

# Examining L2 learners' argumentation: analysis through the knowledge-telling strategy

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## **Argumentative essay writing: framework**

**L2 learners need to present an argument in an academic debate, as they attempt to contribute to knowledge building** in their postgraduate programme essay assignments.

L2 learners use the three-step cognitive reading and writing strategies:

(a) Selecting and using relevant information from sources

(b) Developing an argument in an academic debate

(c) presenting the argument through writing strategies (i.e., citing, referencing, genre, register, structure, style, grammar, etc.)

(Wingate, 2012)

- L2 learners must recognise researchers and course tutors as the audience and understand the need to construct an argument for knowledge transformation in an academic debate, as they use the reading-to-write strategies.

- Selecting sources, critical reading, and argument construction are the important stages and are also prerequisite to the presentation of an argument for the L2 learners' argumentative essays.

## **Literature review/argumentative essays for L2 learners**

Many studies of L2 postgraduate students' argumentative essays focused on **the learners' audience awareness and interpretations of writing practices.**

- Some researchers have investigated L2 master's student text borrowing, citing, and referencing, by examining the learners' written texts and conducting discourse-based interviews (Harwood & Petric, 2012; Jomaa & Biddin, 2019; Petric & Harwood, 2013; Petric, 2012; Shi, 2011, 2012a, 2012b).
- Other researchers have examined L2 postgraduate learners' representations of audience and writing strategies for argumentative essays (Cabrejas-Penuelas, 2008; Negretti, 2017).

**L2 postgraduate learners' planning for source text selection, critical reading and argument construction have not fully been examined yet.** The present study investigated the selected 'less successful' L2 learners' source use, reading and argument construction, using a knowledge-telling model.

## Two different approaches to knowledge building

Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) suggest two different approaches to reading and writing which are defined as **the knowledge-transforming and knowledge-telling strategies respectively**:

- Learners who apply a knowledge transforming strategy critically review the literature, recognise a researchers' academic debate, and build an argument that helps transform the existing knowledge.
- On the other hand, learners using a knowledge-telling model proceed with writing based on their long-term memory and experience rather than critical reading of source texts.

Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987, p. 9) indicate the characteristics of the knowledge-telling strategy as follows:

'Knowledge-telling provides a natural and efficient solution to the problems ... given any reasonable specification of topic and genre, the writer can get started in a matter of seconds and speedily produce an essay ...'

# Knowledge-transforming strategy

Mental representation of assignment



Problem analysis and goal-setting



Content knowledge



Content problem space



Discourse knowledge



Rhetorical Problem space



Problem translation



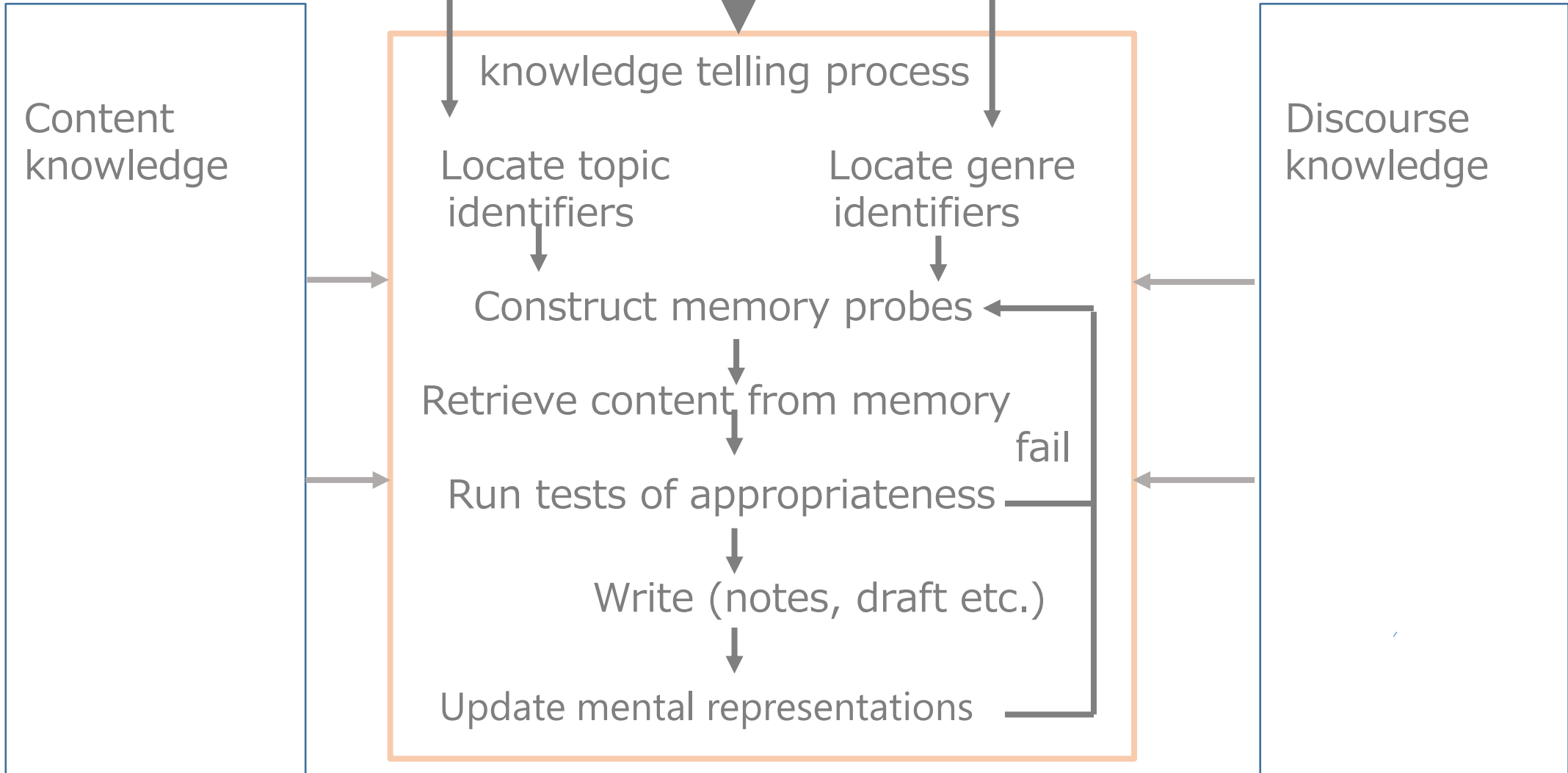
Problem translation

Knowledge-telling process



# Knowledge-telling strategy

Mental representation of assignment



Content knowledge

Discourse knowledge

knowledge telling process

Locate topic identifiers

Locate genre identifiers

Construct memory probes

Retrieve content from memory

Run tests of appropriateness

Write (notes, draft etc.)

Update mental representations

fail

## **The present study and methods**

- The researcher posed the two research questions:

RQ1: What were the two less successful L2 postgraduate students' cognitive characteristics of selecting source texts, reading and argument construction? How did they become aware of their strategies and develop arguments?

RQ2: How did the two less successful L2 postgraduate learners' cognitive processes match the cognitive processes of the knowledge-telling model?

### **MA TESOL/Education University, UK**

- One of the core modules in autumn term 'Second Language Learning Principles'

### **Participants**

Two selected L2 learners out of six participants were less successful, as they received the grade of pass. Accordingly, their interview data were selected for further detail analysis.

### **Assignment and data collection**

The interviews with the six L2 postgraduate students took place at the beginning of the module and after the module. The researcher attended the module and observed the two L2 learners' learning.

## Results from thematic analysis

- Thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006) was applied through the stages: (1) familiarising with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing the themes, and (5) defining and naming the themes.
- The two L2 learners both were less aware of planning source texts, critical reading and argumentation. They also did not consider themselves as a member of an academic community, either. They relied on their previous experience as a practitioner rather than critical reading of relevant academic research to develop their essay arguments.
- **Two themes about the learners emerged:**
  - (Theme 1)** Selecting limited source texts
  - (Theme 2)** Argument construction based on previous experience (rather than critical reading of various source texts)



## Extract 1: Learner 1, Interview data 1

Extract 1

RE: Did you evaluate and give a critical evaluation of that (academic researchers' theory), so that you can present the recommendations in a way that can suit Japanese context?

LN1: **I did not pick any theories** supporting my choice, **as I picked up his policies**, but **let me say I choose it through my experience** though it is not long one, but **through my age and through my experience** who has two sons and looking at various classroom context.

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(Memo)

Learner 1 did not feel the need to read various researchers' theories. And she relied on her previous experience, as **she selected one suitable text about the teaching policies** for her essay argument building.

## Extract 2: Learner 1, Interview data 2

Extract 2

LN1: Even though nearly 30 years have passed since publication, but **basic ideas are still active, I think. Still teachers can use this in the present context. So, I wanted to point that out.**

As I told you before, there is a basic principle in teaching to students we need to be aware of and **using the policies he took, in my essay, would make my essay interesting and useful for readers and future teachers and for me, myself.**

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(Memo)

Learner 1 referred to the limited source texts rather than critical reading of the theories. Learner 1 relied on **her previous teaching experience to construct an argument** as a practicing teacher and did not critically review the researchers' theories for argumentation.

## Extract 3: Learner 2, Interview data 3

### Extract 3

RE: What do you think of important things you have to do in the reading stage for the purpose of writing an assignment?

LN2: It's the first step reading before writing the assignment. Reading comes definitely the first step, [...] **you have to detect only the useful ones that could be put together. Just like a cloth, you have to find them one by one and sew them together** and make it a complete assignment.

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(Memo)

Learner 2 did not mention the need to read various academic sources, either. She attempted to **find only the useful ones and combine them** for her essay assignment.

## Extract 4: Learner 2, Interview data 4

Extract 4

RE: What is your claim, argument or suggestion you make (in the assignment)?

LN 2: Okay. Simple, I'm trying to **highlight the importance of chunking**, both learning chunks and teaching chunks in classroom context. I think **it's the context I used to teach**. [...] I think it also deals with the problem of many Chinese students because in China students memorize English words word by word. [...] **Chunking is something I learned here. I want to use this method.**

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(Memo)

Learner 2 mentioned that she developed an argument regarding the importance of chunking, because **the method is useful for teaching based on her previous experience as a practitioner**. She did not critically review the theories to construct an argument.

## Summary and conclusions

- (a) The two L2 learners selected limited source texts. They developed the arguments based on their experience rather than the use of critical reading of relevant researchers' theories and argument construction.
- (b) The two L2 learners' strategy use through their source text selection, reading and argument construction was in congruent with the cognitive characteristics of the knowledge-telling strategy, not the knowledge-transforming model.
- (c) In writing MA argumentative essays, L2 learners must be aware of knowledge building in an academic debate and the use of critical reading and argumentation, while they sustain their identity as a teaching practitioner.
- (d) EAP practitioners and postgraduate course tutors need to raise L2 learners' awareness of audience and the purposes of essays, facilitating their identity construction and strategy use in the academic community.

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**Thank you!**