

Developing Argumentative Writing Proficiency in Chinese EFL Classrooms: A Genre-Based Group Writing Approach

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Abstract: This study examines the impact of integrating the genre-based approach with group writing on Chinese EFL university students' argumentative writing proficiency. A quasi-experimental design was employed, involving 60 second-year non-English major university students. The experimental group received genre-based group writing instruction, while the control group followed traditional writing instruction. Pre-test and post-test essays were analyzed using Systemic Functional Linguistics scoring criteria, focusing on ideational, interpersonal, and textual meta-functions. Quantitative data analysis included a paired sample t-test to compare the overall writing proficiency of both groups and a Wilcoxon signed-rank test to assess the experimental group's improvement across the three meta-functions. The results indicated that while both groups showed progress, the experimental group demonstrated significantly greater improvement, particularly in ideational and textual meta-functions. These findings suggest that genre-based group writing is an effective pedagogical approach for enhancing argumentative writing proficiency in EFL contexts.

Keywords: Genre-based approach, group writing, argumentative writing, Chinese EFL learners, Systemic functional linguistics

1. Introduction

Writing is considered one of the most challenging language skills for EFL learners, as it requires both linguistic competence and cognitive abilities (Hawari et al., 2022). Among various writing genres, argumentative writing is particularly important in academic contexts, as it requires students to construct logical arguments, critically analyze information, and present well-reasoned perspectives (Parkinson & Musgrave, 2014). In China, argumentative writing is positively correlated with students' academic performance (Halley, 2013; Walton, 1992), and it is an essential component of the English Curriculum Standard for Higher Vocational Education (Ministry of Education, 2021). However, despite its importance, many Chinese EFL students struggle with argumentative writing due to difficulties in generating content, structuring logical arguments, and expressing their stance effectively (Lu, 2023).

Research on EFL writing pedagogy has explored various approaches to improving writing proficiency, including product-based, process-oriented, and genre-based approaches. The product-based approach, which focuses on imitating model texts and producing grammatically accurate sentences, has been criticized for neglecting the writing process and the communicative purpose of writing (Badger & White, 2000; Khaki & Tabrizi, 2021). The process approach, emphasizing planning, drafting, revising, and editing, encourages student autonomy but fails to consider the social and cultural contexts of writing (Zamel, 1987; Hu, 2022). In response to these limitations, the genre-based approach has gained prominence, as it explicitly teaches students the structural and linguistic features of different text types, helping them understand the communicative purpose of writing within specific contexts (Mauludin, 2020).

While the genre-based approach provides structured guidance for writing, collaborative learning methods such as group writing have also been recognized for their effectiveness in EFL classrooms (Teng, 2021). Group writing allows students to share ideas, provide peer feedback, and develop critical thinking skills through social interaction (Abdelmohsen, 2023). In the Chinese EFL context, where large class sizes and teacher-centered instruction often limit student engagement, group writing offers a way to promote active learning and improve writing performance (Sari, 2019).

Given the potential benefits of both genre-based instruction and group writing, this study investigates the impact of combining these two approaches genre-based group writing on Chinese EFL students' argumentative writing proficiency. By analyzing students' performance using Systemic Functional Linguistics scoring criteria, this study aims to provide empirical evidence for the effectiveness of this integrated approach. This study contributes to the field of EFL writing pedagogy in several ways. First, it provides empirical evidence on the effectiveness of genre-based group writing in improving argumentative writing proficiency. Second, it offers insights into how different aspects of writing ideational, interpersonal, and textual meta-functions—develop under this instructional approach. Finally, by focusing on non-English major university students in China, this study fills a gap in the literature, as most previous research has concentrated on English majors or high school students. The findings of this study can inform EFL instructors on effective teaching strategies for argumentative writing and contribute to curriculum development in higher education.

While previous studies have explored the genre-based approach and collaborative learning separately, few have examined the combined effects of genre-based instruction and group writing on EFL argumentative writing. Additionally, most research has focused on English majors or high school students, with limited studies addressing non-English major Chinese university students. By integrating genre-based instruction with group writing, this study aims to: 1) evaluate its effectiveness in improving argumentative writing proficiency; and 2) assess student progress in ideational, interpersonal, and textual meta-functions.

This study seeks to address the following research questions:

- 1) How does genre-based group writing affect Chinese EFL students' argumentative writing proficiency compared to traditional instruction?
- 2) To what extent do students show improvement in ideational, interpersonal, and textual meta-functions based on SFL criteria?

2. Literature Review

A theoretical framework provides a structured foundation for analyzing complex academic issues and guiding research design (Varpio et al., 2020). In the context of this study, three key theories inform the investigation: Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, Social Interdependence Theory, and Systemic Functional Linguistics. These frameworks help explain the effectiveness of collaborative writing and genre-based instruction in EFL classrooms.

2.1 Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Zone of Proximal Development

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory emphasizes the role of social interaction in cognitive development, asserting that learning occurs through engagement with more knowledgeable peers or instructors (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). A core component of this theory is the Zone of Proximal Development, which describes the gap between what a learner can achieve independently and what they can accomplish with guidance (Vygotsky, 2012). This theory underscores the importance of scaffolding, where learners receive structured support until they develop the ability to perform tasks autonomously (Gong et al., 2018). In language learning, social interaction plays a crucial role in knowledge co-construction. Through peer collaboration and dialogue, learners refine their linguistic skills and deepen their understanding of writing conventions (Rahmatirad, 2020). This aligns with the principles of group writing, where learners work together to develop argumentative essays by pooling their knowledge, refining their arguments, and providing peer feedback.

2.2 Social Interdependence Theory and Collaborative Learning

Social Interdependence Theory, originally proposed by Deutsch (1949) and later expanded by Johnson & Johnson (1989), highlights the importance of positive interdependence in cooperative learning environments. The theory suggests that when students work collaboratively toward a common goal, they are more likely to engage in mutual support, effective communication, and resource-sharing (Grubor, 2020). Collaborative learning is particularly beneficial in EFL writing classrooms, as it promotes peer-assisted learning, encourages active engagement with writing tasks, and reduces the isolation often associated with individual writing (Bećirović et al., 2022). Studies have shown that cooperative writing environments enhance motivation, lower writing anxiety, and foster critical thinking skills (Alghamdy, 2019; Moon & Ke, 2020). In a group writing context, learners share responsibilities, negotiate meaning, and provide feedback, which aligns with the principles of social interdependence (Nair & Sanai, 2018). This study applies Social Interdependence Theory to understand how collaborative writing influences the development of argumentative writing proficiency in EFL learners.

2.3 Systemic Functional Linguistics and the Genre-Based Approach

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), developed by Halliday (1995), provides a functional perspective on language, emphasizing that linguistic choices are shaped by social context and communicative purpose. Within this framework, language is analyzed through three meta-functions: 1) ideational Meta-function – concerned with content and meaning-making, particularly how experiences and arguments are represented in writing (Eggins, 2004); 2) interpersonal Meta-

function – relates to the writer's engagement with the audience, including modality, stance, and persuasive strategies (Halliday, 1995; Accurso & Gebhard, 2020); and 3) textual Meta-function – focuses on cohesion, coherence, and thematic progression, ensuring logical and structured writing (Llinares & McCabe, 2023).

SFL provides an analytical tool for evaluating argumentative writing quality by examining how learners structure their essays, engage with the audience, and develop logical arguments (Martin, 2000). By integrating SFL-based assessment criteria, this study evaluates how students' writing proficiency improves when taught through genre-based group writing.

2.4 Genre-Based Approach in EFL Writing Instruction

The genre-based approach, initially developed by Swales (1990) and later influenced by Halliday's genre theory (2004), focuses on explicit instruction in text structure, linguistic features, and communicative purpose (Hyland, 2007). This approach is particularly effective for EFL learners, as it helps them understand how texts function within specific discourse communities (Az-Zhahir et al., 2020).

The genre-based approach is commonly implemented through a teaching and learning cycle, which consists of the following stages: a) building the context – Introducing the social purpose of a given genre; b) modeling and deconstructing the text – Analyzing sample texts to identify key features; c) joint construction – Engaging in collaborative writing activities with teacher support; d) independent construction – Writing individually with guidance; e) linking related texts – Applying knowledge to different writing contexts (Callaghan & Rothery, 1988).

This cycle scaffolds students' learning, ensuring they develop a strong understanding of how argumentative essays should be structured and written. Research has shown that genre-based instruction improves EFL students' genre awareness, text organization, and argumentation skills (Nagao, 2018; Zhang & Zhang, 2021).

3. Methodology

This study adopts a quasi-experimental design to investigate the impact of genre-based group writing on Chinese EFL students' argumentative writing proficiency. A quasi-experimental approach allows for the examination of instructional interventions in natural classroom settings, making it suitable for educational research where full randomization is not feasible. The study involves two groups: an experimental group receiving genre-based group writing instruction and a control group following traditional writing instruction. By comparing students' writing performance before and after the intervention, the study aims to assess the effectiveness of the genre-based group writing approach.

A total of 60 second-year non-English major students from a vocational university participated in the study. These students were enrolled in a compulsory English writing course. Based on their pre-test scores, students were ranked and then assigned to either the experimental or control group through matched-pair randomization, ensuring comparable writing proficiency levels between groups. The experimental group was further divided into smaller writing teams to facilitate collaborative learning, while the control group completed writing tasks individually under traditional instructional methods.

The intervention spanned 12 weeks, during which the experimental group followed a structured genre-based group writing approach aligned with the teaching and learning cycle. The instructional process included building contextual understanding, analyzing model texts, engaging in joint construction of texts, independently composing essays, and applying learned strategies to new writing tasks. Within each group, students took on rotating roles such as leader, recorder, reporter, and timekeeper to promote active engagement and shared responsibility. Peer feedback sessions were incorporated regularly, allowing students to refine their arguments and improve writing coherence through collaborative revision. In contrast, the control group received conventional instruction, focusing on grammar exercises, translation tasks, and individual writing practice without collaborative engagement.

To assess students' writing development, pre-test and post-test argumentative essays were administered. The essays were evaluated based on Systemic Functional Linguistics criteria, specifically analyzing ideational, interpersonal, and textual meta-functions to measure improvements in argumentation, engagement, and coherence. Additionally, classroom observations provided qualitative insights into student participation, collaboration patterns, and the effectiveness of peer interactions in the experimental group. Observational data captured how students engaged in discussions, provided feedback, and navigated challenges within the group writing process. By integrating pre-test and post-test assessments with classroom observations, this study seeks to provide empirical evidence on the effectiveness of genre-based group writing in enhancing Chinese EFL learners' argumentative writing skills.

4. Results

4.1 RQ1: How Does Genre-Based Group Writing Affect Chinese EFL Students' Argumentative Writing Proficiency Compared to Traditional Instruction?

To evaluate the impact of the instructional intervention, the post-test scores of the experimental and control groups were compared. Table 1, summarizes the descriptive statistics for both groups. The mean post-test score for the experimental group ($M = 27.20$, $SD = 3.210$) was notably higher than that of the control group ($M = 22.40$, $SD = 3.927$), with a mean

difference of 4.80 points. This suggests that students in the experimental group outperformed those in the control group following the intervention.

Table 1. Group statistics for post-test writing scores

Group Statistics					
	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Posttest	CG	30	22.40	3.927	.717
	EG	30	27.20	3.210	.586

To determine whether this difference was statistically significant, an independent samples t-test was conducted. The t-test results in Table 2 indicate a statistically significant difference between the two groups ($t = -5.184$, $p < .001$). As the p-value is below 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected, confirming that the genre-based group writing intervention had a significant positive effect on students' argumentative writing performance.

Table 2. Independent samples t-test results

Independent Samples Test										
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				t-test for Equality of Means				
		F	Sig.	t	df	Significance Two-Sided p	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
Posttest	Equal variances assumed	1.411	.240	-5.184	58	<.001	-4.800	.926	-6.654	-2.946
	Equal variances not assumed			-5.184	55.792	<.001	-4.800	.926	-6.655	-2.945

However, to control for potential confounding variables, an ANCOVA was conducted, using pre-test scores as a covariate to ensure that post-test differences were primarily due to the intervention rather than initial writing ability. The ANCOVA results in Table 3, reveal that the effect of pre-test scores on post-test scores was not significant ($F = 0.541$, $p = 0.465$), indicating that students' initial writing ability did not substantially influence their final performance. The group effect was highly significant ($F = 26.753$, $p < .001$), with an effect size of 0.319 (Partial Eta Squared). The adjusted mean post-test scores were 27.205 for the experimental group and 22.395 for the control group, further confirming the effectiveness of genre-based group writing.

Table 3. ANCOVA results for post-test writing scores

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects							
Dependent Variable: Posttest							
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared	Estimated effect
Corrected Model	325.610a	2	176.305	13.599	<.001	.323	-
Intercept	399.738	1	399.738	30.833	<.001	.351	-
Pretest	7.010	1	7.010	.541	.465	.009	-
Group	346.849	1	346.849	26.753	<.001	.319	4.809
Error	738.990	57	12.965	-	-	-	-
Total	37994.000	60	-	-	-	-	-
Corrected Total	1091.600	59	-	-	-	-	-
a. R Squared = .323 (Adjusted R Squared = .299)							-

4.2 RQ2: To What Extent do Students Show Improvement in Ideational, Interpersonal, and Textual Meta-Functions Based on SFL Criteria?

To assess the impact of genre-based group writing, students' pre-test and post-test writing scores were compared. The descriptive statistics for the overall writing performance and the three meta-function components are presented in Table 4. The results indicate a notable improvement in students' writing performance following the intervention. The total writing score increased from 21.10 (SD = 2.537) in the pre-test to 27.20 (SD = 3.210) in the post-test, suggesting that the genre-based group writing approach contributed significantly to writing development.

Among the three meta-functions, textual function (TF) exhibited the most substantial improvement, with an increase from M = 9.33 to M = 12.07. The ideational function (IdF) also showed considerable growth, from M = 6.33 to M = 8.57. The interpersonal function (IF) displayed the least progress, increasing from M = 5.43 to M = 6.57, indicating that students experienced more challenges in improving engagement and stance expression.

Table 4. Pre-test and post-test descriptive statistics

Component	Pre-Test Mean (SD)	Post-Test Mean (SD)	N
Ideational Function (IdF)	6.33 (1.446)	8.57 (2.300)	30
Interpersonal Function (IF)	5.43 (1.569)	6.57 (1.906)	30
Textual Function (TF)	9.33 (2.006)	12.07 (1.964)	30
Total Writing Score	21.10 (2.537)	27.20 (3.210)	30

To determine whether these improvements were statistically significant, a paired samples t-test was conducted. The results of the paired samples t-test as shown in Table 5, reveal a statistically significant improvement in overall writing performance ($t = -8.857$, $p < .001$). The mean difference of 6.10 points confirms that students in the experimental group made substantial progress after receiving genre-based group writing instruction.

Table 5. Paired samples t-test results for overall writing performance

Pair	Mean Difference	SD	t	df	p-value
Pre-Test Post-Test	-6.10	3.772	-8.857	29	< .001

Since the three meta-function components may not follow a normal distribution, the Wilcoxon signed-rank test, a nonparametric alternative, was conducted to examine improvements within each meta-function category. The Wilcoxon test results as shown in Table 6, confirm that students demonstrated statistically significant improvements across all three meta-functions ($p < .05$). The ideational function showed the most significant change ($Z = -4.492$, $p < .001$), indicating notable progress in content development and argumentation. The textual function also exhibited substantial growth ($Z = -2.919$, $p = .004$), suggesting that students enhanced their ability to structure information coherently and cohesively. However, the interpersonal function showed the least improvement ($Z = -3.164$, $p = .002$), suggesting that students still struggled with engagement markers and stance expression.

Table 6. Wilcoxon signed-rank test results

Component	Z	p-value	Interpretation
Ideational Function (IdF)	-4.492	< .001	Significant improvement
Interpersonal Function (IF)	-3.164	.002	Significant improvement
Textual Function (TF)	-2.919	.004	Significant improvement

5. Discussion

The findings indicate that the genre-based group writing approach had a significant positive impact on students' argumentative writing proficiency. The experimental group outperformed the control group, and within the experimental group, significant improvements were observed across ideational, interpersonal, and textual meta-functions. The discussion below interprets these results in relation to relevant theories and previous studies.

The significant difference in post-test scores between the experimental and control groups suggests that genre-based group writing is more effective than traditional writing instruction in enhancing students' argumentative writing proficiency. This finding aligns with previous studies indicating that explicit genre instruction enhances students' understanding of rhetorical structures and linguistic choices, thereby improving overall writing quality (Teng, 2022; Yasuda, 2022). The ANCOVA results further confirmed that pre-test scores had no significant effect on post-test

performance, reinforcing the conclusion that the observed improvements were primarily due to the intervention rather than pre-existing proficiency differences.

The experimental group demonstrated significant improvement in ideational function, which relates to content development and argument clarity. This finding supports the claim that genre-based instruction provides students with explicit structural models that enhance their ability to develop arguments logically and cohesively (Nagao, 2022). The teaching-learning cycle, which included text deconstruction, joint construction, and independent writing, likely contributed to students' improved ability to generate, elaborate, and organize ideas effectively. This result is consistent with previous studies showing that structured genre-based instruction helps students construct more developed and coherent arguments in their writing (Mauludin, 2021).

The most substantial improvement was observed in textual function, which relates to coherence, cohesion, and logical progression. The significant increase in textual function scores suggests that students became more adept at structuring their essays using cohesive devices and logical connectors after receiving genre-based group writing instruction. These findings align with previous research indicating that explicit instruction in discourse structure and cohesive strategies leads to improved textual coherence in student writing (Chen et al., 2024). Additionally, the collaborative nature of group writing allowed students to engage in peer discussions about text organization, reinforcing their understanding of how to create well-structured arguments (Chen, 2021).

Although the interpersonal function also showed significant improvement, its gains were relatively smaller compared to ideational and textual functions. This suggests that while students benefited from the intervention, they still faced challenges in effectively expressing stance and engaging readers. Previous research has shown that developing interpersonal function—such as the appropriate use of hedging, boosting, and evaluative language—requires more sustained practice and explicit instruction (Fadhillah & Rahmadina, 2021). Since genre-based instruction primarily focuses on structural and rhetorical aspects of writing, additional pedagogical strategies, such as targeted feedback on stance-taking and audience engagement, may be necessary to further improve interpersonal function (Zhang & Zang, 2021).

The collaborative writing approach played a crucial role in facilitating knowledge construction, peer feedback, and engagement with genre-specific conventions. Group writing activities provided students with opportunities to negotiate meaning, discuss rhetorical strategies, and refine their arguments, leading to deeper engagement with argumentative writing. These findings align with studies suggesting that peer interaction in writing tasks fosters greater awareness of genre conventions and improves writing quality (Herman et al. 2023). Moreover, working in groups may have reduced cognitive load, allowing students to focus on argumentation and coherence rather than struggling with individual linguistic challenges (Jiang & Kalyuga, 2022).

6. Conclusion

This study provides empirical evidence that genre-based group writing significantly enhances Chinese EFL students' argumentative writing proficiency. The findings indicate that students who received genre-based group writing instruction outperformed those in the control group, demonstrating significant improvements in ideational, interpersonal, and textual meta-functions. Among these, textual and ideational functions showed the greatest progress, suggesting that the approach effectively enhanced students' ability to structure arguments and maintain coherence, while interpersonal function improvements were relatively limited, highlighting the need for further emphasis on stance-taking and audience engagement. The study has several pedagogical implications for EFL writing instruction. First, explicit genre-based instruction should be incorporated into writing curricula, providing students with structured models and scaffolding to improve argument development and text cohesion. Second, peer collaboration in writing activities should be encouraged, as it fosters deeper engagement with genre conventions and improves overall writing quality. Lastly, greater attention should be given to developing interpersonal function, with targeted instruction on hedging, boosting, and evaluative language to enhance persuasive writing. Despite its contributions, this study has some limitations. Factors such as student motivation and prior writing experience may have influenced the results, and the study did not examine long-term retention of writing improvements. Future research should explore the long-term effects of genre-based group writing and its applicability across different educational contexts and proficiency levels. Expanding the study to various EFL populations could provide further insights into the broader effectiveness of this instructional approach. Overall, this study highlights the effectiveness of genre-based group writing in improving argumentative writing proficiency. By integrating structured genre instruction with collaborative learning, EFL educators can enhance students' writing skills and better prepare them for academic and professional communication in English. Future research should continue to refine this approach, ensuring its adaptability to diverse learning environments and long-term skill development.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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