

## Enhancing Argumentative Writing Skills of Grade XII Students through Debate and Collaborative Writing

Tshering Om S

Master in Arts in English, Senior Teacher I, Bajo Higher Secondary School, Wangduephodrang.



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### Corresponding Author:

Tshering Om S

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**Abstract:** Recently, Bhutan has undertaken a major educational shift by benchmarking its national curriculum to the Cambridge International Standards. This transformative step demands teaching and learning practices that meet the international criteria. English, as one of the core subjects, plays an important role in ensuring that students acquire necessary skills to meet the global standards. In the secondary English curriculum, students are required to write argumentative essays, which help develop critical thinking, reasoning, refutation, and communication skills essential for global competence. The present study employed an action research approach to enhance students' argumentative writing skills through debate and collaboration for grade XII students. Pre-test and post-tests for argumentative essay writing were administered. An online survey was also conducted after the interventions to collect the qualitative data. The results of data analysis using descriptive statistics revealed a statistically significant difference between the mean, median and standard deviation scores of the pre-test and post-tests, indicating the positive influence of the two interventions in enhancing students' argumentative writing skills. Based on the findings, this study concluded that debate and collaborative writing are better teaching strategies for enhancing grade XII students' argumentative writing skills.

**Keywords:** collaboration, debate, argumentative essay, teaching practices, students, enhancing, refutation

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## Introduction

Writing essays is an essential skill for higher secondary students in Bhutanese academic settings. It involves conveying thoughts and ideas, making well-reasoned arguments, and providing supporting evidence in a well-organised and logical way. As reflected in the *Cambridge International Education* (2025-2026), improving students' argumentative writing fosters students' critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and self-confidence. Through argumentative writing, students learn to analyse, evaluate, and argue with logical justification, thereby enhancing their capacity to persuade readers effectively (Cambridge International Education, 2025-2026).

Furthermore, *Cambridge Assessment International Education* (2022) highlights that writing argumentative essays helps students develop a deeper understanding of independent research and reflection. It encourages them to present ideas coherently, synthesising multiple perspectives and developing a global mindset—skills that are vital for success in higher education and 21st-century learning contexts.

Globally, argumentative writing is recognised as a key mode of academic discourse. As Petkovic (2021) observes, major international standardised examinations, such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), require students to compose

well-organised arguments supported by relevant evidence. This demonstrates the international emphasis on the importance of argumentative writing in assessing students' academic competence and communicative ability.

Within the Bhutanese education system, the importance of argument writing is similarly underscored. The *Instructional Guide for English, classes XI and XII, Bhutan* (2023) specifies that students in these grades must compose argumentative essays as part of the national English curriculum, which carries 25% weighting in assessment.

However, most often, teachers overuse traditional approaches and fail to implement innovative argumentative writing strategies. Driven by this concern, in this action research, this researcher reflects on her practices and understands them to improve students' argument writing skills.

## Situation Analysis

Although argumentative writing has gained significant recognition internationally and within the Bhutanese education system, many students continue to face persistent challenges in composing argumentative essays. The researcher, who has been teaching English for several years, has observed that students in Bhutan, specifically in grade XII, struggle to construct logical arguments, apply critical thinking, and provide sufficient evidence to support their claims and counterclaims.

In the Bhutanese context, one key issue lies in the teachers' traditional instructional approach, which emphasises structural conformity—particularly the five-paragraph format prescribed by the Royal Education Council (REC)—over creativity and critical engagement.

The performance data from higher secondary schools, over three consecutive academic years (2022–2024), show a similar problem. In English Paper I, Question 1—an argumentative essay worth 25 marks—most students consistently scored below average, with only a small number achieving marks above 16 (Table 1). This observation aligns with previous research that traditional models may limit students' ability to think critically and to construct arguments (Fiallos, Molina, Pilla, & Melo, 2025).

**Table 1: Performance data of BHSS (2022-2024).**

Academic year	2024	2023	2022
Total no. of students	71	68	74
Score Range	16-20	7	8
Score Range	14-15.9	12	17
Score Range	14-15.9	15	11
Score Range	Below 13.9	37	45

Source: *Records of result analysis, Bajo HSS*

This trend mirrors the national examination results from the Bhutan Council for School Examinations and Assessment (BCSEA), where English Paper I scores remain comparatively lower than English Paper II (Table 2). Likewise, the mean mark for the trial examination, BHSS, 2024 (Table 3), shows a similar performance.

**Table 2: Mean marks of BCSEA examination (2023-2024)**

Academic Year	2023	2024
Mean Mark	61.6	64.15

**Table 3: Mean marks of Trial exam, BHSS (2024)**

Academic Year	2024
Mean Mark	64.15

Source: *Records of result analysis, BHSS*

Other factors contributing to this issue include limited exposure to argument-based writing in earlier grades, linguistic challenges due to English being a second or third language, and traditional teaching methods that rely heavily on teacher-centred instruction. These factors collectively hinder students' ability to construct coherent, well-reasoned arguments.

In response to these challenges, this action research (AR) aimed to explore and recommend innovative teaching strategies for English teachers to enhance students' argumentative writing skills. The study is also expected to contribute to the broader goal of improving students' overall academic proficiency within the Bhutanese secondary education system.

## Aims and Objectives

The main objective is to enhance students' argument writing skills in the English subject at Bajo Higher Secondary School, Bhutan.

Specific objectives include:

1. To identify key challenges grade XII students, face in composing argumentative essays.
2. To explore innovative means of argumentative writing strategies.
3. Analyse the effectiveness of structured debate and collaborative strategies in producing quality argumentative essays.

## Research Question

This action research aimed to answer the following questions.

How can we improve the argumentative writing skills of grade XII students using debate and collaborative writing?

Sub-questions:

- i. What common challenges do grade XII students face in argumentative writing?
- ii. How does participating in debate activities influence students' ability to construct arguments in writing?
- iii. How does collaborative writing support the development of argumentative structure and coherence?
- iv. Which intervention—debate or collaborative writing—is more effective in improving students' argumentative writing?

## Significance of the Study

Students in Bhutan come from multicultural and multilingual backgrounds, and their varied linguistic and sociocultural experiences influence their learning attitudes and performance. Understanding students' challenges and reflecting on teachers' pedagogical practices are important for improving students' academic performance and skills development. Additionally, this study is significant in:

- Enhancing students' argumentative writing skills through debate and collaborative strategies.
- Refining teaching pedagogies and instructional practices to support diverse learning styles.
- improving students' academic performance by addressing key challenges and
- Contributing to improving quality education at Bajo Higher Secondary, Bhutan.

## Literature Review

### The Need for 21st-Century Skills

Students of the 21st century need a blend of skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, communication, creativity, and problem-solving. Argumentative writing plays a significant role in developing these skills, as it encourages reasoning and evidence-based thinking. However, the traditional method of focusing on form and structure limits students' critical thinking and creativity. To address this, Lhadon and Wangmo (2022) recommended debate and collaborative writing strategies for future researchers.

*Debate as strategy to enhance argumentative writing*

Previous research shows debate as a promising strategy for improving students' argumentative writing skills. Majidi, Graaff and Janssen (2023) revealed that debate strategy creates an instructional atmosphere that leverages the potential of speaking, which is likely to affect students' writing skills. Additionally, debate confronts debaters with plenty of conflicting facts, assumptions, and perspectives that demand the use of higher-order reasoning. Involving in debate encourages students to critically analyse the opposing side's reasoning and evidence and to identify inconsistencies in their line of reasoning (Zou et al., 2021, as cited in Majidi, Graaff, & Janssen, 2023). Mokhtar, Jamil, Yaakub and Amzah (2020) further emphasise that debates diversify students' arguments and support their evidence-based reasoning and foster motivation that will help students develop stronger skills in writing.

### **Dialogic instructions**

Another study shows dialogic instruction is an effective pedagogy in enhancing students' argumentative writing skills. A qualitative discourse-based case study in an Australian high school indicated that dialogic instructions help students to develop reasoning and problem-solving skills (Lee & Lee, 2023). Likewise, dialogic instruction encourages students' participation and empowers students to articulate their arguments confidently (Graham & Harris, 2019, as cited in Daeng & Enre, 2024).

### **Extensive Reading**

Studies show that extensive reading positively enhances students' arguments and writing abilities. A quasi-experimental study in South Korea of Lee and Lee (2023) reported that secondary school students who are engaged in extensive reading outperformed those taught through traditional writing instruction. The program improved all aspects of writing—including content, organisation, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics.

### **Collaborative Writing**

Collaborative writing is another effective approach to improve students' argumentative writing. Fiallos, Pilla, Melo and Monina (2025) identified that students working in pairs or groups developed deeper cognitive engagement and better argumentative discourse.

Collaboration encourages idea sharing, peer feedback, and refinement of arguments, leading to more coherent writing. This interactive process enhances students' critical thinking and confidence in expressing ideas.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study employed an action research design, which emphasises action and the transformation of teaching practices (Maxwell, 2003; Kemmis, 2010). The study examined teaching strategies—debate and collaborative writing—for improving students' argumentative writing skills. Kemmis and McTaggart's (1988) action research spiral model, Reconnaissance, Plan, was applied.

### **Participants**

This study was conducted in the twelfth grade involving 68 students (36 male and 32 female), aged between 16 and 19, in one of the higher secondary schools in Wangduephodrang district, Bhutan. The class was chosen because students required

improvement in argumentative writing skills, as observed by the researcher.

### **Data collection approach**

The data for the study was collected through pre-tests, post-tests, a closed-ended survey (online) and a critical friend's observation journal as described below:

Baseline data were collected from (N=68) in June during the mid-term examination, where students wrote an argumentative essay in the exam. After the baseline data collection, two intervention strategies—debate and collaborative writing—were implemented in September.

Post-intervention data were collected from (N=68) through argumentative essay writing using a different question. The post-tests were designed to find the effectiveness of the intervention strategies in improving students' argumentative writing skills. The essay questions were developed, and their validity and reliability were ensured in accordance with the standards set by the *Bhutan Council for School Examinations and Assessment* (BCSEA).

Further, qualitative data was collected through an online closed-ended survey using a self-designed questionnaire (N=68) administered based on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1-strongly disagree; 2-disagree; 3-neutral; 4-agree; and 5-strongly agree, to collect students' perceptions on the interventions used. There was a total of 22 items, including demographic information, and 17 items that measured students' perceptions on the interventions.

The study employed the school principal, who had a Master of Education (MEd) in Leadership and Management, as the critical friend. Feedback from the critical friend's observation notes—once during the baseline phase and twice during post-intervention data collection—was used in helping the researcher avoid overlooking important information and to minimise potential bias in data interpretation.

## **Data Analysis**

Descriptive statistics were employed to summarise and interpret quantitative data obtained from the pre-test, post-tests, and survey. Measures such as mean, median, and standard deviation were computed using a spreadsheet through Jamovi (version 2.6.45.0)—an open statistical software.

### **Baseline Data Analysis and Findings**

The author collected baseline data from (N=68) students' argumentative essays during the midterm examination.

**Table 1: Analysis of students' argumentative writing, pre-test score**

Tes t	N	Missin g	Mea n	Media n	SD	Mi n	Ma x
Pre-test	68	0	46.9	46.0	11.1	22.0	78.0

Table 1 shows the descriptive analysis of the pre-test administered before the implementation of interventions. The result indicated ( $M = 46.9$ ,  $Mdn = 46.0$  and  $SD = 11.1$ ) moderate variation in students' scores. However, the lowest score (22.0) and the highest (78.0)

indicated a huge gap between the top and low performers. Based on this finding, the following interventions were designed.

## Intervention Phase

This study implemented two intervention approaches informed by scholarly literature. The interventions were implemented separately at different times. During the first intervention ( $N=68$ ), the researcher introduced the concept of debate and its procedures through explanations, examples and video lessons. This was followed by demonstration sessions where students learnt how to construct arguments, counterarguments and refutations, supported by relevant evidence and proper citations. After theoretical instruction, a short debate session was conducted to give students practical experiences in presenting arguments and refutations. These intervention strategies were carried out for two weeks (1-2 weeks of August). Subsequently, students applied their learning (post-test 1) by writing an argumentative essay on the topic: *Should mobile phones and the internet be provided in the classroom for students?* The essays were evaluated, and feedback was provided, and scores were maintained for analysis.

The second intervention was implemented over a two-week period (3-4 weeks of August). Collaborative writing strategies such as brainstorming ideas collectively, organising arguments logically, and providing supporting evidence were introduced to the students. Students were then assigned an argumentative essay writing (post-test 2) activity on the topic: *Some people believe that students should be encouraged to make classroom presentations, while others argue it is a waste of time.* The intention of administering different questions was to assess students' progression in writing argumentative essays. The critical friend's observation notes were used to guide the effective implementation of the interventions.

Following the completion of two interventions, an online closed-ended survey was administered to collect students' perceptions on the effectiveness of the interventions.

## Post-test Data Analysis and Findings

**Table 2: Analysis of the first intervention: Debate (Post-test) scores.**

Test	N	Missing	Mean	Median	SD	Min	Max
Pre-test	68	0	65.4	64.0	11.5	46.0	96.0

Table 2 shows the post-test scores for the first intervention—debate. The descriptive analysis of students' performance showed ( $M=65.4$ ;  $Mdn=64$ ). The findings indicated that compared to pre-test scores ( $M = 46.9$ ,  $Mdn = 46.0$ ), there was an increase in the mean and median by 18.5 and 18 points, respectively, indicating the positive impact of the intervention. There was a slight rise in SD from 11.0 to 11.5, which suggested a persisting difference between high and low scorers.

**Table 3: Analysis of the second intervention: Collaborative writing (Post-test) scores**

Test	N	Missing	Mean	Median	SD	Min	Max
Pre-	68	0		76.0	13.7	36.0	96.0

test			72.2.0				
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Table 3 shows the post-test scores following the second intervention—collaborative writing. The descriptive analysis showed ( $M=72.2$  and  $Mdn=76.0$ ). The results showed further improvement in students' writing skills. Increase in SD from 11.5 to 13.7 indicated a greater variation in students' scores after the second intervention.

Overall, the comparison between the two interventions showed that both debate and collaborative writing strategies improved students' argumentative writing skills.

**Table 4: Comparative analysis of the pre-test, the first intervention (post-test 1) and the second intervention (post-test 2) scores.**

Test	N	Missing	Mean	Median	SD	Min	Max
Pre-test	68	0	46.9	46.0	11.1	22.0	78.0
Post-test (1)	68	0	65.4	64.0	11.5	46.0	96.0
Post-test (2)	68	0	72.20	76.0	13.7	36.0	96.0

The comparative analysis of the pre-test,  $M = 46.9$ ,  $Mdn = 46.0$ ,  $SD = 11.0$ ; post-test (1),  $M = 65.4$ ,  $Mdn = 64.0$ ,  $SD = 11.5$ ; and post-test (2),  $M = 70.2$ ,  $Mdn = 69.0$ ,  $SD = 10.8$  indicated a consistent improvement in students' argumentative writing performance, with a slight decrease in score variability after the second intervention.

## Closed-ended survey Analysis and Findings

A closed-ended survey using a self-designed questionnaire based on a five-point Likert-type scale consisted of 22 items that measured students' perceptions and their preference of the interventions. These findings are based on item numbers 4, 11, and 14.

**Figure 1: Analysis from closed-ended survey, item number 4: "The traditional lessons help me develop strong critical thinking skills".**

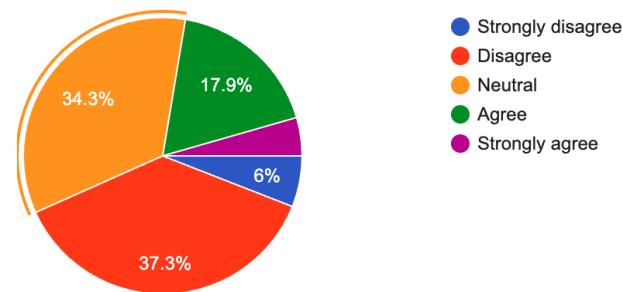


Figure 1 shows students' perceptions of the traditional approach to teaching/learning argumentative essays, from the closed-ended survey, item number 4. Responses revealed that although students valued argumentative writing, many struggled with logical thinking and reasoning skills. The findings indicated 17.9% of students agreed that the traditional teaching approach focused more on essay structure, 34.3% remained neutral, and 37.3% disagreed.

**Figure 2: Analysis of item number 11: Structured debate helped improve my arguments and writing skills.**

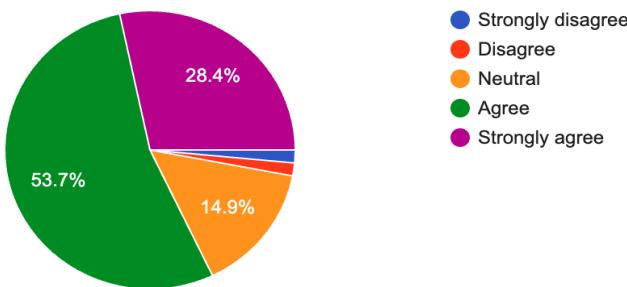


Figure 2 shows data from item number 11: *structured debate helped improve my arguments and writing skills*. Regarding item 11, 28.8% of students agreed and 53.7% strongly agreed that participating in structured debates enhanced their argumentative writing skills, with 14.9% expressing a neutral stance. These results suggested that the majority of students perceived structured debate as an effective strategy for improving their writing and reasoning.

**Figure 3: Analysis of item number 13: "I can write argumentative writing. Better after introducing strategies like debate and collaboration".**

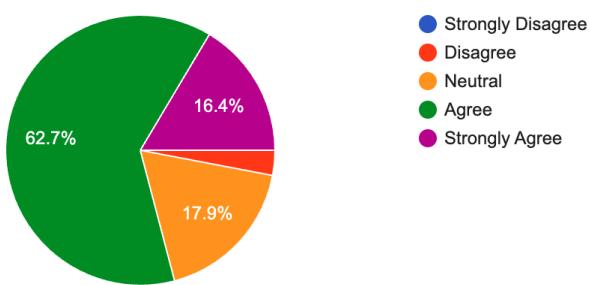


Figure 3 presents students' responses on item 13, where 16.4% of students strongly agreed and 62.7% agreed, while 17.9% reported a neutral response. These findings indicated that the majority of students perceived the intervention strategies as effective in improving their argumentative writing skills, confirming the post-test results.

### Critical Friend's observation Journal Analysis and Findings

The analysis from the critical friend's observation notes journal before the intervention strategies further affirmed that students lacked reasoning skills while writing argumentative essays. Additionally, students were focused on the outline of the essay rather than on the argument skills. As pre-intervention observation notes read:

"Students were able to tell the structure of an argumentative essay; however, many lacked critical thinking skills. Additionally, they struggled to differentiate between arguments and counterarguments, and some had difficulty providing evidence to support their claims, which limited the strength and clarity of their essays."

As per the observation notes, few students stated, "I understand the importance of argumentative essays for the English subject; however, I am not able to score a better mark." Similarly, another student mentioned that "I love argumentative essays. It helps to

improve my language." In contrast, one student admitted, "Argumentative essays are difficult to write because they require lots of arguments and counterarguments."

The critical friend noted that "students had difficulty maintaining a logical sequence of ideas. They often combined unrelated concepts within a single claim and relied on personal anecdotes."

"Students needed significant teacher prompts to stay focused on their claims. Many struggled to construct counterarguments and relied on the ideas and suggestions from their peers."

"After interventions, students demonstrated a clear understanding of arguments and counterarguments. They were able to link ideas across paragraphs with confidence. It was noted that both the interventions had positive impacts in enhancing their argumentative writing skills."

The observation notes revealed that students demonstrated a clear understanding of arguments and counterarguments and effectively linked ideas across paragraphs with confidence, thereby significantly enhancing their argumentative writing skills.

### Discussion and Implications

The study aimed to enhance class XII students' argumentative writing skills by identifying key challenges and addressing them through the implementation of two intervention strategies—structured debate and collaborative writing.

Corroborating to (Fiallos, Molina, Pilla, & Melo, 2025), the findings of this action research indicated that traditional instructions limited students' ability to think critically and to construct arguments. Teachers mostly followed traditional teaching practices which focused more on content layout and structure rather than enhancing students' writing skills. Results from the pre-test confirmed that students initially had low levels of argumentative writing skills, as indicated by baseline data ( $M=46.9$ ;  $Mdn=44.0$ ;  $SD=12.3$ ; range=28-78). The findings showed students struggled to construct clear arguments and counterarguments, provide supporting evidence, and maintain logical sequencing. Likewise, the gap between high and low performers highlighted the need for targeted instructional interventions to enhance low performers' critical thinking and reasoning.

Findings from post-test analysis demonstrated that both the interventional strategies—debate and collaborative writing—significantly enhanced students' capacity to compose argumentative essays. The increase in the mean to 65.1 and the median to 64.0, following the first intervention, indicated that debate activities helped students generate and organise arguments, strengthen reasoning skills, and build confidence in defending their claims. These findings align with Mokhtar, Jamil, Yaakub and Amzah (2020), who emphasised that debates diversify students' arguments and support their evidence-based reasoning. Additionally, the findings align with a previous study that debates encourage students to critically analyse the opposing side's reasoning and identify inconsistencies in their line of reasoning (Zou et al., 2021, as cited in Majidi, Graaff, & Janssen, 2023).

Similarly, after implementation of the second intervention—collaborative writing—the mean further increased to 69.9 and the median to 72, suggesting that collaborative writing fostered peer interaction and idea sharing, thereby enhancing students' essay writing skills. On the other hand, a slight increase in standard deviation to 14.1 suggested individual differences in their progress.

The findings from the second post-test of this action research align with Fiallos, Pilla, Melo, and Monina (2025), who identified collaborative writing as an effective strategy for enhancing students' deeper cognitive engagement and improving argumentative discourse.

Qualitative data findings from the open-ended survey and critical friends' observation notes confirmed that despite understanding the significance of argumentative writing, students face challenges of reasoning and critical thinking skills. Pre-intervention observations noted that students focused on essay outlines rather than arguments and needed significant teacher prompts, while post-intervention notes highlighted that students were able to compose well-structured essays with clear understanding of arguments and counterarguments.

Results indicated several pedagogical implications. Teachers can implement structured debates to enhance students' critical thinking, argument construction, and reasoning abilities, while collaborative writing exercises can improve essay coherence, logical flow of ideas, and peer-supported learning.

#### **Limitations of the study**

Given the current issue of teachers placing greater emphasis on the outlines of argumentative essays within the Bhutanese education system, this action research was designed to examine and implement two intervention strategies aimed at enhancing students' argumentative writing skills. However, the study has several limitations. First, it focused on the practices of one teacher with one class grade of XII in one school; therefore, the interpretation of the results may be influenced by contextual bias. As such, the findings cannot be readily generalised to other school settings. Moreover, the absence of a control group limits the ability to infer causal relationships from the result.

## **Conclusions**

This action research concludes that there should be a shift in teaching approaches from traditional instruction to more interactive and student-centred methods in order to enhance students' argumentative writing. The findings of this study concluded that teachers should place greater emphasis on developing students' argument writing skills, rather than merely focusing on content outlines. The results indicate that integrating structured debate and collaborative writing can effectively address the challenges students face in argumentative writing. Teaching through debate can help in fostering students' critical thinking, argument construction, and immediate skill application, while collaborative writing can strengthen coherence and idea development. Together, these strategies offer a comprehensive approach to enhancing students' overall writing proficiency, maximising their argumentative writing performances.

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