opening paragraph to the concluding one, Khalid is preoccupied with his ethnicity-based contentious contexts and difficulties for which he blames the government. Closely linked to this inherited identity-oriented explanation is the religious discourse where, according to him, mosques are no longer ‘safe places.’ Here, too, as in Manori’s essay, no reference is made to media discourses which are the spring boards for the voice of people. His thesis statement, repeated three times in the essay, does not materialize since his conceptualization process collapses and veers away from the notion of the public sphere to a critique of equality, discrimination, and freedom in the context of ethnic conflicts in Sri Lanka. In this instance, the conceptual incongruities emanate from Khalid’s avid inclination to dwell on the discourses of ethnicity and religion regardless of their relevance to the topic under review:

However, our main problems come from other ethnic groups. We don’t have equal status in the country. So how can we have our voice and be free is the question and our freedom is limited. Public sphere is also useful to our business people... They have fear because some people can loot and assault them. So how can we fix these problems/? Even the mosques are not safe places. Another point is that some people live in arable lands in the dry zone of the country but some ethnic groups claim these lands. General climate and weather conditions in these areas are not good for people. With limited rainfall, in this dry zone, people still produce crops and work hard. The government should appreciate this. I think politicians are silent about these problems and that is the reason for the disappearance of the public sphere (para. 4).

Obviously, his comment ‘Even the mosques are not safe places’, and the rhetorical question, ‘How can we fix these problems?’ with a note of pessimism denote strong ethno-religious overtones, and they appear to be genuine concerns. Some of his concepts related to the

alleged encroachment of land by the Moslems in the northern part of Sri Lanka seem to have been augmented by the use of terminology drawn from his other subject Geography. For example, expressions such as ‘...arable lands in the dry zone of the country; General climate and weather conditions; limited rainfall, in this dry zone; people still produce crops’, typify his indebtedness to the discourse of geography, and evince interdisciplinary contexts. However, these conceptualizations emanating from recent ethnicity-related conflicts in Sri Lanka are not congruous with the central argument highlighted in the essay topic. Not only are they far-fetched as far as the disintegration of the public sphere is concerned but they also stand in isolation from the rest of the paragraphs in the essay. One of the reasons for this drawback seems to be the student’s inability to develop a concept and sustain it in the context of argumentative elaboration.

Asymmetrical power relations

Khalid’s reference in his essay to ‘different power levels in society’ based on ‘ethnicity’ is an acknowledgement of the existence of asymmetrical power relations in an ethnically diverse society:

On the other hand we see different power levels in society and they have something to do with ethnicity and religion. The government must improve security for us. So we can live without fear but there are different stories about security also (para. 4).

He seems to suggest that these power structures are politically oriented and that political intervention is necessary for eliminating social disparities. Khalid’s yearning for a society, where access and equity are not only enshrined in the law but they are also implemented regardless of the differences and preferences of people, is epitomized here. Khalid’s apparent obsession with ethnicity related issues borders on conceptual incongruities since he does not provide adequate evidence to justify his thesis.

However, there can be situations where lecturers are inhibited by tension-ridden ethnocentric discourses; consider, for instance, Sumith's reference to 'sensitive issues' and reluctance to proceed with the interview. Students, too, can be demoralized by these conflictual elements in argumentative discourse. For example, Khalid's repetition of the proximal deixis 'these' along with his gestures was tantamount to an emotional outburst:

K: I think this is a problem. So, we cannot have a public sphere until these, THESE things are there.

R: What do you mean by these things?

K: People are divided because of ethnicity and political discourse. We can see these things around us...

Moreover, Khalid's expression, 'we see them around us...' is suggestive of the superimposition of untutored competencies as lived experiences over tutored competencies and the resultant incongruities in his conceptualization process. Khalid's assertive observation, 'Different ethnic groups have political parties behind them and this is also a real reason for the disappearance of the public sphere', sheds light on the politicization of certain ethnic communities and the accompanying dichotomies in society. His conceptualization process captures these binary oppositional paradigms: ethnicity and politicization, which are not congruous with the argumentation prefigured in the essay topic. More importantly, these two dialogically defined (Bakhtin, 1981) concepts seem to have masked his critical thinking and critical judgment capacity since they prove to be more realistic, and more visible than what he learnt in the classroom.

A learning episode

Quite serendipitously, our interview with Khalid turned out to be a learning episode for him, signifying the need for integrating students' conflicting conceptualization processes into writing pedagogy:

R: People have access to the social media in Sri Lanka, and it gives them enough opportunities to express themselves. What do you think of the social media?

Khalid: (Pause). Yes, social media can do a lot to exchange ideas and educate people. But people can misuse it also.

R: Then, you agree that public sphere is more related to media discourses than political discourse or ethnicity?

K: Yes, I think so. You are right...

R: Why didn't you discuss the role of the media?

K: I think ethnicity, religion and political discourse because (Pause) we feel it and they are around us...

Khalid repeats three times the thesis statement in his essay; however, like in Manori's essay, it establishes only a quasi-coherence through climactic references to the essay topic:

In Sri Lanka I think political discourse has contributed to the disappearance of the public sphere (para. 1).

I think politicians are silent about these problems and that is the reason for the disappearance of the public sphere (para. 2).

I think in Sri Lanka, political discourse has contributed to the disappearance of the public sphere (para. 5).

This is also indicative of a tokenistic perspective, creating a verisimilitude effect in the essay. For example, the juxtaposition of the content to the thesis statement has occurred just for

the sake of an argument, without providing any concrete evidence. However, Khalid's references to ethno-religious discourses in his essay epitomize the indifference and insensitivity of political authorities to the grievances of ethnically marginalized people. He seems to utilize this essay to unleash his anger regardless of the congruity of his conceptualizations with the essay topic. As recent research has demonstrated, students' goals can adversely affect the structure of an argumentative essay (Ferretti, Lewis & Andrews-Weckerly, 2009).

In the concluding paragraph of his essay, Khalid makes a hypothetical assertion that the future for Islamic people in Sri Lanka is bleak: 'The future for our people is not bright any way'. This is a strong claim and it condenses the overall conceptual preoccupation with ethnicity and religion in his essay, deviating from the central argument between political discourse and public sphere. The implication is that for Khalid, the conspicuous relationship between political discourse and ethnicity has become a significant priority.

Nationalist preoccupation

We have identified twelve essays with conceptual incongruities emerging from the over emphasis on nationalist perspectives. Selva's essay is one of them where nationalist preoccupations are predominant. Referring to a political issue, Selva narrates how nationality is politicized disadvantaging the Tamil people:

The governor in our district is a Sinhalese administrator and he does not solve our problems, so the public sphere is spoilt. OK we ask the administrator to be fair and give chances to Tamil people. I think our administrator should come from our people. This is important for the public sphere and when people are not happy, we cannot have a public sphere. Then the other officers in his office are mostly Tamils, and so communication problem is there...

Ethnicity related issues are frequently introduced in Selva's essay as evidence of the disappearance of the public sphere, and they signal the animosity between the Tamil minority and the Sinhalese majority which has existed for decades in Sri Lanka. It is apparent here how Selva's nationalist sentiments have masked his audience consciousness, too. For example, using a conversational marker (OK), he seems to address the governor, not the lecturer/marker.

In order to elicit more information, we asked Selva about these nationalist orientations in his argumentation:

R: Sometimes, in multicultural societies there can be issues but people have to settle them peacefully. So, how would you relate this governor issue to the essay topic?

S: Yes, but public sphere is not possible. How can we communicate with the administration? OK, no communication means no public sphere...

From his lecturer's point of view, the micro context Selva dwells on in his essay has strong nationalist connotations implicating both Sinhalese and Tamil people:

Researcher: ...Any comments on Selva's essay?

Sumith: He is talking about racial discrimination, and how Tamils are disadvantaged, but as we know, they have freedom to voice their concerns. Social media and even popular media are part of effective modes for this...

Political discourse

Similar to 23 essays completed by students, Upul's development of arguments is mostly based on political discourse. In his essay, he reiterates the fact that public sphere is not achievable in Sri Lanka where ruling political parties and their opponents blame each other in irrational and dogmatic ways:

We cannot have public sphere because parties in power quarrel with opposition parties. Then, the people who follow these parties are also divided and then their decisions are not good for people. There is no unity among people and also parties, so the public sphere is also divided and people have different opinions. We need to change this pattern, and then we can have public sphere... (para 3)

At the interview, Upul stated that politicians in Sri Lanka blame each other for good reasons, for bad reasons, and for no reasons:

Researcher: Why did you pick up political discourse here?

Upul: Because it is an important part of the essay question, and it is true. Even a politician does good things or bad things for us, other politicians are not happy. Sometimes they just blame others without any reason...

R: So, what's your point?

U: Public sphere is not possible. It is possible when politicians work together...

It seems that the reference to 'political discourse' in the 'essay question' may have persuaded Upul and the other 22 students to make digressions around the concept of political discourse. Such textual manipulations invariably foreshadow students' untutored competencies which foreground societal epistemologies.

With a view to identifying pedagogical issues relating to the essays, we also had a brief interview with the lecturer (Sumith) who taught this subject with Perera. He stated that the presence of a robust social media network in Sri Lanka itself is a manifestation of the existence of a public sphere where individuals and groups of people can communicate with each other untrammelled by political intervention:

R: ...What do you think of their ability to form concepts?

S: They can, but not the right ones. Obviously, Manori can write and talk but, in her essay, she messes up key points and some mistakes in expression...

R: Khalid refers to business people, looting, and assault. How relevant are these references?

S: Sorry, these are sensitive issues, you know...

R: So what should constitute the right answer?

S: They should definitely discuss the issue of social media. It is everywhere now and anybody can use it. So the public sphere is there and it is the most popular one among students...

Sumith's reference to the 'issue of the social media' in relation to the essay topic is a valid observation. Habermas (1989) may not have conjectured the emergence of the digital public sphere (social media) we are witnessing today with its ubiquitous global presence.

Discussion

According to the two lecturers/markers, 78 essays inclusive of the 72 we analysed were unable to reach the pass mark required for this module. They failed to meet the pedagogic expectations however much they attempted to develop and establish arguments in their essays within their ability. In the 23 essays we examined, socio-political and economic discourses were the main criteria which had taken precedence over the subject-oriented knowledge capital (Discourse Analysis). In particular, Manori's ideological consciousness conditioned by the superimposition of the Marxist discourse, and the interdisciplinarity anchored in Political Science, and Upul's scathing critique of the politicians seem to have made their conceptualization process impervious to the role of the social media in creating a public sphere.

Ethnocentric and nationalist arguments were present mostly in 27 essays we analysed. They may be construed as manifestation of the segregated societal architecture in terms of fossilized ethnic consciousness in Sri Lanka. Apparently, ethno-religious consciousness has proved to be a deterrent to these students' conceptualization process. Interdisciplinary impasse was identifiable in eight essays including the one completed by Manori. Politically motivated ideologies also dictate terms to both Manori and Upul, and both of them are inadvertently promoting a tokenist discourse in the context of an argumentative discourse. On the other hand, Khalid, Ruwani, Bhagya, and Selva are engulfed by their ethno-religious exclusiveness which has precluded them from addressing the essay topic.

Students' propensity to prioritize particularly issues of political, cultural, and social issues of importance, and transcend the conceptually defined boundaries of a topic of an essay may be considered as innocent moves to discover themselves within familiar zones of interest which are instrumental in asserting their own individuality. It was convincingly spelt out at the interview that Manori had no intention of challenging or resisting the essay topic:

Researcher: Are you challenging the essay topic? I mean the political discourse is responsible for the disappearance of the public sphere?

Manori: No, no. I don't challenge. I agree. It is the reason no doubt, but I talk about the things which I can see...

In view of the digressive shifts in conceptualization in student essays, lecturers may be tempted to dwell on a perceived proposition of a discourse of resistance, which could in fact be non-existent. The implication, then, is that pedagogical explications of discourses are not concretized and internalized enough in the mind of students to critically analyze their preferred identity-oriented investigations of socio-political, cultural, economic, and historical issues (cf.

Wodak, 2011). Conceptual incongruities in most of the essays occurred owing to students' being implicated in socio-political, ethno-religious, and economic issues. What, then, are the reasons which made these students vulnerable to the factors listed in Table 1? Most of these students were reading Sinhala/Tamil, ESL, and Geography for their BA (general) degree and this discipline-specific exposure enables them to achieve a set of related tutored competencies. However, most of the factors referred to earlier are not exclusively discussed in these courses nor are these students provided with adequate academic support for ESL writing in those contexts. For these reasons, in order to cope with the requirements of the argumentative essay, a significant number of students have resorted to their untutored competencies derived from societal epistemologies and the related identity crises outside of the classroom. As revealed in this research, this is a situation where lecturers' conceptualization process informed by a prescriptive set of pedagogic criteria is in conflict with students' conceptualization process which is often galvanized by incidental learning imperatives such as inherited identity, social identity, and ideological identity in a broader context of society. This is echoed in Canagarajah's observation that students' identity-oriented explications in their writings at times can engender pedagogically antagonistic propositions (2004).

We asked Perera about the strategies he uses in providing these students with prior knowledge required for completing argumentative essays:

R: ... what's your approach to making students write effective argumentative essays?

P: I usually encourage library work in groups, and occasionally give them model essays and I think they can do these things because they are university students....

Although they study at a university, these first-year ESL student writers could still be regarded as novice writers without prior experience in writing long argumentative essays, and for

them ‘library work in groups’, or ‘model essays’ are not adequate; instead, in-class discussions on the significance of interpretation of essay topics, conflicting propositions emerging from students’ inherited, social, and ideological orientations need to be discussed.

Complex conflictual dimensions in argumentation have to be explained to students as part of remedial work. It is only then that lecturers can develop understanding of and sensitivity to students’ primary academic voice (Author, xxxx) which is invariably implicated in a variety of discourses in the process of discursive construction of texts. For example, in our interview with Khalid, we problematized his conflictual conceptualization process, and it proved to be a worthwhile learning experience for him.

For some, it may seem highly problematic why a significant number of these ESL writers opted to discuss a ‘political sphere’, and failed to analyse the media discourse and the Habermasian public sphere. In doing so, some of these students have also lost the audience consciousness: the fact that they are constructing a text for the lecturers/markers whose primary concern is to verify the nexus between the writing task (essay topic) and the product (the essay). This is a situation where writing pedagogy needs to take cognizance of conflicting domains of students’ conceptualization process. The following implications of this study would also be useful in terms of pedagogical intervention at post-secondary level:

- Discourse-based pedagogy is preferable to textbooks and lecture notes.
- Student identities, interdisciplinarity, and conceptualization pose challenging situations to practitioners as well as students.
- Micro knowledge domain and macro knowledge domain should be an integral part of pre-writing.
- Argumentative writing is a synergistic activity.

- Student texts completed in class are useful as teaching materials.
- Practitioners can focus on students' strengths and weaknesses (error analysis).
- Students often write themselves into their texts.

Conclusion

As demonstrated in this research, the codification of concepts in the essays, along with their incongruities, is engendered and filtered through the two-fold social cognitive model introduced in this article. Students' conceptualization process appears to be more propelled by their untutored competencies anchored in their identities than their tutored ones. This occurs in situations where students often inadvertently write themselves into texts in the conceptualization process. In their essays, public sphere is depicted as a tokenist discourse; in other words, it is not developed as a concretized concept in terms of valid arguments observing coherence and cohesion. This vindicates our position introduced earlier in this article that lecturers can make students proceed with the writing process from a micro knowledge domain (essay topic) to a macro knowledge domain (expanded essay topic). For pedagogical purposes, appropriate teaching/learning materials may emerge from student texts themselves rather than textbooks. These novice student writers cannot be blamed for what they discuss in their essays; they discuss social realities which should be an integral part of writing pedagogy. In these contexts, pedagogical intervention is much needed in terms of conflict teaching and disciplinary/interdisciplinary integration. Further empirical and theoretical explications are needed to investigate how students' untutored competencies and tutored competencies are embedded in the conceptualization process associated with argumentative writing among diverse student populations.

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