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Exploring EFL University Students' Perceptions on Using Semantic Mapping Strategy in Argumentative Essay Writing

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Abstract

This study explores the Algerian university students' perceptions on using semantic mapping strategy in argumentative essay writing courses. 28 third year students, enrolled at M'sila University, were randomly selected to be trained in this strategy. Out of this sample,14 students willingly participated in a focus group interview. The latter investigated their impressions, experiences, and reflections by the end of those training sessions. This study is descriptive and qualitative in nature. After using thematic analysis procedures, the findings revealed that the implementation of semantic mapping is highly significant since it helps solve some of students' writing pitfalls basically in vocabulary, ideation, and communication. Therefore, the study recommends the explicit use of this strategy to help students start their writing confidently, interactively, and cooperatively.

Keywords: argumentative essay writing; cooperatively; EFL university students; interactively; perceptions; semantic mapping

1. Introduction

Nowadays, English permeates nearly every domain. College students' interactions, the bulky scientific documentation, everyday mails, and international business and correspondence are increasingly conducted in English. Just as speaking is crucial, the ability to write formally, in English, is deemed a determining factor for personal and professional success. Therefore, to meet the demands of modern life, virtually all members of society including students need to brush up their writing skills.

To highlight the importance of writing in the learning process, Rao (2007) stresses that it "stimulates thinking, compels students to concentrate and organize their ideas, and cultivates their ability to summarize, analyze, and criticize" (cited in Abduh Nasser, 2016, p.194). Harmer (2004, p.31), further argues that it "may provoke language development." These accounts demonstrate a key point: writing is essential for EFL learners.

Despite these and other reflective and developmental benefits, the consensus around the complexity and multifaceted nature of writing in ESL and EFL contexts has long been acknowledged. Scholars like Renandya and Richards (2002), and Tribble (1997) agree that writing is the most difficult skill to acquire and master. This difficulty arises because writing in English involves both high and low-level skills. As Richards and Renandya (2002,p.303) explain "L2 writers have to pay attention to higher- level skills of planning and organizing as well as lower -level skills of spelling, punctuation, word choice, and so on" (as cited in Poorsoti & Davatgari Asl, 2016, p.189- 190).Therefore, we could boldly say that writing requires students to carefully deal with these numerous aspects; it needs time, efforts, and sustained practice to be efficiently developed. In the same breath, Raimes (1983,pp.12-13) illustrates that the difficulty of writing, as most students often complain, lies more in the difficulty of "finding and expressing *ideas* in new language." For them , the problem is with communication not just with writing.

In the Algerian tertiary settings, writing well-crafted essays is amongst the utopian aims that EFL students strive to achieve as much of their work will be assessed by essays' quality. However, this goal often proves challenging due to various factors. First, lack of reading among our students, lack of motivation, and lack of practice due to the short time allotted to the writing credits are probably the top causes of students' low performance. Second, believing that writing is a solo silent activity, some teachers and students continued to perceive it isolated. That is, many students prefer to write individually and some teachers keep away from the writing scene. They do not often participate in the writing act with their students. Like these perceptions may add to the dire teaching and learning situations. Third, most of students' writing are limited to tests and exams' requirements. This makes writing occasional; hence, it is hardly harnessed. Fourth, for some students, fluency in speaking is regarded the sole indicator of language excellence. This prioritisation of speaking over writing has led the latter to be somehow neglected. These, among other reasons, make writing well- developed essays in English a daunting or even an intimidating task.

Out of her long experience as a teacher of Written Expression at M'sila University, the researcher has observed that many students find writing essays a tedious act. Particularly, a paucity of vocabulary (a linguistic challenge), a lack of ideas (a cognitive challenge), and difficulty in properly communicating their thoughts (a communicative challenge) are the main problems that they commonly encounter. Therefore, in an assiduous attempt to help them alleviate such three pitfalls, she opted for semantic mapping strategy use in the pre-writing stage.

It is compelling to acknowledge that a considerable body of research has documented the use of semantic mapping strategy in teaching vocabulary, reading, and writing. While studies such as Thornbury (2002), Zaghlool (2004,cited in Bani

Abdelrahman,2013), Abu- Hussein (2007) Adbollahzadeh and Amiri (2009), Abate and Tefera (2015), examined its role on promoting vocabulary acquisition among primary and secondary education students, Bani Abdelrahman (2013),and Al Khazaali (2020) targeted university contexts. Concerning its employment in reading skill, De Fatina (2006, cited in Bani Abdelrahman,2013) carried out a study on College students to check also the significance of the strategy on vocabulary learning. As for writing, Siddiq (2013) studied its use on the descriptive text to solve the problem of idea' generation and organisation among high school pupils. Vijayavalsalan (2016) assessed the role of mind mapping, another name of semantic mapping, on essay writing skills of university students. This study was not specific enough neither about the writing skills examined nor about the type of essay used.

The studies reviewed above demonstrate, on the one hand, that the sustained scholarly interest in vocabulary teaching stems from the fact that vocabulary serves as the backbone of all forms of communication. On the other hand, research exploring the uses of semantic mapping in writing skills – specifically in argumentative essay writing –remains relatively scarce.

In Algeria, the same research scene exists. Bennoui (2021), from Biskra University, investigated the effects of semantic mapping on developing university students' reading comprehension. Additionally, Gerrout (2022), from Ouargla University, explored this strategy' impacts on the development of middle school pupils' vocabulary learning. Therefore studies about the use of this strategy in essay writing or about students perceptions of the use of this strategy are really limited.

Having a bird's eye view on the Algerian research realm, we can say that no studies have been undertaken to investigate the use/s of semantic mapping in writing skills per se, and if any exists, none has investigated its significance, role, or use in university students' argumentative essay writing. This study seems thus the first to do so. Moreover, apart from the function of the technique on vocabulary development, the other dimensions of writing such as cognitive, interactive, or cooperative are not widely searched either in Algeria or abroad. In consequence, based on the problems raised earlier: a lack of vocabulary, a lack of ideas, and difficulty in communication, this study comes to fill in this gap.

1.1 Aims of the Study

The current study principally aims to explore university students' perceptions or perspectives of using semantic mapping in argumentative essay practice sessions. It attempts to discover whether the implementation of this strategy, in the pre-writing phase, reduces their vocabulary, content generation ,and communication problems or not.

1.2 Research Questions

To address the above main aim, the study raises the following questions:

a). What are students' perceptions on the use of semantic mapping in argumentative essay writing ?

b).Does the use of semantic mapping during the pre-writing phase help students solve their linguistic (Vocabulary),cognitive (ideation), and communicative difficulties? If yes, how it does so.

c).Do they think that this study is successful ? Why or why not ?

2. On Essay Writing

2.1 Essay Definition

Oshima and Hogue (1998,p.100) describe the essay as "a piece of writing several paragraphs long instead of just one or two paragraphs." This clarifies that to properly elaborate a given theme in an essay, the writer should use more than one paragraph.

2.2 Essay Structure

Essentially, essays have three main sections: an introductory paragraph (the introduction), supporting paragraphs (the body), and a concluding paragraph (the conclusion). This format is common to all types of essays; however, the main difference between a short and long essay lies in the number of developmental paragraphs which make up the essay body. Short essays have an introduction, one or two body paragraphs, and a conclusion; whereas, long essays which are also called a five-paragraph essay (Davis & Liss ,2006) have an introduction, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion.

2.2.1 The Introductory Paragraph (*The introduction*)

The introductory paragraph is the first stimulating paragraph in an essay. It indicates its topic, purpose, and tone. It consists of two parts: a few general statements about the subject to attract the reader's attention and a thesis statement (Oshima & Hogue ,1998). A thesis statement for an essay is just like a topic sentence for a paragraph. It is the most essential sentence in the whole essay. It introduces the specific topic and the controlling (central) idea (i.e. the major subdivisions, sub-ideas, or sub-points) of the topic.

In long essays, the introductory paragraph should have a hook, background information, and a thesis statement. The *hook* is a statement that begins the introduction. It includes one or two interesting sentences that engage the reader' attention and stimulate their curiosity. *Background information*, in most cases, follows the hook. It encompasses a general statement or statements that give a broader picture of the subject to be discussed. *A thesis statement* usually comes at the end of the introduction (Boardman & Frydenberg,2008).A writer's success in crafting a good introduction depends heavily on how well they formulate their thesis statement.

2.2.2 The Developmental Paragraphs (The Body)

Although the introduction plays an important directing role in the student's essay, the body is regarded as the main part. Placed in the middle; i.e., between the introductory and the concluding paragraphs, it includes the information necessary to support the central points stated in the thesis. Each point is developed in one or more paragraphs and backed with specific details, examples, and explanations which the reader needs to know (Oshima & Hogue,2006). Such details involve evidence from books, articles, websites, or personal experiences. Additionally, the writer needs to provide their own analysis in this section. Thus, it is in the body that the bulk of the author's discussion takes place.

2.2.3 The Concluding Paragraph (The Conclusion)

As its name suggests, the concluding paragraph is typically the final paragraph in an essay. It usually consists of a summary of the main points covered in the body, a restatement of the thesis statement in the writer's own words , and/or a final comment on the subject based on the information presented (Oshima & Hogue 1998).

Like the introduction, the conclusion of an essay is important. When written logically and clearly, it strongly impresses the reader and guides them into the end of the essay (Oshima & Hogue,2006).In terms of structure, the conclusion moves from specific to general, and can be seen as *an inverted funnel*, the opposite of the introduction' structure.

2.3 Essay Writing Process

Under the process-oriented instruction, a broad spectrum of interest has been given to the various stages or phases that the writer undertakes during composition. Researchers in the dynamic filed of the EFL/ESL classify and name them distinctly. Seow (2002) and Harmer (2007) put them in four stages: planning, drafting, revising, and editing. Harmer names the last two stages as editing and final version. According to

White and Arndt (1991), the process writing comprises six stages: drafting, structuring, reviewing, focusing, evaluating, and generating. Tribble (1997) divides it into five phases: prewriting, composing, revising, editing, and publishing.

2.3.1 Pre-Writing

Pre-writing refers to the activities students engage in before they begin writing. Presumably, one of the most challenging aspects in writing is getting started. To move safely and steadily away from facing a blank page towards generating, selecting, and organising ideas, students should set the scene effectively in this initial stage. Because writing is fundamentally a process of communicating something (topic/content) to someone (audience/reader) for some reason (purpose), it is during this stage that students can actively engage in thinking, discussing, exploring, organising, and breaking through mental barriers to write on the topic at hand. In brief, it is the preparatory planning stage that guides students through various strategies or activities towards producing a reader-based- piece of writing.

To show the significance of the pre-writing activities, D'Aoust (1986,p.7 cited in Oluwadiya ,1995,p.128) states they aid students to discover both what they want to say and how to say it on paper. Moreover, they encourage generate ideas by promoting a free flow of thoughts. Put simply, prewriting activities facilitate planning at the product and the process levels. Pre-writing is then a valuable platform that provides students with both the motivation and the tool to begin writing.

2.3.2 During-Writing (Composing)

Drafting or composing refers to the stage in which the writer writes the first rough version of a piece of writing. In this first "go" at a text (Harmer,2007, p.5), the writer starts to translate the ideas gathered and organised in the prewriting stage into forms (i.e., structures/sentences) to develop meanings. That is, he/she moves from the abstract (ideas) into the concrete written text. In such early draft, the writer does not need to be overly concerned with linguistic or grammar accuracy but fluency (Seow,2003) because this stage is often built on the assumption that the first draft will be amended later. Naturally, student writers need to know that "no piece of writing is ever perfect the first time" (Oshima & Hogue, 1998,p.10); so, in such sense, drafting simply means that writers can write several drafts before achieving the final accomplished form.

2.3.3 Post-Writing (Revision)

In writing, a writer may unconsciously omit a key piece of information, explain an idea inaccurately, provide insufficient support for a paragraph, structure a sentence poorly, or misspell a word. It is in this stage that writers review what they have written earlier to address such issues to improve clarity, coherence, and correctness. Flower and Hayes (1981) divide revision stage into *evaluating* and *revising,* Hedge (2005) categorises it into *reviewing* and *improving*, and Harmer frames it (2007) into *reflecting* and *revising*. A glance at these partitions reveals a resemblance at the overall aim: reviewing, evaluating, and reflecting are used to improve the quality of the written work. For Harmer (2007), skilled writers tend to focus first on reformulating general meanings and structures then shift their attention to features like vocabulary choice and grammar accuracy. This demonstrates before student writers publish their polished version, they need to go through several sub-processes to refine and reshape both their thoughts and language.

2.4 Argumentative Essay

Argumentative or persuasive essay (Boardman & Frydenberg, 2008) is at the heart of academic writing. In this writing discourse, college students are required to write to persuade someone to take actions or to convince someone to agree or disagree with a particular point of view. Davis and Liss (2006) declare that the argumentative essay expresses an opinion about a controversial topic. In order to induce the audience

effectively, the writer needs to strike a balance in the essay by including both their own viewpoint and the opposing one, or as Davis and Liss (2006,p.93) call it "the counterargument."

Although the argumentative essay requires students to take a clear position on an issue, it encourages them to consider the opposing viewpoints. After introducing a counterargument, students must refute it by explaining what is weak about it. In other words, the counterargument is challenged using evidence that supports the writer's main argument. Presenting a well-rounded argument increases the reader's willingness to accept the writer's opinion. Ultimately, argumentative essay is a form of writing in which the writer advances strong and logical reasons, makes inductions, and draw evidence-based conclusions.

3. On Semantic Mapping Strategy

The researcher's deep commitment to the art of teaching has propelled her to profess that engaging in an earnest preparation for the topic with students before they begin writing is a vital step that a teacher can take to set the stage for them. Since the primary goal of the pre-writing phase is to "get the kettle boiling", the teacher's role in activating students' prior knowledge is essential.

3.1 Semantic Mapping: Concept Defined

One of the prominent teaching and learning strategies rooted in schemata theory is semantic mapping. As the name signifies, this cognitively-based strategy is particularly effective in empowering students' cognitive abilities. It helps them to think critically, solve problems, organise their thoughts and regulate their writing behaviours, and make decisions before the actual composing process start. Therefore, it encourages them trace out both the internal and external schematic structure of the writing piece.

What is exactly semantic mapping? Although this concept has various names such as word maps (Harmer,2007,p.235), mind maps (Hedge,2005,p.56), spidergram, webbing (Mah,2011,p.82), think-link, graphic organizers, knowledge mapping, or cognitive maps (Svantesson,1989,cited in Vijayavalsalan,2016,p.138), and clustering (Rico,1987,p.29), views about its definition and nature are similar. Harmer (2007) states that word maps are an extremely stimulating way "of building up vocabulary knowledge as well as provoking students into retrieving and using what they know" (p.235). Semantic mapping is based on the premise that enabling students to map out their thoughts on a particular topic –by activating and building both schemata and vocabulary knowledge –can significantly enhance their writing.

Rico (1987) defines semantic mapping or clustering as "a linear brainstorming process that generates ideas, images, and feelings around a stimulus word until a pattern becomes discernible" (p.29). It helps to recoup information stored in a person's long term memory or to add new one. Expanding a key word or a main idea into more interconnected words or sub-ideas through the map is an attempt to concretize and visualize the abstract thoughts boiling in the brain. Closely related, the two above descriptions (*viz*., of Harmer and of Rico) demonstrate the main purpose of the strategy. Semantic mapping simply makes the invisible mental operations visible and utilizable.

From the outer frame, semantic mapping is a diagram of words and ideas presented in shapes such as rectangles and circles and connected by lines and/or arrows. Nyoni (2012) defines semantic mapping as "a graphic arrangement of words that indicates "how new words and ideas are related to each other within a text" (p.266). Being both vocabulary and knowledge representation and expansion tool, semantic mapping displays words and ideas that are related to the topic under discussion.

3.2 Approaching Semantic Mapping Strategy in Writing Classroom

When the teacher knows how to effectively introduce and manage this strategy, the most intricate task of getting started in writing becomes less stressful for students. To beneficially incorporate semantic mapping in the writing classroom, the teacher needs to undertake some steps.

First, he/she introduces the topic that students are going to write about and the tool that he/she is going to use (i.e. semantic mapping).Second, the teacher writes and encircles the key word or the key idea of the selected topic in the middle of the blackboard and asks students: "What do you think of when you see that word?"(Rico,1987,p.29), or can you think of words/ concepts which are associated to this one? By doing so, the teacher questions students to call out or to jot down all what comes to their mind when they hear or see the word/ the main idea of the topic in hand, i.e., they are moved to give words or concepts which they personally associate to that key term. In this stage, the teacher encourages all answers. After this brainstorming or "listing of data" (Nofriati,2017,p.48) process, the teacher sets students to categorise those words or sub-ideas in a form of a map. The latter stands for an organized grouping of vocabulary items. The map denotes what students already have about the subject. It also supplies them with a support or a base upon which they can build the new information used in the writing text. At the end, and from the information or the notes displayed in the map, students select what to include in their writing piece. Synthesising such sub-steps starting from preparation, brainstorming, generation, association, organisation to assignment, one can say that semantic mapping is a top-down approach that endows students with a rich basis to write.

3.2.1 Semantic Mapping Accompanying Activities

3.2.1.1 Classroom Discussion. Although research on the role of classroom discussion in improving ESL/EFL students' writing skills is limited, some scholars have explored its potential benefits. Oyetunde (1989, cited in Oluwadiya, 1995, p.132) asserts that this technique is highly appropriate for writing instruction. He argues that such oral or group discussion, in which students are guided to generate ideas, should always precede any written assignment. This activity sensibilises students to the need to plan both the content and the organisation of their writing. Additionally, it allows the teacher to assess their students' vocabulary and their grasp of language structures necessary for their writing. Integrating classroom discussion within the semantic mapping strategy could offer a meaningful approach to teach writing.

3.2.1.2. Debating. Engaging students in a discussion of a debatable issue during the prewriting stage-through semantic mapping - is worthwhile for motivating them to write. Debating is "the act of orally presenting two sides of an argument or a topic" (Oluwadiya ,1995,p.130).The verbal language used in this classroom technique can prompt students to express different opinions on the topic at hand. By speaking and listening to opposing arguments, they can foster their writing ability. Debating provides them a good opportunity to plan their writing, select, organize, evaluate their own perspectives and those of others', and improve their language use. In short, under the guidance of the teacher, debating offers a relaxed and supportive environment for students to start
writing with confidence.

3.3 The Use of Semantic Mapping Strategy in EFL Writing Classes

3.3.1 Semantic Mapping and Students' Vocabulary Repertoire

One of the exceptional features to craft a strong written masterpiece is the writer's flexibility in dealing with words. Possessing a good amount of vocabulary and being able to use them properly relieves the overthinking of writers about what to write and how to express themselves.

Used in any language instruction, including writing, semantic mapping has been widely recognised by many researchers as a good technique to expand students' vocabulary. Mah (2011,p.85) states that semantic mapping used in "the pre-writing phase of a lesson can activate learners schemata by introducing them to the relevant key words". In the same breath, Sun (2014,p.1480) asserts that in the classroom, the teachers use semantic mapping "to enrich students' vocabulary, which enlarges students' linguistic schemata". This classroom activity provides a partial and visual framework for students to build their linguistic ability.

Not only does semantic mapping assist students to improve their vocabulary knowledge, but it also enhances their ability to use words properly. According to White (1986,cited in Bani abdelrahman,2013) words make unique associative networks; so, understanding the relationships between them helps students learn their meaning, and as a result, they may use them appropriately. Semantic mapping offers a robust visual platform in which the associative technique fosters deeper and better understanding, retention, and use of vocabulary items.

3.3.2 Semantic Mapping and Content Activation

One of the interesting ways to save students who are at loss for ideas when they start writing is brainstorming. The first aim of this strategy is to stimulate students' imagination to produce ideas on a topic (Reis Alves, 2008). It is therefore helpful particularly for those less imaginative students who do not very often exercise their ingenious abilities and hence find it hard "to generate or recall encyclopedic/word knowledge and link ideas together" (Reis Alves,p.7).

To possibly and perfectly promote productivity and creativity, brainstorming process should not be hindered (White & Arndt,1991). The writing teacher needs to establish a conducive classroom environment where students feel comfortable and confident to assert and explore their ideas. Consequently, they can find what to write and so bridge their intellectual emptiness.

Another equally important outcome of semantic mapping is content organisation. Coghlan and Brydon-Miller (2014 as cited in Al Khazaali,2020) commend without reservation the use of semantic mapping for creating an informational organisation environment. Likewise, Subari, Wiratno, and Berminati (2022) describe semantic mapping as a highly creative teaching technique that aids students to arrange "their ideas systematically"(p.352).It enables them to order and pre-structure their ideas before they write. In short, the richer and clearer the map, the stronger the ideas' organisation will be.

3.3.3 Semantic Mapping and Classroom Communication and Cooperation

The use of semantic mapping during the pre-writing phase promotes active communication and cooperation between the teacher and students. Johnson and Pearson (1978) clarify that semantic mapping is a good way to "motivate and invite learners' active participation"(p.14).In other words, semantic mapping enhances inclusive classroom participation by pushing students to talk, ask questions, and express their opinions. This kind of collective thinking helps students build broader viewpoints and interpret the writing topic from diverse perspectives. When students contribute their ideas and draw on their classroom mates', they feel a sense of investment in the final written product.

Another important view of the cooperative dimension of semantic mapping is provided by Van Boxtel ,Vender Linden, Kanselaar (cited in Han,2002) .They claim that collaborative concept maps engages learners in more elaborative actions and fosters negotiation of meaning. Consequently, it offers them an opportunity to "generate interactions that enhance the development of knowledge" (p.20). All in all, encouraging

interaction and cooperation can be considered an additional advantage of semantic mapping. After establishing a theoretical foundation of this study, the upcoming section deals with the empirical part.

4. Methodology : Methods and Materials

4.1 Research Setting and Sample

The present study took place in the Department of English at M'sila University, Algeria during the second semester of the academic year 2022/2023. After obtaining their written consent to participate, a group of 28 students was randomly chosen to be trained on the use of semantic mapping strategy. Then a part from this sample,14 students were willingly interviewed at the end of this project. Although the standard focus group size consists of 6-12 participants (Dornei ,2007),choosing 14 students is doable for two salient justifications. On the one hand, the interviewees have the same characteristics, so the researcher wants to capture diverse perspectives. On the second hand, she seeks to question a larger representative sample of students (i.e. a half of the total sample).

4.2 Research Method

The study predominantly employed a descriptive qualitative method to provide a rich and straightforward accounts for students' perspectives and experiences.

4.3 Data Collection Tool

Since this study is essentially qualitative in nature, a focus group interview was carried out to survey the subjects' opinions and behaviours after taking some trainings (19 sessions) on semantic mapping strategy use in argumentative essay writing practices.

4.3.1. The Focus Group Interview: Definition

As a qualitative mode of inquiry, the focus group interview (Creswell &Creswell ,2018;Dorneyei,2007;Morgan,1988) involves a group setting in which the researcher (the interviewer) records the responses of a small group of students (the interviewees).This tool enables the collection of convenient qualitative data within a relatively short period of time. What characterises this focus group format is its foundation in the collaborative experience of group brainstorming. After acquainting students with the interview's structure, purpose, and content in the pre-interview session, the researcher held a brief conversation with them during the first 10 minutes ,of the actual second session , to ensure they felt relaxed and ready to begin.

4.3.2 Questions of the Interview

4.3.2.1 Starting Moves: The First Questions. In any interview context, the first few questions are frequently crucial because they establish the scene and set the tone for what follows. These moments allow the group members create their initial rapport. When participants are able to respond to these opening questions, they may feel more confident, competent, and thus open to genuine exchange. Questions 1 to 3–**Q1**: "Did you enjoy participating in this study? Tell about your impressions." ; **Q2**: "What did you like most about the study?"; and **Q3**: "Do you think that the participation of your teacher in the pre-writing phase through semantic mapping backed with classroom discussion is helpful? Is this cooperation necessary in the writing process? Explain how." –were designed primarily to explore students' overall impressions about participating in this study where semantic mapping is used as a prewriting strategy.

4.3.2.2 Probing Moves: Content Questions. To get a rounded picture about the role of semantic mapping in alleviating students 'vocabulary, ideation, and communication difficulties, **Q4**:"Does the use of semantic map in the pre-writing phase help you solve lack of vocabulary problem? If yes, how it does so"; **Q5**:"Does the use of semantic mapping help you to generate ideas before you write? If yes, illustrate how, and **Q6**:"Is the use of semantic mapping beneficial for you to communicate /express your ideas ? If yes, explain how it promotes your communicative ability" were posed. To give depth and richness to students' responses, those probing questions were asked. Such follow up questions were designed to encourage elaboration and provide clarification. In brief, they aimed to move the interview beyond its surface level and prompt them to reflect more deeply and more meaningfully on their experiences.

4.3.2.3 Closing Moves: The Last Questions. Providing space for the participants to express their final thought in an interview is pivotal. **Q7**:"How would you evaluate your participation in this study ? To what extent is it successful or unsuccessful? Explain why or why not" and **Q8**:"What would you like to add?", served as pre-closing moves, signaling to students that the interview was drawing to a close. Inviting them to evaluate, summarise, or add remarks reflects the researcher's intention to include what (Dornyei,2007,p.143) calls "a final winding down phase." Overall, these wrap-up questions were designed to explore students' concluding reflections after the study, and to gently steer the conversation towards closure.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Focus Group Interview Pre-Analysis: Step by Step Procedure

As a data gathering instrument, the interview aimed specifically (a) to explore students' views and impressions after participating in the study ;(b) to describe the role of semantic mapping in relieving their vocabulary, idea generation and organisation, and communication hurdles; and (c) to assess the success of the study in students' eyes.

Although the interview was taped, the researcher took written notes afterwards. This note-taking process adds to the richness of data collected via the recordings. Further, to enhance reliability, the researcher asked the participants to restate their thoughts in written form. This not only affords an additional opportunity for students to express themselves through writing, but also enables the researcher to reflect on these written responses alongside their 'verbal contributions. It further allows the researcher to check whether students' answers remained consistent over time.

To proceed systematically, the researcher listened to the recordings multiple times, carefully read the students' transcripts, and coded their answers to identify some emerging sub-themes. This thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006;Braun & Clarke,2023) focuses on the main recurring aspects in students' responses. Although the interview was guided by predefined questions, it remained open to flexible and spontaneous interaction. This blend of deductive (i.e., based on pre-determined questions and categories) and inductive (i.e., open to categories emerged from the collected data) approach is considered valuable as it can significantly enrich the quality of the interview findings.

5.2 Findings of Focus Group Interview

Alongside the qualitative data, the researcher provides the following quantitative information for more clarification and specification. Both types of data may give a clear and an in-depth analysis of participants' answers.

Table 1:Results of Students' Focus Group Interview

Questions		Students'Answers	
		Yes	No
1.	Did you enjoy participating in this study ? Tell about your impressions	14	00
2.	What did you like most about the study?	/	/
3.	Do you think that the participation of your teacher in the pre-writing phase through semantic mapping backed with classroom discussion is helpful? Is this cooperation necessary in the writing process? Explain how	13	1
4.	Does the use of semantic map in the pre-writing phase help you solve lack of vocabulary problem? If yes, how it does so"	11	3
5.	Does the use of semantic map help you to generate ideas before you write ? If yes, illustrate how	13	1
6.	Is the use of semantic map beneficial for you to communicate /express your ideas ? If yes, explain how does it promote your communicative ability?	12	2
7.	How would you evaluate your participation in this study? To what extent is it successful or unsuccessful ? Explain why or why not	/	/
8.	What would you like to add?	/	/

5.2.1 Analyses of Findings of Focus Group Interview

As depicted in table1, nearly all questions require students to elaborate .Questions 1,3,4,5 and 6 are auxiliary ones and include explanations. Questions 2, 7, and 8 were purely open ended questions.

The main theme emerged from responses to **Q1** is *students' enjoyment* .Results from **Q1** clearly revealed that all participants (N=14) highly enjoyed participating in the study. One student said ,"I really liked the study and if I had the chance to repeat it, I would", a second student asserted, "It was one of the enjoyable experiences in my career as a student" while a third one noted, "More than enjoyable, the study was impressive from which I learned a lot. It was a journey of addressing my fears and weaknesses, facing and overcoming them." A fourth student declared, "It was an amazing experience having the teacher by your side; most of the time, teachers provide the lesson and leave." Another student viewed, "It was interesting because I found out a lot especially about how to structure an argumentative essay." These answers demonstrate a complete consensus that students loved being a part of this study.

Q2 was about the aspect they liked most in the survey. Similar to **Q1**, all students responded very positively. The first main theme elicited here is *the interactive classroom environment*. Out of 14 members, 11 plainly and confidently stated that the stimulating interactive classroom environment was the top lovely aspect. For them, the use of semantic mapping backed with classroom discussion allowed them to think critically, participate, and communicate complex concepts. For example, one student revealed, "The things I really liked most in the study were the interaction of the teacher with students and students with each other. In addition, the classroom discussion was very effective in mastering critical thinking." A second student raised, "It was an opportunity to train ourselves to view our own favourite ideas just as critically as those we oppose, and to be exposed to different topics and problems." The second theme concerned *the good choice of writing topics* . Two students were too specific noting that the varied selected topics made the project both beneficial and entertaining. One of them announced: "the best thing that encouraged me to continue is the environment that the teacher cared about and the topics." One student gave a unique and succinct answer to

this question stating: "The thing that I liked most about the study was that it made me write." This response effectively recapitulated everything. The investigation provided an excellent opportunity for students *to write* considering that the participants had missed their first year due to the Covid-19 crisis and related confinement. Responses to Q2 showed that all students appreciated the supporting writing atmosphere they were experienced during the study.

The main theme occurred from students' answers to **Q3** (part1) is *the importance of the teacher's participation or intervention in the process writing* where the solid majority (13 out of 14) stated that teacher's participation in the pre-writing stage is extremely necessary. However, one student viewed the pre-writing phase as merely a waste of time. In part (2) of the question, students' explanations fell into three main categories: (a) *teacher's guidance* (5 students), (b) *idea generation* (3 students), and (c) *idea organization* (5 students).An interviewee explained, the teacher with her strategies were a guide for the students and their scattered thoughts." Another informant elucidated:" It was beneficial to generate ideas because sometimes the idea is there and we forget about it. Additionally, it helped us organise our thoughts." Cooperation in the pre-writing stage is thus the step most students eagerly anticipate from their teachers.

Answers to **Q4** indicated that 11 students found semantic mapping an effective method for vocabulary development while three believed that their writing difficulties lay outside vocabulary domain. For these students, semantic mapping did not help them solve their vocabulary problems, hence it did not contribute to expanding their vocabulary repertoire.

Since the main theme in Q4 is *vocabulary building,* coding students' answers in part two revealed three sub-themes: a) *acquiring new vocabulary*, b) *improving vocabulary quality*, and c) *enhancing vocabulary use*. 10 students voiced out that semantic mapping greatly expanded their vocabulary repertoire either by helping them discovering new words or by developing their already existing vocabulary. One student mentioned, "It helps me to improve and enrich my vocabulary", while another stated, "it helped me to find new words." Regarding the second sub-category, three students maintained that semantic mapping improved the quality of their lexicon. They described a shift from using simplistic or even ordinary words to more advanced ones is a merit counted for this strategy. To support so, a student argues, "Because of the fact that semantic map requires brainstorming, a lot of keywords are shared by the class. And from that, one can learn a new advanced vocabulary." Similarly, another student illuminated ,"I really felt confident, and I had to worry less about sounding too simple and basic when speaking and writing." Finally, two students highlighted that the strategy supported vocabulary use. One reported," it helps me to know new words and use them." Interestingly, the above answers suggest semantic mapping efficacy in solving students ' vocabulary –related problems and hence enlarging their lexicon store in various ways.

Q5 highlights the cognitive perspective of semantic mapping use. For yes/no questions, the vast majority of students (N=13) agreed that the strategy was helpful in solving some of their mental obstacles. In the second part, and as illustrated in the table, the central theme was predefined: idea generation and organization. From this, two sub-themes emerged : a) *classroom brainstorming support* and b) *visualisation association among ideas*. Within these sub-themes, several related cognitive processes were found including critical thinking, creativity, exploration of new ideas, idea' selection, and clarity of ideas. Regarding brainstorming, three students spot its great role on boosting their critical thinking dexterities. Two students discussed its capacity on leading students to discover new ideas and perspectives while another two recounted creativity as a positive outcome of brainstorming. For the visualization nature of the

map, five students claimed that it supported idea organization, four highlighted its power on idea selection, one student mentioned clarity, and two students stated that it made writing easier. It can be noted here that the frequency of each sub-theme does not necessarily reflect unique respondents; some students stated multiple aspects. For example, one student's answer nearly encompassed all of them saying, "It helped me come up with my ideas easily. The visual way of organizing thoughts guided me, making my writing clearer and more connected. This step was important not just for improving my writing skills but also for making my thinking process better when it comes to generating and choosing ideas." Another insightful response was, "seeing thoughts written down in front of me instead of thinking about them in my mind helped me organise my immediate thoughts ,which stimulated the hidden ideas to find their way out and made it easier for me to tell what arguments could be more engaging in the topic." This nicely illustrated the role of semantic mapping in facilitating both content generation and organisation**.**

Q6 explored the communicative aspects not of the map as such but of the interaction fostered during brainstorming or questioning sub-processes. Twelve participants acknowledged that the strategy was serviceable in *stimulating communication*. In explaining how this happens,11 students out of the 12 students concurred that semantic mapping boosts active participation. This, in turn, naturally pushed students to articulate and share their thoughts, which helped build clarity and, subsequently, self-confidence. One student extended the discussion to highlight the *communication between the writer and the implied reader saying* " It helps to communicate generate ideas easily. Through semantic mapping, I organise my ideas logically which helps also the reader to understand me." Such thoughtful reflection signifies that students are aware not only about the visual verbal interaction during classroom discussion but also about the indirect written communication with the reader. Another student justified, "Because I am an introvert student to certain extent, I do not usually participate in the classroom…therefore I could not just sit down and watch them. I started to get motivated to participate with them." Captivatingly, it increases classroom engagement and motivation. A final very compelling evidence came from a student describing, "Since everyone was participating in building the semantic map, I had the chance to give my ideas and then to query and discuss my classmates' as well. I had the chance to talk as in oral expression session." This remark reveals the big role of semantic mapping in *sharp*ening not only written communication but also listening and speaking skills.

Answers to **Q7** can be categorised under the theme *of students' satisfaction* .The responses entirely showed that students were highly satisfied with their participation in the study. They confidently described the journey as successful. One student remarked, "My participation in this study was definitely a success.", echoing this sentiment, another student stated, "I would evaluate my participation as highly successful." Quantitatively, a third student rated their involvement as "9/10". As a teacher, the researcher could tangibly feel the positive energy that the study infused into her students' learning experiences. In accounting for the reasons of this contentment (part 2 of Q5), the following responses were reported:

- **S1** shared, "I learned how to structure my essays and report logically, ensuring that my ideas flowed coherently...I learned to anlayse complex topics and think beyond them."
- **S2** stated, "I can tell that generating ideas is easier than ever....For me knowing how to write an introduction is a precious development."

These responses clearly conveyed a central fact: The use of semantic mapping in the pre-writing stage is beneficial for students. When both teachers and students invest considerable time and efforts into teaching and learning of writing, our students'

performance and outcomes will be impressive.

Q8 discussed students' suggestions and expectations. The majority of students (9 students) expressed their gratitude to the teacher acknowledging the support provided throughout the study. Despite this predominant sense of appreciation, five (5) proposed two key suggestions for future implementation. The first one strongly endorsed the *generalisation of this study's findings across the Algerian universities*. One student commented, "The study was very successful . I hope that it is integrated in the educational system." In the same vein , another student declared," I would like to add that this study should be over-generalised in all universities." These responses reflect a shared belief in the broader applicability of the strategy beyond the current setting (M'sila University). The second proposal was *to allocate more time and practice for students* to develop their writing skill. This significantly points for potential curricular development.

5.2.3 Discussion and Interpretation of the Interview's Findings

The results of the focus group interview affirmatively address the research questions. Nearly all students hold positive views about the use of semantic mapping in writing classes. The majority of them indicated the powerful role of the strategy in relieving their linguistic (vocabulary), cognitive (ideas generation and organization) and communicative obstacles. Besides, all of them think that this study was very successful. Many interviewees articulated that it helped them enlarge their vocabulary bank, externalize and structure ideas which were previously scattered, and explored more complex concepts prior to writing. These results lead us to say that in its visual form and through classroom discussions and debates induced by thought-stimulating questions, semantic mapping makes writing safe for students to start it. Equipped with a richer vocabulary, and clearer set of ideas pertinent to the argumentative topics, students find the most intriguing part of writing, which is the beginning, more collaborative and accessible.

The promise of such interactive, cooperative work between the students and their teacher, and among students and their peers (as seen in responses to Q3and Q6) is clearly appreciated by participants. Students largely enjoy this dynamic spirit. Nearly all of them agree that the active involvement of both teacher and students in the process writing favourably influences the learning/teaching' s sphere. This significant finding confirms that for many students at M'sila university, this intervention represents the first time they were actively supported by their teachers in shaping their writing particularly during its initial phases. The conditions created in this new instructional approach, where both teacher and students and students and their classmates were approachable, motivates students to speak, listen, argue, oppose, and share ideas and experiences. This interaction, in turn, helps reduce students' fears and hesitations and therefore contributes to improve their writing skills.

Trained on authentic argumentative themes, students learnt properly how to structure their essays. We can claim that the consistent practice of this visually based-strategy before writing promoted students' awareness of both internal and external organization of argumentative essays. With such organisational patterns in mind, students are able to sequence their ideas logically and smoothly. Luckily, this study supports the development of long –term argumentative writing skills which students can apply in various academic subjects (modules) and situations.

The obtained results demonstrated that semantic mapping is a good teaching technique for developing EFL students' vocabulary. This finding aligns closely with previous research including Indriati (2014),Thaldon (2020), and Fitriani, Usman, Asrifan, Posi, and Hermansyah (2022). This literature supports the use of semantic mapping as the strategy for a direct vocabulary instruction. That is, it does not primarily focus on writing skill as such. Only a few studies explored the connection between

semantic strategy and vocabulary building in writing. For example, Elbadri (2022) examined its role in enhancing elementary students' ability to write recount texts.

As shown earlier, all the interviewees –except one–acknowledged the potency of semantic mapping on enhancing students' *idea generation* and *organization* processes (Q5). This key pattern of result is also consistent with the findings of Akbar and Yulitriana (2022) who indicate that semantic mapping facilitates brainstorming and the organisation of ideas among primary school when writing descriptive texts. Both this study and that of Siddiq (2013) highlight a noticeable gap in research regarding the use of semantic mapping in content generation and organization skills at the university level.

Concerning the third dimension, many participants noted that *the interaction* taking place during semantic mapping activity was highly helpful in boosting their communicative competence. Despite this general agreement, it appears that very few studies have addressed this aspect. In brief, research on the use of semantic mapping in higher education context, in writing skill per se, and more particularly in argumentative essays is still relatively limited.

Overall, studies about students' perceptions of the use of semantic mapping in essay writing classes are also limited. A research conducted by Pakaja, Habibie, Akhmad, Nabu, Kar;ila (2025) explores both students' and teachers' viewpoints of the use of this strategy in EFL setting. The findings are consistent with the ones of this study. They reported positive opinions on how this strategy assists ideas generation and organisation prior to writing. This lead us to say that numerous studies on semantic mapping stress the effectiveness (i.e., improvement in writing aspects such as vocabulary) (e.g., Al-khazaali,2020; Al-Shaer ,2014) rather than perceptions. Thus, this study may contrast with them as it touches on perceptions on the one hand, and on three aspects of writing skill on the other.

Therefore, it can contribute to fill in such gaps. Based on the above accounts, it is reasonable for the researcher to extrapolate that this study may be the first study in Algeria to explore the three writing dimensions (*viz*., linguistic, cognitive, and communicative) together. In the Algerian EFL contexts, most studies are on general writing strategies or metacognitive awareness (e.g., Zid & Naoua ,2022). Fewer ones exist especially on investigating semantic mapping strategy use in writing or on exploring students' perceptions.

6. Pedagogical Implications and Recommendations

Drawn upon the obtained findings, the following main implications and recommendations would be helpful:

- **Integrating semantic mapping systematically in teaching writing**: Since students reported better vocabulary activation, clearer idea generation and organisation, and more improved communication, the writing teachers need formally to include this strategy in the prewriting stage.The use of semantic mapping simply marks a shift from a product-oriented into a more process-based learning/teaching of writing in EFL setting.
- **Using semantic mapping to support vocabulary retention and selection**: It is empirically proved that semantic mapping is primarily used to enhance vocabulary. The findings that students gained a good volume of items (knowledge and size of vocabulary) drives the attention that this technique boosts vocabulary acquisition ,retention, and use more than the other traditional methods such as memorisation. Therefore, it is an excellent tool to fill the gap of students' paucity of vocabulary.

- **Promoting interactive and cooperative learning in EFL Writing Classes:** The use of semantic mapping can bring the missing link and bridge the existing gaps in writing courses and practices. The participation, communication, and cooperation among the teacher and students and students themselves can significantly engage students and hence help improve their writing skills. Such interaction an cooperation can add that spark needed in writing classes.

7. Conclusion

This study provides evidence that the use of semantic mapping nourishes EFL students' writing fluency and quality. Data collected, analysed, and discussed show its potential in reducing students' vocabulary, idea generation and organisation, and interactive difficulties. Students overtly demonstrated that they acquired both basic and advanced vocabulary, and they learnt to use words properly in context. They learnt to think critically, to share knowledge, and to assess their thoughts as well as those of others. Furthermore, they were trained to assume roles, engage in dialogues, and actively participate in various discussions. These interactions lifted up their motivation and built their self-confidence, thereby, helping them hone their listening and speaking skills alongside their writing ones.

In light of the significant findings, we can boldly claim that our students need an extra spark to inspire them to write. By incorporating elements of visualisation, communication, and cooperation, the often tiresome writing process can become more enjoyable for them. Therefore, with the hope that this study may bring a substantial contribution, it strongly recommends the integration of semantic mapping not only in argumentative essay writing, but in various types of written discourse.

In addition to its role in the pre-writing stage, semantic mapping can also be applied in the post-writing phase. Moreover, it can be very workable even at paragraph level. Due to its flexibility, semantic mapping can also serve as a learning strategy that students may benefit from in various subject areas. By the end of this study, we can say that if all the stakeholders: teachers, students, and administrators, commit more time, efforts, and attention to writing instruction, notable improvements in both teaching and learning outcomes can be achieved.

This study may open new horizons for researchers to further explore the benefits of semantic mapping. When applied in the pre-writing phase, future studies could investigate its impacts on vocabulary recall and retention. Additionally, examining the strategy's effects on enhancing coherence in writing could be a worthwhile direction. In terms of communication improvement, researchers might look into its potential to reduce students' fear and hesitation to participate whether in writing activities or in other academic subjects.

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