

## Discrepancies between actual and perceived abilities in understanding argumentative texts amongst ESL students in Malaysia



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### ABSTRACT

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The ability to apply classroom learning to real-world contexts is essential, particularly in understanding arguments within argumentative texts. This skill is vital for informed citizenship, as it equips future graduates to handle real-life issues they will encounter in society and industry, fostering lifelong learning beyond their tertiary education. The purpose of this study is to compare students' actual abilities with their self-assessments in comprehending argumentative texts from newspapers by identifying any discrepancies between students' actual and perceived abilities, enabling instructors to design more effective teaching strategies to bridge these gaps. This study is qualitative in nature whereby it involved 51 diploma-level English as Second Language (ESL) students from a Malaysian public university. Four newspaper articles from local columns were used to test actual comprehension abilities, while an online survey assessed students' self-perceived abilities. Results indicated a significant disparity between actual and perceived abilities, consistent with previous research. Although not explicitly tested, there appears to be a correlation between negative self-assessments and poor performance. Future research should explore the effectiveness of the three-stage model essay framework in preparing students for real-world applications, as this model may not align with industry needs. A new framework is needed to aid ESL students in comprehending not only academic argumentative texts but also authentic texts.

**Contribution/ Originality:** The study's focus on comparing actual versus self-assessed comprehension abilities in ESL students, particularly in the context of understanding argumentative texts from newspapers, offers a unique angle. While many studies have explored comprehension and self-assessment separately, this specific comparison in an ESL context within a Malaysian public university is less common.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Background of Study

The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) is unprecedented in that its pace is unlike any other industrial revolutions experienced throughout human history. The way we live, work, and communicate, all of which have become characterised by automated processes and the increasing use of intelligent machines, comes with novel changes and challenges. Where education matters, there is a significant shift of role between educators and students wherein the former are expected to become facilitators to assist the latter to transition towards learning at their own pace and

becoming curators of knowledge as teaching and learning technologies and applications are making their way into education (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2015). In other words, a bigger emphasis is placed on students to be more independent and to ensure that their pursuit of knowledge to be ongoing, voluntary, and self-motivated well past their formal education years.

Kirsch (2001) wrote though the meaning of literacy has its roots in reading, the definition has evolved through time to refer to “using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential”. In other words, literacy is reading, but it is not confined to simply decoding or reading aloud, as it also peers into other aspects surrounding the act of reading such as the diverse ways, reasons, and purposes to read and to have a text read in different settings, etc. It is a skill that is highly crucial for any individuals attempting to develop themselves in order to be successful in academics and in career, and ultimately to stay afloat amidst the challenges of 4IR (Conley & Wise, 2011; Ippolito, Steele, & Samson, 2008; Murnane, Sawhill, & Snow, 2012).

This complex and ever-changing reality will require students to possess literacy skills with which they can evaluate and reflect on information critically and analytically (Rusydiyah, AR, & Rahman, 2023). Recognising this, educational institutions around the world are beginning to prioritise producing graduates who possess critical thinking abilities (Ab Kadir, 2010; Ab Kadir, 2017; Murnane et al., 2012; Paul, 1995; Wegerif, Li, & Kaufman, 2015). Though further research is needed to determine the relationship between literacy skills and individual’s higher order thinking skills, the former has always been postulated to influence the latter (Binkley, Keiser, & Strahan, 2011; Joseph & Schisler, 2009; Manfra & Holmes, 2020; Susanti & Krisdiana, 2021; Taboada Barber et al., 2015).

Nevertheless, though developing critical thinking literacy levels is vital for ESL students, concerns have been raised that the standards and the needs of their academic institutions and industry for various professional and public contexts have not been met, especially within the parameter of discursive activities (Azmi, Hashim, & Yusoff, 2018; Nti, 2019; Sarudin, Noor, Zubairi, Ahmad, & Nordin, 2013; Silva, Reichelt, & Lax-Farr, 1994; Tan, 2017). Skills related to making and understanding arguments make demands of students to be highly cognitive, which explains why it poses some difficulties to students (Crowhurst, 1990). Zappel (1986) said, “argumentation is present in discursive activity, it is linked to the specific socio-cultural context in which a discourse takes place, and it is bound by linguistic and logical rules in order to be intelligible”. Mohammad (2019) postulated that challenges of argumentative skill amongst students is present in argument structure organisation and logical meaning comprehension. Additionally, vocabulary knowledge plays a significant role in reading comprehension, affecting how students understand and interpret texts, including newspaper articles (Umar Baki, Rafik-Galea, & Nimehchisalem, 2016).

### *1.2. Statement of Problem*

It is generally acknowledged that graduates should possess soft skills to successfully enter and grow in the job market. However, a study by Nadarajah (2021) found that there is an obvious mismatch between expectations in the job market and local graduates in terms of specific employability skills in Malaysia. Fresh graduates are generally competent at hard skills such as basic ICT skills, leadership, teamwork, and time management, but when it comes to soft skills which include communication, creativity, problem-solving, and interpersonal skills, much is left to be desired, as indicated by various research studies (Ahmat et al., 2022; Insani, Pratiwi, & Muhardjito, 2019; Puspitasari & Nugroho, 2019).

Therefore, these potential drawbacks as undergraduate students strategise to understand arguments in academic texts will be examined and see if they are able to also apply similar strategies in understanding arguments in authentic texts. Ultimately, this study will compare students’ actual ability in contrast to their self-evaluations of their own ability in understanding argumentative texts from newspapers. Such a comparison will assist lesson instructors to see if there is a discrepancy in students’ actual and perceived abilities, and consequently, to design a more

comprehensive approach to bridge the gap between actual and perceived competence in argumentative composition and comprehension.

The ability to understand arguments in social discourse is crucial for informed citizenship as these real and challenging texts expose the future graduates to real life issues that they may need to deal with once they join the community and the industry. This may also introduce them to lifelong learning, which may continue even after they complete their tertiary degree.

### *1.3. Objective of the Study and Research Questions*

This study is done to explore students' ability in understanding arguments in authentic text. Specifically, this study is done to answer the following questions:

- To examine students' actual ability in understanding arguments in authentic texts.
- To investigate students' perceived ability in understanding arguments in authentic texts.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### *2.1. Actual and Perceived Competencies*

Li, Sum, Sit, Wong, and Ha (2020) conducted a study to investigate if Chinese school children can assess their abilities correctly in physical literacy in comparison to their performance. The study revealed that significant correlations were observed between the perceptions and actual scores in the participants, especially amongst the boys, suggesting gender as a variable factor in determining the correlation between actual and perceived competencies. A research paper written by Cequena, Barrot, Gabinete, Barrios-Arnuco, and Bolanos (2013) factored in different variables when investigating this matter, namely writing, and reading. Their study revealed a similar result to the aforementioned paper vis-à-vis writing, where there is a positive relationship, but the same does not apply to reading. In hindsight, variables may well play a key role in understanding the association between actual and perceived competencies.

Nevertheless, research from numerous studies highlights a notable difference between students' actual literacy abilities and their perceived competencies. When Porat, Blau, and Barak (2018) measured students' perceived competencies versus actual performance in digital literacies, they learnt that only a handful can be said to have evaluated their perceived abilities correctly. Likewise, a study by Kim, Park, and Jo (2020) also found that there is discrepancy in how people perceive their literacy and how they actually perform. The focus of their study revolved around the subject matter of eHealth, specifically with regard to the ability to use online cancer-related information. These findings are consistent with several other studies across different fields such as those conducted by Karataş et al. (2022); Du Plessis (2012); Baartman and Ruijs (2011); Kusmaryono and Kusumaningsih (2023) and Kelly, Feistman, Dodge, St. Rose, and Littenberg-Tobias (2020).

Despite its discrepancy, it must be noted that the way students evaluate themselves has also been proven to significantly influence and improve their actual performance. According to the research by Reynolds, Arnone, and Marshall (2009) which delved into the influence of eight grade students' perceived competence and reading enjoyment towards their actual performance in information skills and digital technology knowledge, the former did positively contribute to the latter. Their study lends support to self-determination theory which outlines the importance of internal sources of motivation that concerns one's innate growth tendencies.

### *2.2. Reading Argumentative Texts*

Reading argumentative texts in English classrooms requires a blend of skills, strategies, and critical thinking. Students learn the components of argumentative texts, including types of evidence. Integrating critical thinking skills into reading and writing instruction enhances students' abilities to analyse, evaluate, and construct arguments. Engaging with argumentative texts develops critical thinking, logical organisation, and coherence in writing. This

integration not only improves argumentative writing proficiency but also overall critical thinking skills (Iswati & Purwati, 2022; Prayogi, Mulyati, Sastromiharjo, & Damaianti, 2022; Wu & Qian, 2024).

Students employ cognitive and metacognitive strategies to comprehend, analyse, and respond to argumentative texts. Wilkinson, Reznitskaya, and D'Agostino (2023) notes that professional development for teachers enhances their facilitation skills, positively impacting students' argumentation skills and academic performance. The goal is to enhance reading comprehension and the ability to critically analyse persuasive texts, with teachers playing a key role in guiding this process.

Furthermore, argumentative texts require critical engagement, evaluation of evidence, and construction of meaning. Unique features like claims, evidence, and counterarguments can challenge students (Diakidoy, Ioannou, & Christodoulou, 2017). Individual differences significantly influence how students approach argumentative texts. Factors such as prior knowledge, language proficiency, and socio-economic background shape reading practices (De-La-Peña & Ballell, 2019). Recognising these differences informs differentiated instruction to meet diverse learner needs.

In the digital age, students engage with argumentative texts on various digital platforms. Technology impacts reading practices, necessitating digital literacy skills (Diallo, 2023). Using digital tools like online annotation platforms and collaborative forums enhances interaction with texts.

Classroom instruction is pivotal in shaping reading practices. Teacher modelling, guided practice, and collaborative activities develop proficiency in reading argumentative texts (Qin & Liu, 2021a). A supportive classroom environment that encourages critical discussions and peer feedback deepens understanding of complex arguments.

### *2.3. Authentic Argumentative Texts*

Numerous studies have shown that critical thinking is associated with critical reading that helps students better their academic performance and problem-solving abilities (Ellen, 2023; Kökçüü, 2023; Prada Arias, Trujillo Rodríguez, & Herrera Mosquera, 2022; Tsai, Wu, Bråten, & Wang, 2022). Additionally, engaging students in critical literacy practices has been shown to activate motivation, leading to improved language learning engagement and academic perseverance (Prada Arias et al., 2022). A subset of critical literacy includes the ability to understand arguments, and for fresh graduates who are expected to manifest this ability not only within academic settings, but also within various other domains that contain authentic use of persuasion and arguments. Such skill helps them to differentiate between valid and credible arguments and misinformation presented in various authentic sources that contain abundant information such as news articles, social media posts, and other forms of digital and printed media. These real-life based texts, which are not specifically designed for educational purposes have been recognised by many educators to be effective and interesting materials, and they have been proposed to replace fabricated texts in the teaching of reading (Albiladi, 2019; Islam & Santoso, 2018) suggested that every text should be authentic because learners need to be prepared to use the English language in real-life situations. Such texts also provide an ongoing connection to current events and an introduction to adult reading (Blachowicz & Ogle, 2017). In fact, an overwhelming demand for authentic texts to be used in teaching and learning has seen that this type of text is commonly utilised in textbooks teaching argumentative reading and writing (Mierwald, Lehmann, & Brauch, 2022).

Be that as it may, argumentative texts taught to undergraduate composition classrooms are rather rigid in their structure as the guidance and instructions often revolve around “five-paragraph essay” structure (Yasuda, 2023). By providing a structured approach to argumentative composition, students' ability to analyse, reason, and persuade effectively may be enhanced (Grosskopf, 2020). Structured argumentative texts may serve as a bridge between academic knowledge and practical application, but such compositions may potentially constrain the development of broader argumentative practices and hinder developments of higher-thinking skills (Almeida, Figueiredo, & Galvão, 2012; Ghanbari & Salari, 2022; Meza-Duriez & Orellana, 2022; Risco del Valle, 2018).

Schneer (2013) study focused on the format of the typical argumentative essay, widely instructed in academic writing resources for English language learners and examined its close resemblance to real-world situations. An examination was conducted on a set of 50 argumentative opinion blog entries sourced from prominent U.S. news websites, namely The Huffington Post and FoxNews.com. In accordance with Hyland (1990) model, an analysis of moves was conducted on all 50 argumentative blog entries. The objective was to assess the degree of conformity between the structures of these entries and the models of effective argumentative essay writing as outlined in writing textbooks. The results showed that the authentic opinion blog entries from the real world diverge notably from the frequently instructed three-stage essay model, uncovering various aspects that warrant contemplation and additional exploration. Grossnickle (2020) in her research, reflected on the limitations of confining writing assignments to traditional letters and suggested expanding the unit to include various genres such as Twitter threads, infographics, documentaries, photo essays, and TED talks. Emphasising authentic writing experiences, she defined it as writing for a specific purpose and a real audience, allowing for feedback and student choice. By incorporating diverse genres, the aim is to enhance intrinsic motivation and overall classroom participation. Research suggests that engaging in authentic experiences contributes to students' content mastery. The focus on intentional and standards-aligned instruction aligns with disciplinary essential practices, encouraging students to explore different modalities, registers, voices, and rhetorical styles in writing for various purposes and audiences. She emphasised the importance of offering students more control throughout the writing process, creating a more inclusive classroom that mirrors the diversity of the world beyond school. The introduction of authentic writing into the classroom has proven to be a transformative experience. By permitting individuality and diversity in the writing process, text genres, and classroom structure, ownership over learning was assumed by students, resulting in the creation of unique outputs. Larson, Britt, and Larson (2004) conducted two experiments in their study where they investigated the ability of university students to understand authentic argumentative texts and the factors influencing their proficiency in this skill. Participants engaged in several relatively lengthy arguments, tasked with identifying the main claim and supporting reasons. Experiment 1 revealed a lack of expertise amongst participants in identifying crucial elements within argumentative texts, with only 30% accuracy. The inclusion of explicit markers proved beneficial, enhancing performance across all skill levels. Errors in identifying the claim and reasons displayed intriguing patterns, such as recognising either an uncontroversial statement of the theme or a counterargument as the claim. Building on the findings from Experiment 1, a concise argument tutorial was developed and tested in Experiment 2. While effective for readers focused on comprehension, it did not demonstrate the same efficacy for those reading with a rebuttal intent. These results underscore the necessity for additional instruction in argument comprehension skills and advocate for further research into the underlying processes involved.

Using argumentative texts from newspapers to teach argumentative compositions can be beneficial for students' writing skills (Da Silva Souza, 2020; Marttunen & Kiili, 2022; Qin & Liu, 2021b). Research suggests that students can enhance their argumentation depth and breadth using newspapers by analysing source texts and writing papers based on diverse arguments and controversial topics. Additionally, utilising newspaper articles in teaching strategies can improve science process skills, foster openness, criticism, and perseverance, and positively influence scientific attitudes (Amelia & Muthim, 2021). Nevertheless, Marttunen and Kiili (2022) found that when it comes to writing after having been exposed to arguments in newspapers, students seemed to struggle with structuring their composition, perhaps due to the reasons discussed earlier.

#### 2.4. Toulmin's Model

Toulmin's model is a theoretical structure that can be used to analyse and understand arguments. Toulmin's model consists of various components that aid in dissecting the elements of an argument, including the claim, grounds, warrant, backing, qualifier, and rebuttal. This framework offers a systematic approach to evaluating the effectiveness and validity of arguments by examining how these components interact and contribute to the overall argumentative

structure. It serves as a valuable tool for both analysing existing arguments and constructing persuasive discourse. Therefore, this study makes use of Toulmin’s argumentation model in teaching the students involved in understanding arguments.

The notion that argumentative discourse in academic writing bears resemblance to formal logic and shares the same foundation of claims and evidence is emphasised by Toulmin (2003). The widely employed structural framework for written arguments within academic discourse is known as the Toulmin argument pattern. This model encompasses several essential elements: a *claim*, supporting *data*, *warrants* that establish a connection between the *data* and the *claim*, *backings* that reinforce the *warrants*, and *rebuttals* that outline the *scenarios* wherein the *claim* might not hold true.

Additionally, Toulmin introduces *qualifiers* to indicate the level of reliability attributed to conclusions derived from arguments. Despite the passage of time, Toulmin (2003) remains both relevant and applicable for the analysis of argumentative texts. Evident in its widespread utilisation by researchers for dissecting written and spoken arguments, Toulmin's theory continues to be a cornerstone, even though it may not be the most recent theory available. Furthermore, Toulmin (2003) provides an effective pattern for structuring arguments, underlining its enduring significance in the field of discourse analysis. Based on the Toulmin argument model the argument above could be drawn schematically as below:

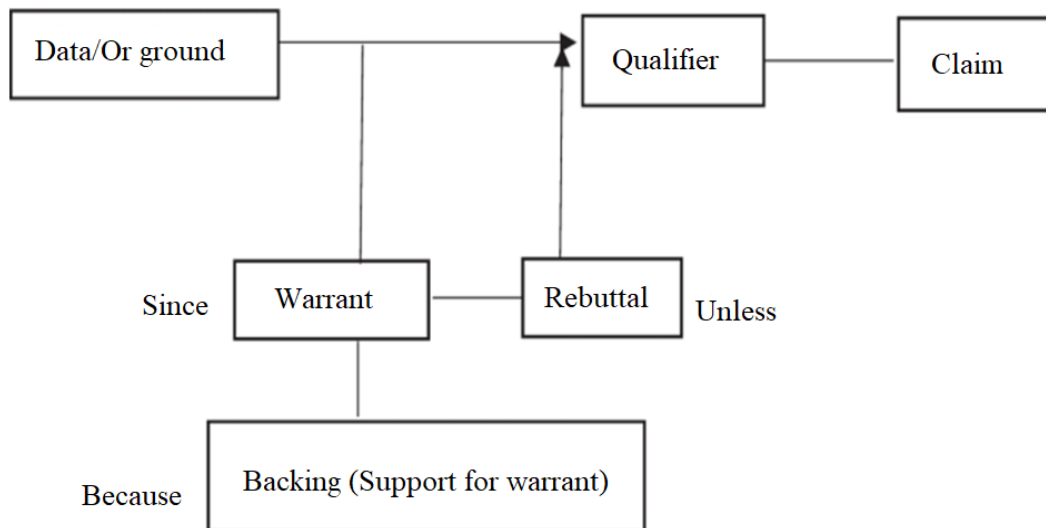


Figure 1. Toulmin's argumentation model

Source: Toulmin (2003).

Figure 1 illustrates Toulmin’s argumentation model, which is a framework for analysing and constructing arguments. It was first introduced in 1958, but it continues to be influential and widely used in academic discussions and applications. The model aims to understand the structure and components of effective arguments and provides a systematic approach to breaking down arguments into six key elements which are *data*, *qualifier*, *claim*, *warrant*, *rebuttal*, and *backing*.

Table 1. Elements and definitions in the Toulmin model (Yang, 2022).

Six elements of Toulmin’s argumentation model	
Claim	Claim refers to the conclusion to be argued for.
Data	The term data (D) refers to the specific facts relied on to support a given claim
Warrant	Toulmin introduced the concept of warrant (W), which serves as the bridge to justify how the claim is derived from the data.
Backing	Backing refers to facts, authorities, or explanations used to strengthen or support the warrant.
Qualifier	Qualifiers refer to modals, such as probably, possibly, perhaps
Rebuttal	A rebuttal specifies the conditions which might defeat the major claim



Table 1 presents the details of the six elements in Toulmin's argumentation model. In general, Toulmin's argumentation model provides a robust framework for understanding, analysing, and constructing arguments in various fields, including education, law, and everyday discourse.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1. Participants

51 diploma level English as Second Learners (ESL) students in a Malaysian public university participated in the study. The students were from various faculties, all of which include hotel and tourism management, communication and media studies, and academy of language studies. The students had a range of English language competencies, with some being more proficient in English than others.

#### 3.2. Instruments

##### 3.2.1. Newspaper Articles

Four (4) newspaper articles were carefully selected from the column piece of local newspaper portals to be used as lesson and practice materials. Two (2) of the articles feature the characteristics of argumentative texts and the other two (2), non-argumentative texts. For the lesson, one (1) out of the two available argumentative articles, entitled "Encourage Smokers to Switch to Better Alternatives", was used. For the purpose of assessing students' actual ability in understanding argumentative texts, two (2) articles which are expository in nature and one (1) argumentative article were used. The titles of the articles are "Time to raise minimum wage for interns", "Mum's food intake linked to child's obesity", and "Tackle mental health by giving hope to others", respectively. The length of each article falls within the range of 600 to 750 words.

##### 3.2.2. Online Questionnaire

An online survey was conducted amongst students to assess their self-perceived ability to comprehend arguments in argumentative texts. The survey included questions about their interest in reading such texts. Students were also asked to rate their skills in understanding arguments within these texts. Additionally, they were queried about any difficulties they may encounter when trying to understand arguments and were prompted to describe the specific challenges they frequently face.

#### 3.3. Procedure

##### 3.3.1. Phase 1

Prior to testing students' abilities in understanding argumentative texts, lecturers were tasked with providing a lesson on the subject matter in the first phase of the study. The phase began with instructing students to print out three articles of their choices to be brought to the class scheduled for learning argumentative texts. In the class, the lecturers taught their students the topic of reading and understanding argumentative texts, the lesson plan of which was designed based on the structure of Toulmin's model of academic argumentative writing. The lesson entailed instruction on the essential components of an argument, namely *reasons* and *conclusions*, along with the indicators that signify a well-constructed argument. In addition, the lecturer shed light on the distinctions and similarities between academic texts and authentic texts, such as newspaper articles. To facilitate comprehension, students also received a textual analysis sample that served as a reference point for conducting the reading activity, with the lecturer offering guidance throughout the process.

##### 3.3.2. Phase 2

In the second phase of the study, the lecturer began by requesting students to review previous lessons on reading and understanding argumentative texts to observe how much they understood the topic. Afterwards, to assess

students' actual ability, the students were each assigned an individual task, requiring them to engage with three (3) reading texts, carefully selected by the lecturer from the column piece section of local newspapers to test students' competencies. Students were tasked with identifying which amongst the three was argumentative. Upon completing this, they were required to identify the *conclusion* (argument) of the author, followed by *reasons* and *tone*, and thereafter completing an online questionnaire, to determine their perceived ability in understanding arguments in authentic texts.

Table 2. Students' distribution of scores for argumentative texts tasks.

Question	Scores				
1 (Type of essay)	41 / 51				
2 (Conclusion)	35 / 41				
3 (Reasons)	0 mark	1 mark	2 marks	3 marks	4 marks
	12 / 41	12 / 41	8 / 41	8 / 41	1 / 41
4 (Tone)	24 / 41				

Table 2 shows distribution of students' scores based on the tasks assigned to each of the 51 respondents. A significant majority (80.39%) were able to identify which of the three texts that they had read was argumentative. Furthermore, out of the 41 who were successful at identifying the argumentative article, 85.37% of the respondents managed to isolate the *conclusion*, and 58.54% the *tone* of the argumentative article. However, when tasked with locating the *reasons* for the argument in the article, only one (1) student managed to get all correct.

#### 4. FINDINGS

##### 4.1. Students' Actual Ability to Understand Arguments in Authentic Texts using Toulmin's Model

Table 2 shows the complete figure of participants in the study and the categorisation of the figure according to their answers based on the tasks provided. In the order of the row of data, the table includes the number of students who were able to distinguish argumentative text from expository ones, who were able to recognise the conclusion or main argument of each text, who were able to isolate the reasons of the argument, and lastly, who were able to detect the tone of the argumentative text. The figures reveal as many as 41 students were able to successfully identify argumentative texts when tasked with distinguishing types of articles taken from the local newspaper portals, after having been exposed to the framework introduced by Toulmin (2003). However, despite being able to tell an argumentative text apart correctly, only 35 students could point out the conclusion of each article from the initial figure. Additionally, when asked to deduce the reasons in each text, almost all students performed rather poorly as only 1 student was able to obtain full score. As for the tone, 24 students managed to answer correctly.

##### 4.2. Students' Perceived Ability in Understanding Arguments in Authentic Text

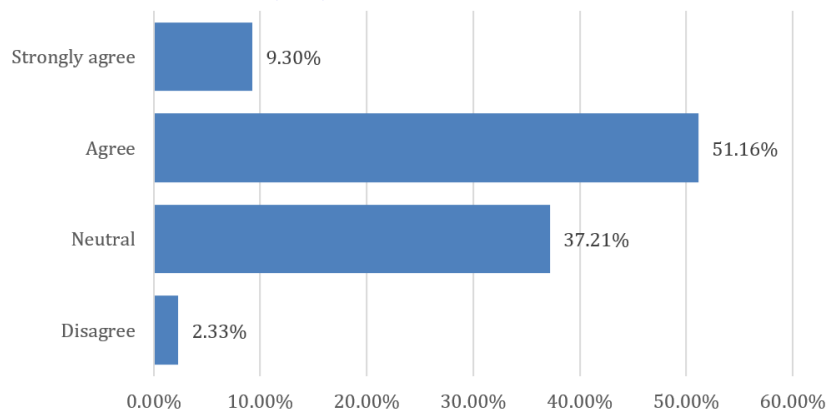


Figure 2. Percentage distribution of "I enjoy reading argumentative texts."



Figure 2 shows that out of 51 students, 60.46% responded positively to the statement “I enjoy reading argumentative texts”, while 37.21% chose neutral and 2.33% expressed that they did not enjoy reading argumentative texts.

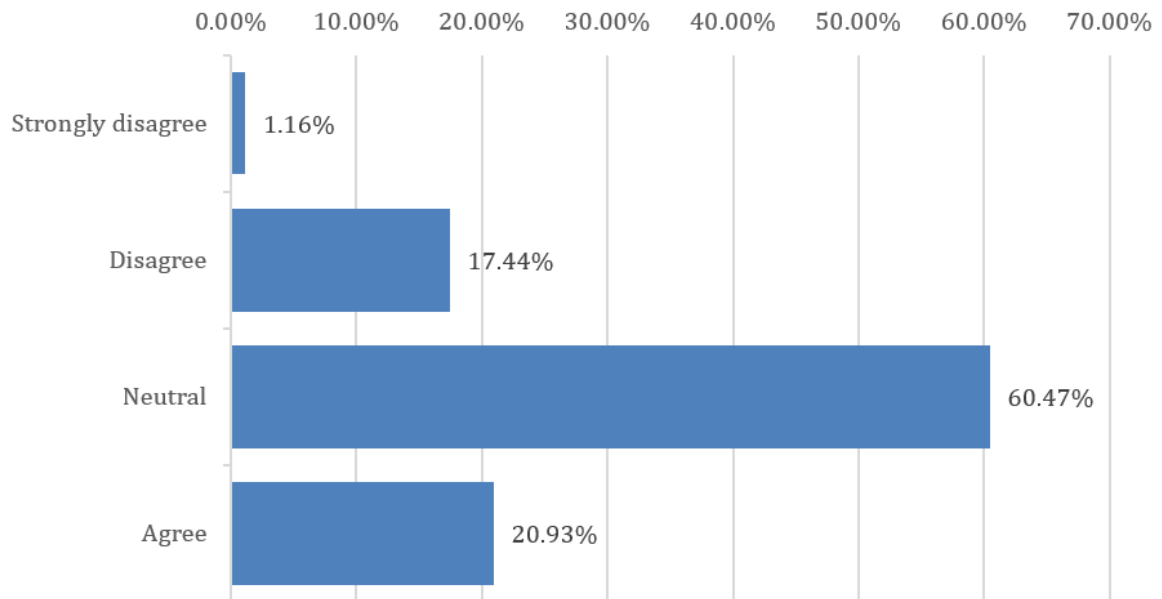


Figure 3. Percentage distribution of “I am skilled at understanding arguments.”

Figure 3 shows the percentage distribution for the statement “I am skilled at understanding arguments”. A high percentage of the respondents (60.47%) chose neutral due to their uncertainties of their own ability. Only 20.93% were confident that they would not have any issues when it comes to their comprehension of argumentative texts, while the rest (18.6%) related to the statement negatively.

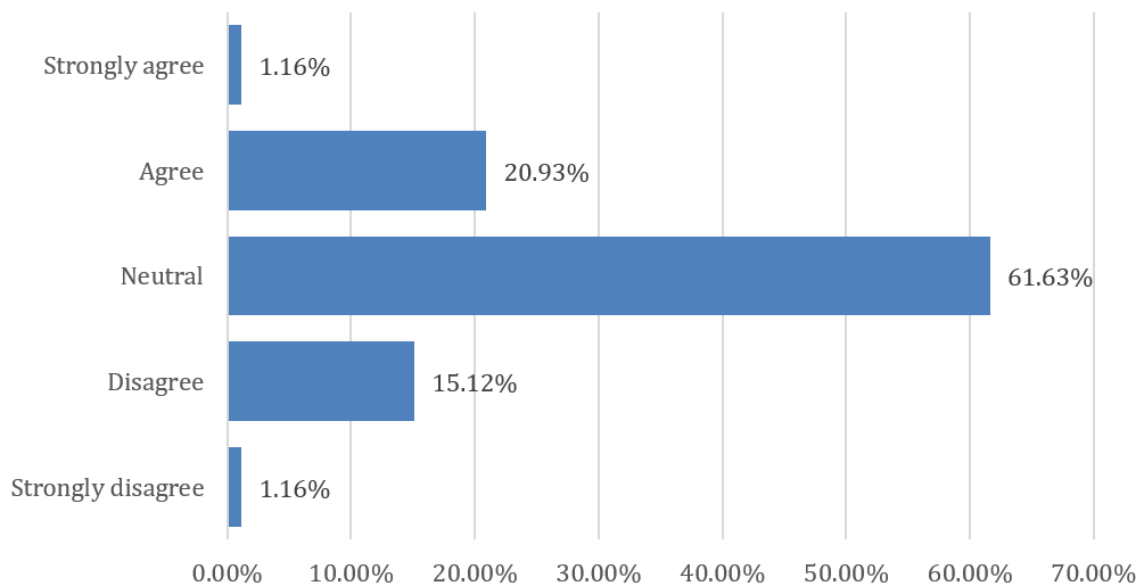


Figure 4. Percentage distribution of “I can identify arguments easily.”

Figure 4 shows a similar pattern to the previous statement as respondents at large (61.63%) had doubts whether or not they could identify arguments easily. 22.09% of the total respondents expressed their confidence that identifying arguments was not an issue, with another 16.28% indicating the opposite.

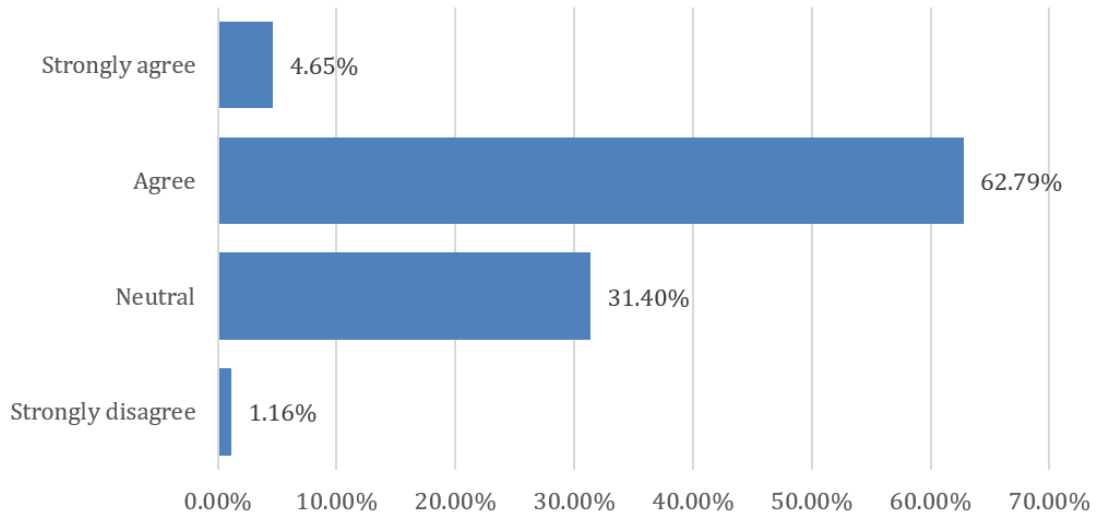


Figure 5. Percentage distribution of "I have improved my understanding of argumentative texts after the lesson."

Figure 5 shows that more than half of the participants (67.44%) agreed and strongly agreed with the statement "I have improved my understanding of argumentative texts after the lesson" with the instructor. However, 31.4% of the respondents were neutral, probably because they were not sure how to evaluate themselves and only 1.16% of them disagreed with the statement.

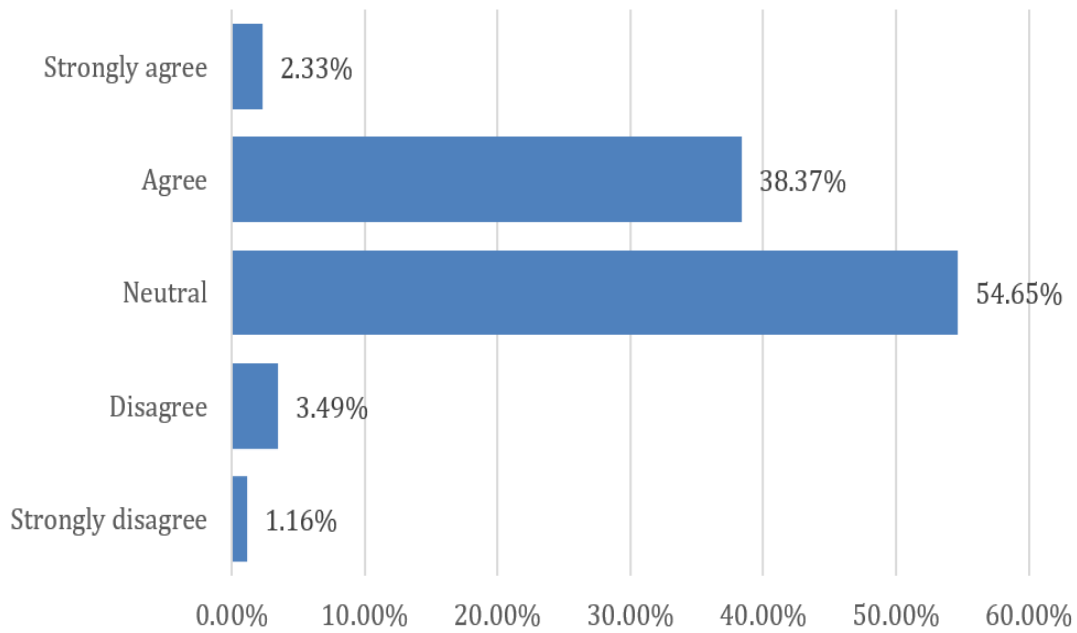


Figure 6. Percentage distribution of "I am able to identify argumentative elements in a text."

Figure 6 illustrates students' perceptions of their ability to identify argumentative elements in a text. The results show that 40.7% of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that they could identify these elements. In contrast, 54.65% of the students were neutral, and the remaining 4.65% either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.

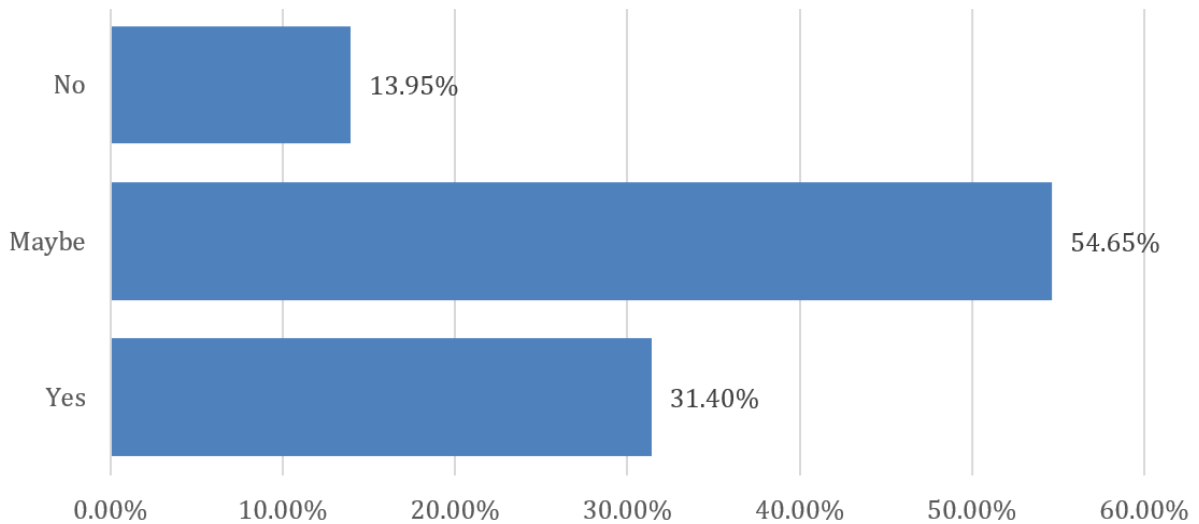


Figure 7. Percentage distribution of “Did you encounter any difficulties while doing the exercise?”

Figure 7 presents participants’ responses to the question, “Did you encounter any difficulties while doing the exercise?” The majority, 54.65%, selected “Maybe”, indicating potential difficulties. About 31.4% replied “Yes”, confirming they faced difficulties, while 13.95% said “No”.

## 5. CONCLUSION

### 5.1. Summary of Findings and Discussions

This study employed the theoretical framework proposed by Toulmin (2003) wherein arguments can be analysed and understood systematically. The participants of the study were exposed to the framework via classroom lessons and afterwards they were given tasks to complete related to the lessons. Out of 51 students who participated, a handful were not able to complete the tasks, the result of which will see the analysis that follows will be based on successful entries only which comprise 41 of them.

Whereas the results reveal a positive outlook on students’ ability to distinguish argumentative texts, this may not paint the whole picture of students’ comprehension level since there is a probability that participants might have completed the tasks given to them haphazardly. Studies of similar nature in the future will have to consider eliminating such a variable to obtain a more accurate representation of students’ understanding. The concern arises from the fact that the percentage of students who could score well as the tasks were progressing is rather inconsistent. As a matter of fact, only one student out of the 51 participated was able to identify all the items that make up the reasons for the arguments. It is important to note that students were asked to complete the tasks after they had been taught the steps to identify and analyse argumentative texts using Toulmin (2003) in class. Though it started off well considering only 19.6% of the students could not distinguish between argumentative and non-argumentative texts, it can be seen from the rest of Table 2 that students who could perform well are a minority.

In exploring students’ perceived ability in understanding arguments in authentic texts, it is not precarious to conclude that students were found to be unsure of their own strengths and abilities. The tendency in students’ responses as they answered the questionnaire may be a telling clue to understand this aspect of the study. Items in the questionnaire were mainly designed to let students evaluate themselves and there are six items altogether. The only two items to which students responded rather positively are those inquiring whether they find argumentative texts exciting and whether prior classroom lessons have improved their understanding of argumentative texts or not. Students may find such texts enjoyable to read because many argumentative texts are naturally polemic writing and reading how an author takes a stand on and against an issue can be engaging at times. Furthermore, when specifically asked whether having been exposed to a lesson based on Toulmin (2003) makes them understand argumentative texts better or not, students provided an encouraging response in general as 62.79% of them said yes, despite the fact that

their actual ability showed otherwise, as discussed earlier. Participants' actual ability in dissecting argumentative texts is rather reflective of and consistent with the rest of the results from the questionnaire as they generally seemed to have begun to doubt themselves and constantly chose neutral or maybe as their answers.

This study demonstrates a consistent result with previous research where there is a notable disparity as far as students' actual and perceived abilities are concerned. In the case of this paper, the subject matter is related to that of understanding arguments in authentic texts such as those published in newspapers. Though not tested, there seems to be a correlation between students' actual and perceived abilities because it is postulated that the downbeat responses from the questionnaire might have influenced their performance in completing the tasks.

### 5.2. (Pedagogical) Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

The effectiveness of Toulmin's model cannot be understated in helping learners to understand argumentative texts. However, as this study has shown, there is a need to devise lessons which not only employ Toulmin's model, but also other models which may focus on the landscape of ESL learning because as suggested by [Mohammad \(2019\)](#) ESL learners, in particular, face difficulties in discursive activities due to language interference. This is compounded by the fact that authentic argumentative texts are not incorporated as part of the participants' classroom instruction. This study has also shown that there is a need for improving students' performance in literacy skills by improving their perceptions and evaluations of themselves. Students' mediocre performance in this study may be a direct result of their self-doubts as shown in the findings and discussed earlier.

Future research must attempt to explore whether preparing students within the perimeter of three-stage model essay is beneficial or not as once students graduate, as a model of such nature may not be what the industry will find useful. Eliminating variables such as potential haphazard responses that were not taken into account in this study must also be addressed to accurately determine students' actual and perceived abilities. A new framework needs to be developed to help ESL students in particular to understand not just argumentative texts, but also authentic ones. Research of this subject matter is crucial as it will serve as a foundation to bridge the gap between the expectations of the industry and the employability skills of local graduates, especially when it comes to higher-order thinking skills.

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