

CHAPTER

5

SCENARIO-BASED ASSESSMENT IN A TERTIARY LANGUAGE COURSE

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5.1 INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015–2025 aimed for every child to be proficient in both languages that are dominant in Malaysia, Malay and English (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). Consequently, the English Language Education Reform in Malaysia: The Roadmap 2015–2025 plans a concerted effort to upskill students in English proficiency, the national second language, alongside Malay (Malaysia first language). The blueprint emphasises in one of its chapters the concern over the inadequate English communication skills of undergraduates at public universities. Less than 50 % of graduates from public universities were able to meet the standards required by potential employers, while a little more than half of them had only limited proficiency (English Language Standards & Quality Council, 2015). This disparity is a concern as graduates enter the workforce, where the demand for English language skills in the workplace has grown significantly due to globalisation and increased connectivity.

Not only is having excellent English proficiency skills important, but also the skills of crafting persuasive arguments and thinking critically are becoming more vital than ever as we progress further into the 21st century. For students to thrive at tertiary levels and in their future careers, they must be able to bring together information from various sources, assess different viewpoints, and build strong, evidence-based cases to support their positions. However, the customary methods of evaluating student writing frequently fail to measure these higher-level abilities adequately (Sadeghi & Douglas, 2023). Assessments based on real-world situations and contexts, or scenario-based assessments (SBA), provide a more authentic approach for gauging argumentative writing proficiency and foundational critical thinking abilities.

Real-world-focused writing assessments provide students with practical scenarios and directions to showcase their skills using writing in a meaningful way for a particular purpose and audience. As reported by Davies and Hibbs (1995), past studies have revealed that these types of assessments allow for a more robust measurement of student's capacities for analysis and communication versus traditional essay exams. However, there appears to be a lack of extensive research specifically focused on leveraging these realistic writing assessments to enhance argumentative writing proficiency among tertiary-level students.

This chapter explores a newly developed English writing course aimed at enhancing undergraduates argumentative writing and critical thinking abilities through the use of scenario-based teaching and evaluation methods. Key learning outcomes of the course include students' ability to build cogent arguments, incorporate information from various sources, and examine issues from different viewpoints. The course is believed to offer helpful information about a novel implementation of SBA to develop higher-order writing and analytical skills. Moreover, the course design emphasises iterative practice, allowing students to refine their reasoning and communication skills through continuous feedback and revision. In doing so, it contributes to a growing pedagogical effort aimed at aligning English writing instruction with the complex cognitive demands of contemporary academic and professional environments.

5.2 TASK, ASSESSMENT, AND PROCESS IN TERTIARY LANGUAGE COURSES

This section discusses the concept of reading-to-write tasks, collaborative writing projects, scenario-based assessments, and the test development process in a language course at the tertiary level.

5.2.1 Reading-to-write Task

Reading-to-write tasks have not received adequate theoretical attention. Much research has focused on the skills involved in common argumentation practices without addressing the core constructions underlying reading-to-write tasks. Reading-to-write tasks have so far been discussed mainly from literacy and language assessment perspectives. Reading and writing are often considered separate skills in curriculum design. However, real-life literacy demands, particularly at the tertiary level, challenge the traditional view of reading and writing as separate skills (Uludag & McDonough, 2022). Here, we view skills as integrative and mutually constructive.

Reading-to-write tasks are now employed in literacy and language assessments, either to complement or replace independent writing tasks or impromptu prompt-based writings (Chan et al., 2015). Introducing reading-to-write tasks is a major way to develop both language and academic content knowledge. Such tasks better represent real academic and vocational activities (Zhang et al., 2019). The ability to synthesise reading into writing is a critical academic skill that prepares for college and a career.

Reading-to-write tasks also create a positive washback on teaching and learning (Knoch & Sitajalabhorn, 2013). The source materials provided in reading-to-write tasks supply background content, helping control topical bias (Kim, 2008). Reading is an indispensable act of research before crafting an argument. Assessment tasks that require reading-to-write integration reflect socially authentic literate practices (Karakoç et al., 2022). In