# Improving English Persuasive Writing in Malaysia: A Recommendation

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**Abstract:** *Persuasive writing is a complex form of written discourse, requiring the writer to justify his stance with a strong argument. The problems students experience when attempting persuasive writing include poor organization, lacking support in their arguments and immature language. The purpose of this paper is to recommend a model to help Malaysian secondary school students improve their persuasive essay writing. 150 students from three secondary schools in the Hulu Klang Area were selected for this study and instructed to submit an essay according to a set of writing prompts provided by the researcher. Toulmin's Model was employed to analyse the essays by identifying the persuasive elements that were utilised by the students in their essays. The findings revealed that the students' proficiency level significantly affected the persuasive writing features that they employ in their essays and the numerous factors encompassing teachers' pedagogical approach, general knowledge and reading habits influenced the students' persuasive writing ability. Hence, the recommendation put forth by this paper is to integrate Toulmin's Model with classroom practice so that students should be able to master the structure of persuasive arguments which will subsequently improve their persuasive writing strategies and nurture their critical thinking skills.*

**Keywords:** Toulmin's Model, persuasive writing, framework
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## 1. Introduction

Students need to master their academic writing skills (Zakaria & Hashim, 2020), which include persuasive writing, as they are necessary when they enter university and go out into the real world to seek employment. Typically, a persuasive writer is tasked with bringing up real-world issues and concerns which requires the writer to change the minds of their readers with their persuasive writing skills (Slusher & Anderson, 1996; Johnson et al., 2018) and resolve an issue (Jovičić, 2006; Wachsmuth et al., 2018). Unfortunately, students do not receive enough exposure to the genre since they are introduced to late it in their upper secondary school year. (Rashid & Chan, 2017). As English persuasive writing is, such limited exposure can cause the students to suffer numerous challenges in an attempt to master it. Therefore, an effective framework needs to be developed to help the students' master their persuasive writing skills. The purpose of this paper is to recommend a new framework that can provide students with the assistance that can help them develop, improve and master their persuasive writing skills.

## 2. Literature Review

Classroom instruction is typically exam-oriented and instructor-centred (Aziz & Ahmad, 2017; Tan, 2006) since the students are spoon-fed only what is necessary to help them score high marks and pass their exams (Bipinchandra et al., 2014; Kaewpet, 2018). Instead of developing their writing skills, the students typically copy model essays to learn how to develop their textual organisation skills (Rachwan & Nicolas, 2018; Aziz & Ahmad, 2017; Tan, 2006; Salies, 2002). Non-native English speakers are often prone to switching between their first language (L1) and second language (L2) as they struggle when composing their essays (Darus & Khor, 2009; Vikneswaran & Krish, 2016). This code-switching will affect the vocabulary they use which can influence the quality of their writing (Colovic-Markovic, 2019) Besides switching between their L1 and L2, students face difficulties when attempting to master persuasive writing due to their teachers' limited ability to teach it properly.

In the ESL classroom, the teacher needs to be an effective instructor who is trained in the art of persuasive writing. An effective teacher (Islam et al. 2022) should be able to adopt appropriate learning approaches, design an effective teaching plan and deliver content that will arm the students with the necessary skills and knowledge that can help them improve their persuasive writing skills. Over the decades, many writing strategies and models have been formulated in the hopes of providing a definitive framework to help students produce strong persuasive essays (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Fei-Wen, 2010; Harris & Graham, 1996, 2018; Stambaugh, 2011; Manz, 2015; Sampson et al., 2013). Among many different writing models, Toulmin's Model (Hitchcock, 2017; Toulmin, 2003) stands as the most widely accepted in persuasive writing instruction (Igland, 2009; Stapleton, 2001; Su-Hie, Rasli & Leong-Jie, 2011; Wingate, 2012).

Toulmin's Model allows students to develop and organise their ideas while they compose their arguments (Hitchcock, 2017; Zainuddin & Rafik-Galea, 2016; Toulmin, 2003; Karbach, 1987). As presented in Toulmin's Model, elements of persuasive writing are divided into two categories. The first, which is the main category, provides the backbone for a persuasive essay, and it consists of 'claim', 'grounds' and 'warrant' (Hitchcock, 2017; Toulmin, 2003). The second category, known as the optional elements, includes 'qualifiers', 'rebuttal' and 'backing' (Toulmin, 2003; Hitchcock, 2017). The elements for both categories are shown in Figure 1.1.
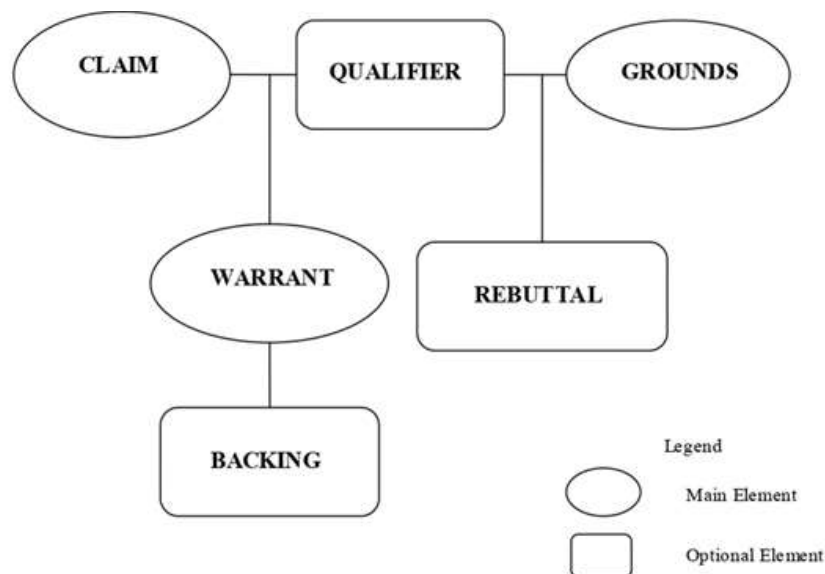


**Figure 1: Diagram of Toulmin's Model**

Toulmin's Model (2003) has been adapted and modified into a teaching tool that can be easy for students to understand (Liu & Wan, 2020). The model acts as a guide that allows students to easily identify persuasive elements, apply them when they compose their essays, learn how to organise their arguments logically and help them to generate new ideas (Hitchcock, 2017; Toulmin, 2003).

Over the decades, numerous studies have used Toulmin's Model as a tool to analyse essays or to help students to improve their persuasive writing (Ignatius; 1999; Stapleton; 2001; Fei-Wen & Yueh-Miao, 2009; Su-Hie, Rasli and Leong-Jie, 2011; Wingate, 2012; Aziz & Ahmad, 2017). These studies have also highlighted that students who do not possess an expert level of persuasive writing skills often write with less complex paragraphs with shorter sentences and simpler vocabulary.

In addition, there have been multiple studies conducted to explore the factors that influence students' persuasive writing quality. For instance, De Rycker and Ponnudrai (2011), highlighted that reading strongly influences the students' persuasive writing skills as this allows them to develop their critical thinking skills (Rafik-Galea, et al., 2008; Suhartoyo et al, 2015). Igland's (2009) case study presents that teachers play an active role in the students' critical thinking development. Reznitskaya, Anderson and Kuo (2007) also argue that social and cognitive factors can strongly influence a writer's ability to compose a strong persuasive argument.

## 3. Methodology

The participants for this study include 150 Form 4 students from three different secondary schools (School A, School B, and School C) within the Hulu Klang area and an English teacher from each school. These suburban schools cater to almost 99% of students of Malay ethnicity. Each student was tasked with writing an essay based on a list of persuasive writing prompts provided by the researcher. A scoring rubric developed by Tunku Abdul Rahman University College (TARUC) was employed to grade the essays as the existing SPM marking scheme was deemed too generic and not specifically designed for persuasive essays (Aziz & Mat Said, 2020). Toulmin's Model facilitated the content analysis of the students' persuasive essays to uncover the common features.

To identify factors that strongly influence the quality of the students' persuasive writing, the student participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire containing 19 items. The questionnaire was self-developed but was also adapted from ones that have been used in past studies (Bipinchandra et al., 2014; Nimehchisalem & Mukundan, 2011; Yakob, 2015;). Section A included items that were used to collect background and demographic information. The items of Section B used a Likert scale which uses a scale between 1-5. In the questionnaire, the students were required to rate the difficulty of English skills (reading, speaking, listening and writing); writing genres (expository, narrative, descriptive, reflective and persuasive); language components during writing; determine their stress level when attempting to write their ideas down on paper; reveal how often they practice writing; rate their writing level; rate factors which they believed are responsible for their persuasive writing skill level; measure the importance of certain criteria in persuasive essay writing; and finally agree or disagree (and to what degree) of activities that may influence their persuasive essay writing.

The interviews with the teachers provided insight into the features of students' persuasive essay writing from the teachers' perspective. The interviewees consisted of an English teacher from

each secondary school. The interviews revealed how English persuasive writing is being taught and how this affects the quality of the students' writing while divulging other factors that may also influence the students' ability to compose a strong persuasive essay.

## 4. Results and Discussion

According to data collected from the essay samples, the students demonstrate the skill to compose their essays using the main elements of Toulmin's Model (Toulmin, 2003). However, they either did not or could not fully utilise the consists as less than a quarter of the essays included the optional elements. Generally, the students only utilised the elements that are necessary to form the foundation for their persuasive argument. Table 1 displays the features of the students' persuasive essays based on their level according to the grades they received: high, average and low.

**Table 1: Features of Malaysian Secondary Students' Persuasive Essays**

| Types of essays based on grades | Features |
|---|---|
| High-scoring | • Well-written and organized coherently and cohesively. <br> • Provide a full background, a clear stance and a thesis statement in the introduction. <br> • The body paragraphs are written in the typical CGW (Claim-Grounds-Warrant) pattern according to Toulmin (2003). In a body paragraph, the topic sentence is the Claim, the supporting details are the Grounds and finally, the last sentence is typically the 'Warrant'. Some of the essays do make use of the optional elements, Backing, Rebuttal and Qualifier, but not to their full potential. <br> • The conclusion for each essay is shown to be done well, providing a summary and reaffirmation of the stance. |
| Average-scoring | • Full essays with sufficient content but with some errors in vocabulary, grammar, and spelling. <br> • Brief introduction, but they manage to provide a stance and thesis statement along with a bit of a background for the topic. <br> • Like the high-scoring essays, the body paragraphs are also well-written, providing a clear topic sentence (Claim) and sufficient supporting details (Grounds). <br> • There is a lack of Warrant at the end of their body paragraphs. They also fail to employ optional elements like Backing, Rebuttal and Qualifiers. <br> • Brief conclusion which reaffirms the stance but the summary is not detailed enough to make a proper conclusion. |
| Low-scoring | • Low quality because of numerous errors in vocabulary, grammar, spelling and punctuation. <br> • Using simple words and short sentences. <br> • Essays were incomplete or too short. <br> • Short introduction, rarely including a proper thesis statement or a stance for their argument. <br> • Introduction lacks a background. <br> • Short body paragraph, lacking in any sufficient detail. <br> • Conclusion is far too brief, lacking a summary of their content as they skip straight to reaffirming their stance if they have stated it before. <br> • While the complete essay follows the basic CGW pattern for a persuasive essay, there are just too many errors and not enough content to score a higher grade. |

Based on the questionnaire responses, students agree that factors which influence the quality of their persuasive writing include the teachers' teaching ability, the students' general knowledge, their grammar and vocabulary, their ability to fulfil the task, spelling, speaking

English outside the classroom and interacting with people outside of the class. In addition, teachers agree that students simply do not read enough to build up their general knowledge, which also affects their ability to compose a strong persuasive essay.

According to the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2015), since 2006, poor English proficiency has been an issue for fresh graduates. As Bahasa Malaysia is the main instructional language, 80% of the curriculum is taught in this language. As a result, since 2011, only 28% of students graduate with a minimum English credit. Table 2 shows the framework, which was developed based on the results of the questionnaire and interviews that reveal the factors which strongly influence the students' persuasive writing skills. The framework covers different levels of implementation - individual (students), classroom, school, ministerial and national - to ensure persuasive writing skills are permanently highlighted in the curriculum. The framework provides a recommendation for each level of implementation and a description of enactment.

**Table 2: Framework to Implement Focus on Persuasive Writing**

| No. | Level | | Description |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Individual (Students) | a. | Students need to motivate themselves so they can start working on improving their persuasive writing skills. |
| | | b. | Students need to start reading more and do more persuasive writing practice. |
| | | c. | Students need to practice using English outside of the classroom to improve their fluency. |
| | | d. | Students need to form discussion groups online so they can learn how to argue about specific topics. They can start by posting about the importance of persuasive writing skills. |
| 2 | Classroom | a. | In the classroom, the teacher should encourage the students to self-learn when outside the classroom. The teacher may still provide guidance to steer them in the right direction. |
| | | b. | The teacher can create and formulate fun in-class activities that encourage discussions and the exchange of ideas. |
| | | c. | In the classroom, the teacher can do step-by-step learning, beginning with the basics for persuasive writing: vocabulary (tone), content (constructing ideas) and organization (style). |
| | | d. | Teachers should also familiarize themselves with Aristotle. |
| 3 | School | a. | The teachers should work together with the administrators to encourage persuasive writing mastery. |
| | | b. | Organize school-level activities: (i) Inter-class/form debates. (ii) Set up reading stations. (iii) Organize seminars/workshops for both teachers and students. |
| 4 | Ministerial | a. | Make persuasive writing training compulsory in Form 1. This allows more time for students to master since SPM has a persuasive essay question. |
| | | b. | Stress the importance of English persuasive writing skills for future careers (advertising, law, politics, etc...) |
| | | c. | Have English teachers take persuasive writing courses as part of their training. Focus on Toulmin's persuasive elements. |
| | | d. | Give teachers an incentive to attend a master's level training locally and abroad so that they can be masters in the art of persuasive writing. They will cascade their knowledge to their colleagues via roadshows. |
| 5 | National | a. | Encourage national and international level activities. |
| | | b. | Encourage activities that stress the importance of Eng fluency (i) National-level debate competitions. (ii) National-level persuasive writing contests. (iii) Public speaking forums. (iv) Open parliamentary sessions for school students to witness |

The main point of the framework is to strongly encourage more focus on persuasive writing training to help improve the students' skills.
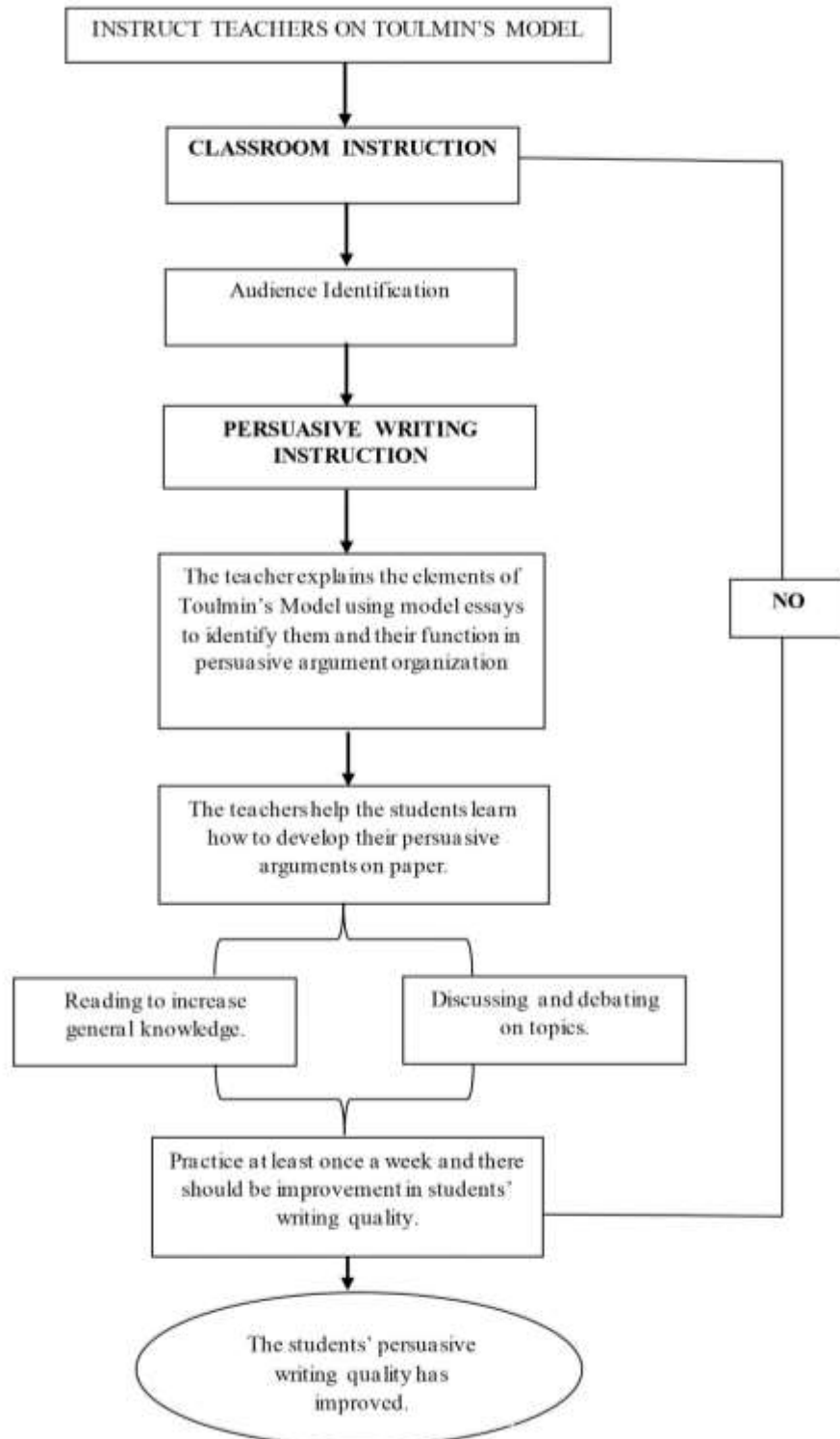


**Figure 2: Concept of Persuasive Writing Instructional Model**

Figure 2 depicts a concept for an instructional model that is intended for persuasive writing instruction. As shown in the figure, the first step is for teachers to help students learn how to identify the target audience for their essays since students usually choose their teachers as the default audience. Following this, Toulmin's Model can then be employed during the lessons.

The teacher can introduce Toulmin's model to the students by identifying the persuasive elements within a model essay (Hernandez et al., 2006). With the aid of the model essay, the function of each persuasive element can be demonstrated to the students. This way the students will be able to understand why the persuasive elements are important to the composition and development of their arguments. For an in-class activity, the students can each be assigned to identify the persuasive elements within an essay. This can be an individual task or group work. With Toulmin's Model, they can dissect the essay and analyse the persuasive elements within the essay. They can also study how the elements interconnect and complement each other. According to Amt (2002), dissecting an essay is a great way to practice argumentative writing as this will allow the students to properly apply the optional elements and improve their persuasive writing skills.

After the students understand the function of each element, the students can then be taught how to compose a persuasive argument. After they have mastered the main elements, the teacher will guide them in utilising the optional elements to help strengthen their persuasive essays. After mastering Toulmin's Model, the teachers would then help the students learn how to develop their essay content, which includes supporting the claims they have made for their persuasive arguments. The teacher needs to encourage the students to read books and newspapers to increase their general knowledge. This strategy aligns with the 3H approach (Islam et al., 2022), whereby the teacher supports sustainability by engaging and developing a holistic individual, including their affective, cognitive, and practical dimensions and talents, in relation to real-world issues and concerns.

The teacher can then have the students practice developing their content using in-class discussions as well as debates so they may exchange ideas. These discussions and debates will allow the students to share and gain knowledge which will allow them to present their opinions. They can be given an issue and be instructed to provide their own opinions on it, and if they agree or disagree. In the beginning, topics should be carefully chosen to not include controversial issues. The topics selected should be related and familiar to the students. If the results are still unsatisfactory the first time, then the process can be repeated. This process needs to be implemented at least once a week, for two hours a day, starting from their first year of secondary school.

As the students learn how to identify the elements within a persuasive essay, they can also learn how to properly organise the elements as they develop their writing skills. Toulmin's Model can also be used by the students to analyse and dissect their writing to discover how the elements function, interconnect and complement each other. As Toulmin's Model can be used as a framework and guide for persuasive writing, the students can improve their persuasive writing skills by properly applying the persuasive elements together in the proper pattern. Therefore, classroom practices and training in persuasive writing based on Toulmin's Model need to be implemented.

The students must also learn to overcome their persuasive writing weaknesses with the teacher's encouragement. One of the weaknesses is the students' lack of knowledge when attempting to compose an argument to support a topic. The teacher can encourage the students to read more, but if this is not enough, then perhaps the teacher can introduce students to documentaries or even audiobooks that can help them gain knowledge that they can use to help supplement their persuasive writing content. Another way to help students improve is to hold frequent debates in the classroom so they can practice how to compose their arguments on the spot.

Teachers also require training in employing Toulmin's Model for their lessons. There should be seminars and workshops that demonstrate to the teachers how Toulmin's Model can be used to improve their own understanding and teaching of persuasive writing in the classroom.

## 5. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to recommend a framework that can help improve the students' persuasive writing skills. The students' persuasive writing ability is influenced by their proficiency level which also affects the features they use while composing their essays. As many of the students have either an average or low level of writing proficiency, a framework focusing on persuasive writing needs to be implemented. The framework should cover multiple levels, ranging from the individual to the national level. The conceptual model is part of the framework as it provides a step-by-step guide that can be employed by teachers to help teach their students to compose stronger persuasive essays and overcome their weaknesses. This is done by introducing them to Toulmin's Model and helping them understand the function of each persuasive element. In-class tasks should be focused on improving their persuasive writing composition to help them improve their skills. Repetition is necessary for this to work.

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